

Alienation In Anita Desai's 'Baumgartner's Bombay': A Thematic Study.

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ABSTRACT

Anita Desai's Baumgartner's Bombay vividly portrays the theme of alienation through the life of Hugo Baumgartner, a Jewish refugee displaced by the Holocaust and condemned to perpetual "outsider" status in both Germany and India. The novel reflects the psychological, cultural, and social struggles of uprooted individuals who fail to find belonging in any land. Hugo's identity crisis, marked by racial prejudice and cultural displacement, exemplifies the existential condition of "accepted—but not accepted," a recurring motif in Desai's fiction. His experiences resonate with broader postmodern concerns of loneliness, isolation, and estrangement, situating the novel within global discourses on exile and identity. The study highlights how Desai uses Hugo and Lotte to explore diasporic alienation, environmental isolation, and cultural rootlessness. Drawing on critical perspectives from thinkers such as Erich Fromm, Sidney Finkelstein, and Neeru Tandon, the paper situates Hugo's plight within the larger framework of alienation in literature. His tragic end underscores the inevitability of rejection in both homeland and host land, making him a "Nowhere Man" who embodies the universal struggle for identity and belonging. Thus, the novel becomes a powerful commentary on displacement, exile, and the human quest for acceptance in an alien world....

1. INTRODUCTION

"Say this city has ten million souls

Some are living in mansions,

Some are living in holes:

Yet there's no place for us, my dear,

Yet there's no place for us.

Once we had a country and we thought it fair

Look in the atlas and you'll find it there:

We cannot go there now, my dear,

We cannot go there now.

Stood on a great plain in the falling snow:

Ten thousand soldiers marched to and fro:

Looking for you and me, my dear, looking for you and me."(W.H.Auden)

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The above poem, titled as 'Refugee Blues', was written by British poet W. H. Auden and was published in 1939 on the eve of the Second World War. This poem analyses the miserable plight of Jewish refugees who were forcibly expelled from Nazi Germany. Additionally, this poem raises broader questions about loneliness, isolation, and exile in the Jewish community. The poet W.H. Auden explores the trauma and pain of Jews who were forced to leave Germany, and in this violent and uncertain world, they were unable to find a place for their safety and security.

Here readers are reminded of W.H. Auden's poem. This poem reminds me of Anita Desai's later novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*. The novelist explores the pitiable and pathetic condition of Jews who fled from Nazi Germany before World War II. Hugo, who is a Jew, wanders all over the world and is unable to find a secure place for himself. This paper analyzes the theme of alienation, which has been the favorite subject of Anita Desai and Hugo Baumgartner who is a stateless and homeless man, and his sense of alienation and isolation in this violent and uncertain world in a detailed manner.

Alienation is an inseparable part of the novels of Anita Desai. Although the term "alienation" is an old phenomenon, it has attained a new dimension in the modern era. Most of Anita Desai's characters are alienated and isolated individuals. The characters feel alienated within themselves and from society. The novelist explores the sufferings of uprooted individuals both in early and later novels beautifully and excellently. Dev, in the early novel *Bye-Bye Blackbird* and Hugo, in the later novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* have been portrayed as uprooted individuals and suffer a sense of loneliness and alienation in the alien land. Both of them become prey to terrible isolation and alienation in this world.

The theme of alienation plays a vital role in postmodern literature. Alienation, which has been the favorite theme of Anita Desai, can be seen in almost all her novels. The term has been used in various disciplines like theology, psychology, sociology, philosophy, feminism, etc. The term "alienation" is defined by Sidney Finkelstein thus: "*a psychological phenomenon, an internal conflict, a hostility felt towards something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself, a barrier erected which is actually no defense but an impoverishment of oneself.*" (Finkelstein, 137). According to Erich Fromm, the term "alienation" meant "*a mode of experience in which the person experiences himself as an alien*" (Fromm, 122). Alienation has been defined in the Britannica perspective as "*An alienated man ... stranger to himself; he has lost his essence; he is in search of his being*" (129). The term "alienation" is defined in Encyclopedia Britannica as "*a term used with various meanings in philosophy, theology, psychology, and social sciences, usually with emphasis on personal powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation, or self-estrangement*" (243). B. Murchland states that the 20th century is "The Age of Alienation."

