



A Study of Xenophobia in *Baumgartner's Bombay* by Anita Desai

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Abstract: Man is a social being. The feelings of love and hate are internal parts of his existence in the world. Sometimes he loves somebody and the other times he hates someone whether there are considerable reasons for those feelings or not. Our liking or disliking for foreigners is among such kind of feelings which make some people victims of our love or hatred. It is known as xenophobia. It is a socio-psychological phenomenon which makes someone hates the people from alien or foreign lands. Catherine Soanes has stated that “xenophobia is an intense dislike or fear of strangers or people from other countries” (644). But now and then excessive patriotism leads to the feelings of xenophobia. The present research paper is a kind of discourse on the xenophobic-syndrome in the hearts of the people in India in *Baumgartner's Bombay*, a novel by Anita Desai.

Keywords: Xenophobia, Foreigner, Hatred, Social, Existence, Race.

The Research Paper: *Baumgartner's Bombay*, a novel written by Anita Desai, is the study of an uprooted Jew, Hugo Baumgartner struggling for his life in a foreign land i.e. India. “The novelist has succeeded in the authentic depiction of the life of a German Jew from his childhood to old age” (Belliappa 52) firstly in Germany and lastly in India. The feeling of xenophobia is brought about by various factors—personal, domestic, racial, social and cultural, which create depression in Hugo’s mind and consequently he thinks himself unwanted, unnecessary and unimportant on this wide earth.

The novel opens with the German Jew, Hugo Baumgartner, who is living out his final years in Bombay. In utter poverty and solitude and he feels himself disgusted and put aside of the Bombay-life. He has been living in this great country for more than fifty years but he is still unacceptable to the people of this country due to colour complexion, face, body structure and language. He remains a *Firanghi* or a foreigner throughout his life in India and he never becomes a part of the Indian life due to the morbid feeling of xenophobia:

Their faces sneered ‘firanghi, foreigner’, however good naturedly, however lacking in malice. Still, the word, the name struck coldly and he winced, hunching his shoulders and trying to avoid the contact he knew they hated because contact contaminated (Desai 20).

In India “After fifty years still uncertain. Baumgartner, du Dummkopf” (8). Hugo Baumgartner is unlucky because in his own country Germany—there also he has never been accepted by the people due to racial discrimination:

In Germany he had been dark—his darkness had marked him Jew, DER JUDE. In India he was fair — and that marked him the firanghi.

In both lands, the unacceptable! (20).

In India whenever he recollects his past days spent in Germany, he finds some hideous experiences of his life. Hugo’s temperamental sensitivity, aloofness and introvert nature is inescapable as we go through the novel. It is this which inevitably places him on the margin. Hugo Baumgartner, the step son of a rich father, has very bitter recollections related to his father, Herr Baumgartner. He is never accepted by his father and he always

ignores him. Hugo wants to go out with his father but he rejects him to take with him:

Hugo was gripping his father's knee, staring at his father's face, saying, 'Take me, Papa, take me'. His father's knee gave a twitch, his kneecap moved out of Hugo's grasp. 'But

Papa, I want to go,' he lunged again before being carried away (34).

His father often makes fun of him and Hugo, a very sensitive mind and a child of very sensitive nature, feels assaulted by such treatment. One day, when Hugo is returning from a trip with his parents, they rest for a while on the way and there his father plays a joke:

'Ofcourse you will be home by bedtime, you bloody,' his father said contemptuously . . . suddenly removed his hat from his head and snatching the cap of Hugo's, exchanged their headgear so that Hugo's small head almost vanished, turning him into a headless gnome while his little cap flew up and perched like a saucer between his father's scarlet jug ears, as he tittered with mirth.

'Hopp, hopp , hopp,

Pferdchen lauf galopp' . . . Hugo was awed by so much of the ridiculous and when passer-by, a gentleman with a lady on each arm . . . burst into shrieks and bellows of laughter, turning again and again to look at the comic pair, Hugo was glad for the hat tilting over his eyes and concealing his face from the brassy world (25).

As Hugo is stamped unaccepted by his father's behaviour and treatment, his mother expresses much more love to him. She calls him a mouse, a rabbit and she is very affectionate to him. But sometimes he feels unsatisfactory relations with her:

His mouth full of toffee, his tongue blamed his mother, ‘You came so late,’ and then, ‘You don’t look like everyone else’s mother,’ he complained, ‘why don’t you look like the other mothers?’ (33).

As a schoolboy, Hugo has unbearable recollections. He could not attend the school meant for the Aryans. He is put in the school meant only for Jews. The stratification of society, his sensitive mind and his introvert nature collectively put him on the edge of xenophobia and it causes depression in his mind. The word ‘Jew’ is stamped on his forehead with his birth. If he were born in an Aryan family then everything would have been different in his life. When he is a school-going boy, on the occasion of the Christmas Day, all the children in the class are given gifts by their respective parents. Only Hugo is left without any gift. He feels very disgusted and insulted. He thinks that he is unimportant to his parents. His school teacher named Miss Fraulein offers him a glass globe and pretends that it is the gift for him but he rejects it:

Then, when the other children began to chant, ‘Hugo, it’s for you. . . . it’s yours Hugo,’ he hung his head and stared at his shoes, for nothing, nothing would persuade him that the twinkling glass globe was his. . . . Then the agony was over and he would collapse into the dark ditch of his shame. 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? (36).

