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TWO VERSIONS OF AFFIRMATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *WHERE SHALL WE GO THIS SUMMER?* AND *BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY*

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ABSTRACT

Indo- English literature in the recent past has attracted a widespread interest in India and abroad. Fiction being the most characteristic and powerful form of literary expressions today has acquired a prestigious position in the Indo-English Literature. In earlier years focus remained on Nationalistic and Sociological themes. It is only in recent years that novelists like Arun Joshi and Anita Desai have displayed an increasing inwardness in their themes and the themes of loneliness, of rootlessness, the exploration of the psyche and the inner man have come to the surface.

Keywords: Alienation, Violence, Affirmation, Existential, Negation

Anita Desai, is one of major voices in the Modern Indian English Fiction. She ushered in a new era of psychological realism in this genre with her novel *Cry the Peacock* in 1963. Her novels are materially different from those of the other eminent Indian women novelists writing English who concern themselves mainly with social and political themes of East-West encounter. Her serious concern is with the journey within her characters. In an interview she herself acknowledged that writing for her "is an effort to discover and then to underline, and finally to convey the true significance of things."¹ She makes an attempt to explore the "submerged truth"² through the exploration of the psyche of her characters against her own vision of life, which is basically dark. The main ingredients of her thematic cluster are alienation, obsession with death and violence, psychic disintegration, involvement and withdrawal, conformity and non-conformity, and the deadly clutches of harsh realities. In almost all her novels, her protagonist feels alienated in one or other way. Generally speaking, alienation is a state of mind where one finds himself rootless, feels a sense of loneliness or exclusion in social relation and even creates the feeling ultimately that one is out of touch with one's own self. Life seems purposeless to him. With one or the other facet of alienation, her protagonists live life with different attitudes- some with affirmation and some with negation.

The two novels of Anita Desai *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* (1975) and *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) present two perfect images of alienated person in the characters of Sita and Hugo, respectively. Though, the two novels have a distance of thirteen years between them, yet, both of them present predicament of an alienated person in an hostile world where they have a wish to affirm themselves. Both of them pass through various situations, some similar and some dissimilar and confront the insensitive world which is unsuitable for sensitive persons like Sita and Hugo. Instead of having some similar characteristic traits they confront life differently and try to cope up with harsh realities and situations in a different way. But both of them show affirmative attitude towards life.

In her earlier novel *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* Anita Desai explores the basic theme of alienation and non-communication in married life presented through a middle aged, nervous and sensitive woman, Sita, the protagonist. In this novel, we find that there is a progress towards affirmation as the novel ends on a happy note of pleasant hope for a pleasant future for the protagonist. But the later novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a portrait of loneliness, of alienation and immigrant's existential problems presented through the life story of Hugo from his childhood days in Germany to his death, at the ripe old age of about seventy in India. This novel overflows with more aching sadness as Hugo Baumgartner makes each and every effort to find some meaning in it without caring that whether he gets it or not and thus shows his affirmation.

Sita, in *Where Shall We Go This Summer?*, who is sensitive, nervous and an introvert finds herself alienated from her husband and children. The problems arise in her life because of her inability to accept the values and attitudes of society. She behaves in a personal way and instead of peacefully accepting, rejects the dictates of society. She searches for the lost beauty of the island of the innocence of the childhood. She is searching for love, the kind of free unquestioning love which she hopes would envelope her. That's why her quest is doomed to failure because that sort of innocence has never really existed. Same is the case with Hugo. Bewildered, frustrated and living in abject penury Baumgartner often recalls his childhood days. He escapes into the past to find some solace in his childhood days spent with his wealthy father and graceful mother. Whenever he feels incompetent to handle any situation, he regresses to his childhood. He longs for familiar surroundings and appearances.

Sita lives in fragments. The path of honour and conviction is not the way for her. She refuses to accept the authority of society even though she knows that the result would be painful. "He who refuses does not repent. Should he be asked again, he would say no again. And yet that no... the right no-crushes him for the rest of his life."³ Sita's wandering from Bombay to Manori Island and, finally, back from island to Bombay is her journey from Alienation to Affirmation. Thus, the problem presented in the novel is alienation, and the inbuilt solution of this problem is affirmation. But, on the contrary, Hugo has adopted the path of 'quiet resignation and acceptance' in facing the strange world where he is a nowhere man always accepting but never accepted, whether he is in Berlin or in Bombay. And finally when he was alone his tarnished trophies content with the mild pleasures of old age; he was killed and thus engulfed by the madness from another, younger world, for which he was unprepared. Thus, Hugo has fulfilled his wish to affirm by compromising in every situation instead of world's harsh reaction towards him.