Alienation is a significant concept in modern times. The theme of alienation plays a vital role in post modern writings. Writers like Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Bharati Mukherjee etc have used alienation as a main theme in their writings. Critics try to analyse how characters are alienated from society and how it is possible to retain their normal life. John Macquarrie quotes thus.

"It confronts the individual with his responsibility and the call to grasp his authentic being". (Macquarrie, 2013, p.115)

The theme of alienation, which is a significant concept in modern times, can be seen almost in all the novels of Anita Desai. Alienation is found not only in Indian writings but also in American literature too in which American novelists such as Ernest Hemingway, Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Faulkner, Henry James, Saul Bellow, Herman Melville etc. have used alienation as a main theme in their novels.

It is known clearly that the sense of alienation is caused by several factors. As an individual has to face failure, frustration, loneliness and irredeemable sense of loss in his life, he suffers inwardly. One of the important features of 'alienation' is anxiety which has been described by John Macquarrie thus, "*It confronts the individual with his responsibility and the call to grasp his authentic being*" (Macquarrie, 1973, p.169). In modern era, an individual feels a sense of 'Otherness' from himself, from society and from his surroundings.

Desai's novels are full of isolators and outsiders. The novelist has dealt with the theme of alienation almost in all her novels beautifully and excellently. The characters feel alienated and isolated within themselves and from society.

According to Neeru Tandon,

"'Alienation' is loosely associated with the existential problems of man. Man oppressed with the realities of modern impersonalized life is often labeled as alienated. The main causes of alienation for human beings are economic, technological, sociological philosophic existential and psychological. The supposed consequences are so extensive as to include psychosis, suicide, psychometric disorder, ethnic prejudice, civil riots, and political agitations or protestations. The problem of alienation is intimately related to the loss and quest of one's identity. Donald even rightly suggests that it is the loss of identity that results in alienation. To realize adequately the magnitude of the problems of loss of identity, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is in the centre of all problems including alienation. A sense of identity is a perennial sustaining creative force in a writer. The loss of the sense of identity may lead to rootlessness or alienation." (Tandon, 2013 p.116,117).

Alienation which has been the favourite theme of Anita Desai can be seen in *Baumgartner's Bombay*. There are four kinds of alienation related to diasporic literature. An individual experiences social, cultural or self alienation in the alien land. Hugo Baumgartner, the title character of this novel becomes victim of social or "environmental alienation" (Tandon, 2013, p.120) in this novel. Unlike Adit, who is an Indian in foreign country, here is Hugo Baumgartner a foreigner in India. Neeru Tandon analyses four kinds of alienation in Desai's novel. He points out,

"Mainly four kinds of alienation can be analyzed from the novels of Anita Desai. First, there are the poor landless people, the bonded labourers, the scheduled castes, nomads, tribal and economically weak people. There is a sense of alienation and rootlessness existing among them. Such alienation finds expression in the novels like The Village by the Sea and In Custody.

Second alienation is a sense of environmental alienation. Millions of men for some reason or the other leave their own roots and fail to strike roots in the alien soil and die as rootless and restless individuals. This kind of alienation is projected in the novels like Bye-Bye Blackbird and Baumgartner's Bombay; as they are richer and more ambiguous novels incorporating the experience of environmental alienation in their texture.

A similar type of environmental isolation has been felt by Hugo Baumgartner with slight variations in Desai's latest novel Baumgartner's Bombay (1988). Unlike Adit, an Indian in foreign country (England), there is Baumgartner, a foreigner (German) in India. His fifty years stay in Bombay as an outsider, without family or country shows his isolated existence. Alone and content with the mild pleasures, he is a portrait of loneliness and alienation.

The story of Baumgartner and Lotte gives expression to the theme of isolation and alienation. Both of the themes are solitary foreigners in India and are uprooted from their own culture. Baumgartner's story is one of inherent alienation augmented by global war, colonial war and religious war. When the familiar emotional and geographical worlds are destroyed, one gets deidentified. Cultural displacement makes Hugo and Lotte alienated and lonely in spite of their assays of adjustment". (Tandon, 2013, p. 118, 120, 121, 122).

Hugo Baumgartner, the titular character of this novel becomes victim of not only cultural alienation but also social alienation in this novel. Hugo, who is a Jew by birth leads a solitary life with his parents in Germany. As he is the only one child, Hugo is affectionate to his parents. However, Hugo's childhood days is not pleasant experience with his parents in Berlin.

Due to holocaust of Jewish community and Second World War, Hugo Baumgartner is forced to leave Berlin, and arrives in India and remains an "outsider". Even after several years of stay in the adopted land he is addressed as "firanghi" "foreigner" (Desai, 2007,22) throughout his life in India. "Accepting – but not accepted" (Desai, 2007, p.23) is the destiny of Hugo Baumgartner. One thing to be noted here is that he is not accepted not only in Germany which is the country of his birth, but also in India where he seeks shelter and settle down as a refugee for many years. It leads him to a sense of loneliness and alienation and suffers from rootlessness in host land.

Hugo's character can be compared with Adit Sen who is the protagonist of *Bye-Bye, Blackbird*. Similar to Adit Sen who yearns for his native land due to racial prejudice and the out break of the India-Pakistan war, Hugo too, in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, longs for his Germany, which is the native land of Hugo, but fails in his attempt due to the out break of Second World War. He leads a solitary life in India where he has nobody to look after him and it leads him to a terrible alienation and isolation in this world. Hugo Baumgartner isolates himself not only from Indian soil but also from his home land, Germany. Being too dark, marked him unacceptable in both lands In Germany, he was too dark and that darkness marked him as "Jew" whereas in India Hugo was too fair which marked him as "firanghi, foreigner". (Desai, 2007, p.22) The colour combination made Hugo unacceptable in both lands. The novelist Anita Desai quotes thus:

"Accepting-but not accepted; that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all. In Germany he had been dark-his darkness had marked him the Jew, der Jude. In India he was fair-and that marked him the firangi. In both lands, the unacceptable". (Desai, 2015,p.23)

Besides, Desai describes his state thus:

"An isolated youth in an increasingly unsafe and threatening land and then, a solitary foreigner in India – like a mournful turtle – Baumgartner carried everything with him; perhaps it was the only way he knew to remain himself" (Desai, 1989,p.109).

Moreover, the novelist has portrayed the isolation and alienation of Baumgartner through the image of the curtain.

"He felt his life blur, turn grey, like a curtain wrapping him in its dusty felt. If he became aware from time to time, that the world beyond the curtain was growing steadily more crowded, more clamorous, and the lives of others more hectic, more chaotic, then he felt only relief that his had never been a part of the mainstream" (Desai 1989 : 211).

Throughout his life, Hugo Baumgartner is an outsider in Indian society. As he is a foreigner, he is rejected by Indians. Although he has lived in India for several years, he is not accepted here. Swain describes his alienated state:

"Throughout, Hugo remains an outsider, a flotsam panting for self-identification and self-projection". (Swain 2003, p. 131)

Hugo's character is similar to Srinivas, an elderly Brahmin, who is the protagonist of Kamala Markandaya's seventh novel *"The Nowhere Man"* and Desai's own favourite. *"The Nowhere Man"* is centred on the racism and terrible alienation experienced by the chief character, Srinivas who has lived in London for several years. Although Srinivas lived in London for many years, ultimately he faced devastating racism, terrible alienation and homelessness. Like Srinivas, who was compelled to feel as "alien" in London, Hugo Baumgartner too, feels "unaccepted" and "alien" even after his fifty years of stay in India. However, unlike Srinivas, Hugo Baumgartner is really "Nowhere Man" who belongs to neither Germany which is the birth country due to his Jewish race, nor India which is the adopted land due to skin colour where he is addressed as "firanghi, foreigner".