Sita, in her childhood, lived a very happy life. There was abundance of free unquestioning love. Her father always looked after her. The island where she lived had beauty and magic. Her father knew some quack cures. The magic in the island made others bow to her father. He father's "miracle cures" (p.50) were strange. The island was a source of happiness to her. Her father was called a "saint", a "wizard" and at the same time a "charlatan" (p.54). Thus, the island offered her all the freedom and security. The magic island was release to her. Her childhood in fact is the reason of her misfortune. She was spoilt in her very childhood, and hence she faces misfortune after her marriage. She is unable to compromise with her husband and other members of the family. In contrast to Sita, Hugo's childhood experiences and interaction in the family have been frustrating. As a child he notices the difference in the taste and temperament of his parents. He finds the difference reflected in the household objects. His father always preferred expensive ashtrays, cigarette cases, the table lamps etc. because all these show "the air of prosperity and satisfaction"⁴ with which his father always used to behave. Contrary to this his mother selected those things for her house which contained living quality that "prevented the rooms from becoming showrooms" (p.27). For Hugo his mother was an epitome of grace, beauty and sensuous aspects of nature. She also did not want him to involve himself in the dull and tedious routine of business life. Hugo oscillates between his father's decorum and gracefulness of his mother. Many incidents of childhood had left cramping influence on the mind of Hugo. His confidence in himself and his faith in his father gets shattered and he develops the tendency of quiet resignation and acceptance for the whole of his life.

The another stage of Sita's life where she feels alienated is her married life. She is married to Raman, the son of her father's friend. She thinks now that she is thrust into the midst of a conventional family. When she goes to live with her in-laws, she is unable to compromise with the placidity and sluggishness of the family. Here

the conflict starts between the sensitive individual and insensitive world. Sita is high strung with an abnormal sensitivity and imagination that make her emotionally vulnerable. She sees the world around exulting in destruction. Her husband and her children thrive in a world where wanton and cruel destruction is the main element and where creation is merely a freak, a temporary and doomed occurrence. She is pained to see in the normal life of the household some acts of unthinking violence: her boys wrestling with each other, Menaka wantonly ripping buds off a plant or shedding her paintings, the youngest, Karan, demolishing his toys with Karate blows, Raman stolidly munching his breakfast while she battles with a popgun to frighten away the crows that are bent upon feasting on a fallen eagle, and ayahs fighting like cats. Each act is horrible than the other and makes her shrink into herself. Raman cannot understand the paranoid show of fear, rage and revolt of a woman now in her forties, greying and aging but behaving with a total lack of control. All that he can say is, "Don't be silly," and "Sita don't behave like a fool" (p.21), "You've gone mad" (p.23). Her attitude is that of violence and passion, while his attitude is downright practical. There is no ideal husband wife relationship between the two. Sita realises that genuine happiness is not possible in her marital situation, that hope arises only to be crushed in an insensitive and cruel setting, that her husband and children are alien to her nature and her needs and, to preserve her sanity she has to escape from her routine life in a Bombay apartment and flee to Manori where she had spent her childhood with her nationalist hero of a father.

In case of Hugo, withdrawal and regression do not help him every time. At different stages of his age, to cope up with certain unpleasant and disappointing situations Baumgartner also indulges in violent and aggressive behaviour which is less related to the physical level out is more pronounced on the emotional and mental plane. In his childhood his father disappointed him. His father was least concerned about his emotional need to enjoy and outing with him, particularly to the racecourse. Hugo showed signs of violence by kicking his mother "with savagery, pummelled her chest with his fists, furiously" (p.31). In Calcutta Hugo becomes possessive about his friends and sole companion, Lotte and gets furious. During the war time it is the violent circumstances – not the death and destruction due to Japanese bombardment which threaten him and force him to think that ways. He is not happy to think of his mother alone in Germany and his inability to rescue her from there makes him sad. His inner rage and anger are symbolically shown when he watches "the fire that burnt in the city" (p.172). Hugo's helplessness and loneliness, at times, make him suppress his aggressive tendencies. He bears everything mutely whether they are experiences of a frustrated family or experiences at school or incidents in Military camp or betrayal from friends like Habibullah. Lack of social acceptance leads him to a sense of insecurity inherent in all human relationships. He feels deprived of faith and confidence in his human relationships and thus he worships loneliness and isolation to such an extent that the is, at times, afraid of any human presence around him and therefore prefers to live in the company of stray cats and fading postcards in his shabby flat instead of any human being and was called "madman of cats" and "the Bille wallah Pagal" (p.10).

The need for being cared for, the need for nurturance makes Sita seek her childhood home as a place where she might recover her sanity again. Having no longer the nerve or even a sort of hypothetical optimism to continue where she is, she seeks her island refuge, sage from pursuit and capture by her family, away from the solidity and the critical hubbub of life in Bombay. On the island, from the vantage point of middle age, she tries to connect the changes, distortion and revelation between the present and the past. The pull of childhood and the youthful perception press hard on her Memories and veiled hints of a lusty past and miracles associated with her father, elder sister and brother revive and come crowding round to torment her further. There are no ready answers to her deep anguish. She feels like a jellyfish stranded on a distant shore, unable to recede into the waters of the past and unable to survive on the sands of the present. Her return to Manori symbolically, is an act of rejection without the hope of recovery or discovery. The disappointment, the boredom and the distaste which she has left behind still chase her. Still there is violence and destruction around her. The gossip and quarrelling sessions of the servants, the fighting among the children, ridicule her effort to protect and preserve her sensitive self. Sita is ignored by Moses, the caretaker, affronted by Menaka and bothered by Karan. So she "keeps chain-smoking and blowing her Bombay memories in an effort to muffle the ache of the void within."⁵