Wilson writes,

"In Germany, his dark complexion marked him for a Jew; in India, he was fair, therefore, ostracized in both countries. Paradoxically, even his cats knew he did not belong – he was not feline – but they accepted him. Lotte, like Hugo, also feels like an exile in Bombay. Hugo's consciousness of continued rejection and 'otherness' began with his childhood in Germany. The cruelty of racial discrimination dawns on him only after a series of subtle forms of rejection have been forced on his childish mind". (Wilson, 2008, p.239)

Besides, Neeru Chkraverty explains his condition thus:

"In the figure of Baumgartner, Anita Desai has created a lost hero, a victim both of circumstances and his own constitutionally ingrained identity. A study of irredeemable loneliness, he is isolated from all by his internal and external inability to form bonds. His quest for happiness is linked to a desire to belong, yet like Maya in Cry, the Peacock, his instinctive condition of silence and loneliness prevents the achievement of this desire." (Chakraverty, 2003, p.135).

Hugo Baumgartner feels a sense of social alienation and isolation since his childhood days onwards in Germany. As Hugo was the only one child, his mother was affectionate to him. Hugo's father Herr Baumgartner was a well to do prosperous business man in Berlin. Once when he was in school during the Christmas celebration, his parents forgot to send Christmas gift to Hugo but at the same time, other children happily rejoicing with their Christmas gifts which was sent by their parents.

This incident makes him as an outsider and makes a remark thus."

"What was the shame? The sense that he did not belong to the picture-book world of the fir tree, the gifts and the celebration? But no one had said that. Was it just that he sensed he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world? A strange sensation, surely, for a child. He could not understand it himself, or explain it. It baffled him and frightened him". (Desai, 2015, p.42)

Hugo left the school and joined a new Jewish school in order to have a better atmosphere there. On contrary, Hugo felt a sense of alienation and isolation there where other students mocked his physical appearance by saying:

"It was in this school for Jewish children, oddly enough, that Hugo first had a remark directed at his nose. When he went out into the yard where the mud was frozen and broke under his shoes, he heard around him a chant that came from all the children. Baumgartner's dumb, has a nose like a thumb!" (Desai, 2015, p.42).

The novelist shows his alienated state for the first time here in this novel. Melany Maria Just writes thus:

"This first day marks him as the eternal outsider: he had been an outsider at the Christian school he attended before, and is again an outsider even at a school with pupils and teachers of his own background, for the Baumgartners did not practice Judaism sufficiently enough for acceptance in a Jewish school. This feeling of being an individual who does not fit anywhere accompanies Hugo throughout his life." (Melany Maria Just, 2008, p.76).

After the death of his father the furniture shop was sold to Herr Pfuehl who was the gentleman from Hamburg. Due to the threatening atmosphere of Second World War, Herr Pfuehl asked him to leave Germany and settle down in India to look after his business.

Unwillingly Hugo arrives in India to establish a home for his beloved mother. Hugo happens to meet Lotte, the German cabaret dancer but he is not interested to marry her. Hugo's Baumgartner's physical appearance was strange and it separates him from Indian soil. Indians looked at him strangely. The novelist quotes thus:

"For the Indian sun had not been good to his skin, it had not tanned and roasted him to the colour of a native his face blazed like an overripe tomato in the sun on which warts gathered like flies. His hair would not turn dark; it stood out around the bald centre like a white ruff, stained somewhat yellow. Even if he had used hair dye and boot polish, what could

he have done about his eyes? It was not that they were blue-far from it; his mother, holding him on her knee and clapping hands in a game, had called them 'dark' eyes, *dunkle Augen*, but Indians did not seem to think them so. Their faces sneered 'firangi, foreigner,' however good naturedly, however lacking in malice." (Desai, 2015,p.23)

The story of Lotte is similar to Hugo's story. Like Hugo Baumgartner, she too becomes victim of terrible isolation and alienation in the alien land. Lotte is driven away from Germany due to holocaust of Jewish community and arrives in India where she feels a sense of alienation and isolation. She is a chabare dancer by profession.

Anita Miles describes her state thus:

"Lotte is a cabaret dancer when Hugo meets her. His delight knows no bounds for he shares with Lotte his deep sense of isolation and alienation as a foreigner living in Bombay. Lotte, too has undergone similar traumatic experiences in a foreign land yet she keeps her sorrows at bay to comfort Hugo. The novel brings out not only the dilemma of people trying to adjusting in an alien country but also the invincibility of love and affection in giving succor to others." (Anita Miles, 2016,p.7)

When Lotte arrived in India, she was youthful and captivating, and soon became drawn to Kantilal Sethia, a Marwari businessman. Without any family or close ties in India, she entered into an illicit relationship with Kantilal, who was considerably older. His sons disapproved of her and treated her harshly, which deepened her sense of loneliness and alienation in Bombay. Kantilal, occupied with his business in Calcutta, visited her only occasionally, leaving her frustrated and isolated. Her only German acquaintance there was Hugo Baumgartner. After Kantilal's death, his sons expelled her and took possession of her property. Struggling with despair, Lotte turned to alcohol in an attempt to escape her troubles. Longing to return to Germany, she expressed her wish, but Hugo responded thus.

"Where could we go, Lotte? Where could you and I have gone?' Baumgartner had taken out his handkerchief again and sat twisting and crumpling it.

'Hmm,' she muttered, scratching her arms thoughtfully, brooding. 'Yes, there was nowhere to go. Germany was gone -phut, Europe was gone, all of it. Let us face it, Liebchen, there is no home for us. So where can we go? Hah? Tell me.'" (Desai, 2007. P.93,94)

Thus both Lotte and Hugo Baumgartner have been portrayed as solitary German individuals and suffer from a sense of alienation and isolation in the adopted land. Besides Anita Desai shows the alienated self of Hugo Baumgartner, who becomes victim of political alienation in Germany.

"In his own country he is a victim of religious persecution, a factor over which he has no control. It is just a matter of accident of having been born in a Jewish family". (Gopal, 2013p.59).

He faces social and cultural alienation in the adopted land. Hena Ahmad's remarks is *"Baumgartner's Bombay is Desai's masterpiece. This superbly crafted novel written from the outsider's point of view-Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist, is an outsider in India. Baumgartner is an immigrant, alienated from society, and one of society's losers"*. (Ahmad,p.89)

Hugo Baumgartner remains an outcast even after his tragic death. He is totally rejected and neglected by Indian society even after his death. He used to visit a restaurant to collect waste food for his only companion clowder of cats. There he happens to see Kurt, who is the German boy. Hugo shows pity on him for his miserable condition and asks him to come and stay in his residence. The café owner also insists Hugu to help him. As Hugo feels German connection with Kurt, he decides to take him to Hugo's residence. But this little kind act leads him to unexpected tragic death of Hugo Baumgartner. Readers are shocked at his death by the German boy Kurt for the few silver trophies possessed by Hugo. On hearing the death news of Baumgartner, Lotte his only German friend and Farrokhs, who is the café owner are shocked at Hugo's tragic end whereas Indians are not moved at Baumgartner's unexpected tragic end even after his fifty years of stay in India.

To conclude, the novelist focuses on the alienated self of Hugo Baumgartner in alien land. "Accepted-but not accepted" is the story of Hugo Baumgartner. Throughout his life, Hugo feels a sense of alienation, isolation and rootlessness which results in pathetic and tragic end. Lotte collects few postcards which were sent by Hugo's mother and comes back to her residence. The death of only one German friend in India torments her soul. Having lost Hugo, Lotte becomes prey to alienation and isolation. The novelist reveals how dislocation leads to social, cultural alienation, and isolation in the alien land and how they suffer inwardly due to relocation of their native land...

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