A change could be possible, we feel. The news of Raman's likely visit to Manori arrives. Sita first experiences a sense of grief and then a warm expansion of relief, of pleasure, of surprise. She wants to be told that he has come for her but, indeed, he tells her that he has come because Menaka had called him. Raman's reply leaves her with a sense of emptiness. She feels evermore diminished and forsaken. And "the trip to Manori also becomes for her a trip of self-discovery and a recognition of reality."⁶ To her dismay, she discovers that she is as much an outsider on island as she was on the mainland. Sita has to accept the fact that she is a woman unloved. Through this acceptance of her condition, she also realises that Raman is brave, while she is not. He had said 'Yes', while saying it Raman has crossed over to the path of honour and his own conviction, but she had escaped from duties and responsibilities, from order and routine, from life and the city, to the unbelievable island. "She had even refused to give birth to a child in a world not fit to receive the child" (p.101). But now she realises that escape is impossible. Unlike her conviction of things in the past, she now accepts a degree of self-distrust in matters of experience. She decides to go to Raman. To live and be a part of life, in the whirlpool of existence, that is the need, the real need. Escape into the past is impossible. Live in the present, whatever it is and wherever you are. So here at last Sita feels that she can achieve a meaningful pattern of living only by going with Raman to Bombay. She realises that she can possibly redress her shattered personality only by reuniting with Raman. And ironically the very hour of her defeat marks her triumph over loneliness.

Unlike Sita, Hugo Baumgartner, from the agonising scenes of his childhood in pre-war Berlin, through his spell in Calcutta and then in Bombay he simply does not belong. Too dark for Hitler's society he is too fair for India; he remains a foreigner, a firangi wherever he goes. Baumgartner remains a drifter. He seems passive and more obviously the victim. Throughout the novel, he seems to be at the edge of events that affect him profoundly; events that he never properly understands, and over which he has no control. First, there is the silent conflict between his remote, authoritarian father and his sensually appealing mother. As he matures, he oscillates in his loyalty between both the poles of self-identification, never coming to a satisfactory resolution of his dilemma. The effort to harmonize this polarity is underlined through Baumgartner's fantasized identification with Venice, where east and west, reason and imagination meet. It is the place where he felt himself the natural citizen. though it is also an illusion. Hugo, is a character whose unresolved childhood continues to haunt him, while India, though being alien to his consciousness, operates as a dimly perceived backdrop of squalor, of opulence and of cruelty from which he remains dissociated.

There is something almost impersonal about the acts of charity and cruel hostility that govern his life. Chimanlal's offer of work is the act of a friend. However, Baumgartner's security and social position is dependent on that friendship, and when Chimanlal dies his son cuts the firm ties with Baumgartner who, with nowhere to go, drifts into the poor section of Bombay, and depends on the charity of a Café-proprietor, Farrokh for food and drink. So, when Farrokh call in the debt, so to speak, Baumgartner feels obliged to take charge of Kurt, a youthful product of post-war dislocation Y drug addict, dropout and bitter anti-Semite Y that preys on black and white alike in the urban ghettos of Bombay.

Thus, *Baumgartner's Bombay* is the story of humanity's need to find sustenance's within itself. It is a story of love that binds, sustains and ennobles; love that draws human beings to one another and responds to their innermost need for human warmth. An ambience of racial hatred in Germany shrivels Hugo and leaves him singed. His search for the bonds that make living meaningful taken him to India. But to look upon Hugo Baumgartner as a decrepit old man purposelessly living with caterwauling cats in filthy surroundings is to equate meaning with ease and being with existence. An apparently lonely Hugo is not projected as a celebration of the inevitability of human destiny. He does not consider his actions as senseless. His anguish does not result from his realization of the absurdity of the human condition. Hugo is not placed in isolated alienation. He makes constant attempts at establishing bonds of relationship with a number of people in Venice, Bombay, and Calcutta, and even in internment camp. He panics at the thought of Habibullah's fate during the communal riots. He responds to the screams of dying Sunil. His relationship with Lotte, Chimanlal and Farrokh are life-long, deep and enriching. So, "Desai's wandering, wounded hero is not in search of a lost kingdom but bonds of human relationships."⁷

In this way both the novels project affirmative vision of the authoress though in a different way. As far as *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* is concerned, a simple domestic situation is presented in the novel. Whereas in *Baumgartner's Bombay* situation presented is more complex. So the ending of the former is a simple happy ending where the hope for a happy future for the protagonist is clear with her realization that life is continual process of sacrifice, adjustment and compromise. But in later no such simple ending is possible as the situation is more complex. And it is Kurt, not Baumgartner, who brings tragic end to his life. So, Hugo's attempts become his Karmic theory of doing things without caring for result and it is Hugo's efforts to find meaning in meaningless world that are more important than what becomes of him ultimately.

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