Consequently, the idea that “he did not belong to the radiant, the triumphant of the world,” obsessed him. “It biffed him and frightened him” (36-37). Hugo never feels happy and satisfied in the school because the children there usually make fun of him. He “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 as they jumped hopped and clapped their hands to keep warm”: ‘Baumgertner, Baum, hat ein Nase Wie ein Daum! Baumgartner’s dumb, has a nose like a thumb!’ ” (37-38). One day the

boys, who are sharing his bench in the class, push him out of the bench and then the teacher asks him:

‘What is lost, Baumgartner? What’s the matter?’ the teacher asked. ‘Is it the bathroom you need already?’ and the children grew pinched and blue in the face with laughter (37).

In the meanwhile, the communal and racial riots start in Germany started and the Nazis begin throwing the Jews out of Germany. His father is kidnapped and forced to commit suicide. The family comes on the edge of starvation. Then Hugo tries to pick up the threads of his father’s timber-business in Berlin where his father had a shop. His father’s business partner Herr Pfuehl drives him out of the business and occupies it very cunningly. He suggests to Hugo that he should try his luck in India. “About the business, the gentleman from Humberg had assured him existed in Bombay” (86). So he comes to Bombay and there he meets Chimanlal a businessman and he “gave him a valuable introduction to an associate in Calcutta, it seemed there were all kinds of possibilities in the business world of India” (88). He goes to Calcutta from Bombay by train. There he meets Habibullah and struggles for the establishment of business in timber-export. But in the meanwhile, the second world-war breaks out and Hugo is arrested by the police for being a German. He is taken into the detention camp. The camp in ‘Fort William’ looks like a prison. The English maltreat the Germans in the camp and the Nazis in the camp maltreat the Jews. The Jews, there, feel doubly maltreated. The English “don’t even know there are German Jews and there are Nazi Germans and they are not exactly the same” (106). There, they are treated as school-going children. And there:

“Time-tables were pinned at the notice-boards, whistles were blown and sirens sounded. . . . At the sound of another whistle, they were all in the bathhouse washing themselves with cold water. Another whistle and they sank into their bunks, expected to sleep, like school boys” (108).

Now he feels “the fears he had about his mother, about what was happening in Germany, allowing it to become a dark, monstrous block. . . . And obsessions into willing ears” (109). Consequently these obsessions cause depression and Hugo thinks that he is unwanted and a misfit in the situation and he feels xenophobic fear. The life in the detention camp for about six years is like the life spent in Germany by Baumgartner. The political circumstances intervene at this stage to ensure the aggravation of Hugo’s xenophobic feelings. The Nazis inflicted many atrocities upon the Jews in the camp. Hugo faces the greatest humiliation when he is compelled by some Nazi soldiers to sing for Nazis “the songs of graves and funerals, of death and battlefields, of endings and defeats” (135) as:

‘Ich hat’ ein Kamerad,
Einen besseren find’st du nicht . . .’

The men in the audience gave a collective shiver. Baumgartner saw some rise to their feet as if an anthem were being played. . . .

Defeat was heaped on him whether he deserved it or not (135).

Hugo Baumgartner “was willing to go along with all these absurdities in the resigned, half-hearted way taught him by years of helpless submission to bullying, first in Germany, then in the camp, which was an extension of the former” (116). The Nazis generally utter the words in their mouths and it seems somewhat like ‘Jude hin’ (116). With the passage of time “The Jews were now separated from the Nazis, in the barracks at another end of the camp. There they sat on their new bunks, hands hanging between their knees and looked at their camp-mate with bemused looks” (117). “The Nazis among the Germans, who seemed to be running the camp — on behalf of or in collaboration with the British — said they were willing to have the Jews do the menial work for them, but the Jews declined” (117-118).

After six years in the detention camp, Hugo Baumgartner spends about a year in Calcutta in utter poverty. There he once thinks to go back to Germany he soon realises “that a return to Germany was out of question. Germany when it flourished had not wanted him and Germany destroyed would have no need of him either. If he were to remain in India, he had to have the means to live in it (even if alone)” (167). Habibullah, the businessman

suggests to Hugo to return to Bombay. “So Baumgartner came to Bombay” (180). It made him realise how much a native he had become. Baumgartner, a native of Hindustan. He smiled” (180-181). In Bombay, Chimanlal helps him and offers him assistantship in business. Hugo accepts it and this time both get unexpected success at the race-course. Now Hugo achieves name and fame in business. Most notable is the irony of the fate that after few years, Chimanlal dies and his son throws Baumgartner out of the partnership out of the feelings of xenophobia so he feels insecure and horrified in Bombay after Chimanlal’s death. At the time of cremation of Chimanlal, the feelings of xenophobia can be noticed as:

Baumgartner joined the mourners at the cremation, standing at the edge of the crowd, all of whom shrank away from him, horrified by the presence of a foreigner, a firanghi, at such an intensely private rite. Hearing the babbling chant of the priests, seeing the confusion around the pyre, smelling the odours of burnt flesh and charred wood under the noontime sun, Baumgartner too wished he had not come, and shuffled away (205-206)

After that when Hugo goes to his office, he comes to encounter the contemptuous feelings of xenophobia in the behaviour of Chimanlal’s son, in the following words:

When he visited Chimanlal’s office, he found the sun installed at a new stainless steel desk . . . when Baumgartner thought to ask a question about the race-course he and Chimanlal had jointly owned, the boy gave up his cool self-control and began to shout, ‘What are you talking about? What joint ownership? . . . ‘Show me one paper you have signed or my father signed’ (206).

Now “Baumgartner understood that with Chmanlal’s death all connection with the firm, formal or friendly, had ceased, and got up to leave. The boy did not wish him goodbye” (206). He is of no importance here by now because the Bombay-life is “the life of money, business, trade, success” (213). Baumgartner finds himself a misfit in the life full of selfishness and materialism:

The life of Bombay which had been Baumgartner's life for thirty years now – or, rather, the setting for his life, he had never actually entered it, never quite captured it, damply, odorously, cacophonously palpable as it was, it had been elusive still (214).

And he feels astonished on thinking that:

He had lived in this land for fifty years — or if not fifty then so nearly as to make no difference — and it no longer seemed fantastic and exotic, it was more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on the earth. Yet the eyes of the people who passed by glanced at him who was still strange and unfamiliar to them, and all said: Firanghi, foreigner. For the Indian sun had not been good to his skin, it had not tanned and roasted him to the colour of a native. What was the colour of a native anyway? (19-20).

Hugo Baumgartner is accepted neither in Germany nor in India. He remains throughout his whole life — an unaccepted and unwanted man on this earth. This all happens because he is a foreigner, so:

Accepting — but not accepted, that was the story of his life, the one thread that ran through it all (20).

One day sitting in 'Café de Paris' with Farrokh, Baumgartner comes in contact with a young boy from his own country, Germany. Even though he is an Aryan, Hugo offers help to him out of the feelings of xenophobia. He takes him to his room. The boy, Kurt is a drug-addict so he is always in need of money and at night he attacks Hugo fatally. He collects all the silver trophies and runs out of the building 'Hira Niwas'. Here notable is the predicament of the fate that the boy, who is offered help, attacks him and in this cruel and bitter way, he is stabbed to death. It is the social instinct of xenophobia in Hugo Baumgartner that in a way draws him to his death. Most notable are the feelings of xenophobia here in the following lines:

Finally the corpse being carried out. Everyone lurching forwards, holding their breaths, letting it out in a long communal hiss. . . . And people falling back. No one wanting to touch, to be touched by death, by the dead. Hands and handkerchiefs rising instinctively to mouths, noses. Not to breathe, not to breathe in death (228-229).

Baumgartner is no more. He has died. But his death has become an interesting thing to the people of Bombay. They are taking great interest in his death. His death makes the police, Chimanlal's son and other people very busy. "The audience shivered with delight" (228) that they would see that firanghi no more. People make faces at each other that 'pagal sahib', 'billi-wallah sahib' (204) has died. This is the evidence of hatred for a foreigner. There are only two persons, who feel really hurt — memsahib Lotte and the owner of 'Café de Paris' Farrokh. Anita Desai uses irony in the murder of Hugo Baumgartner that the man who has been unimportant, unwanted and marginalised for all his life, the death of such a man is also of no importance. He has been unaccepted throughout all his life and in fact he is not accepted even by death. The unaccepted, unwanted, unimportant, he has been — through and through!

Anita Desai uses irony also in the title of the novel. *Baumgartner's Bombay* — it seems that Bombay has been of Baumgartner for the years but the reality is totally different. Bombay has never been of Baumgartner. Hugo always escapes from the mainstream of Bombay-life. Anita Desai focuses her attention on the fundamental problem of existence of Baumgartner but the harsh surroundings cannot accept his existence and he is always neglected as if he were 'an invisible man' in the society because of the feelings of xenophobia. He tries his utmost to adopt the ways of Indian life and makes sincere efforts to develop a sense of belongingness, but always encounters failure because of xenophobia. In Germany he is known as 'der jude', a Jew and in India he remains a 'firanghi', a foreigner. At last he feels "only relief that he had never been a part of the mainstream. Always, somehow he had escaped the mainstream" (211). At the time of Hugo's death, perhaps the environment of India is saying to him because of xenophobia that:

Go, Baumgartner. Out. He had not been found fit. Shabby, dirty, white man, firanghi, unwanted. Raus, Baumgartner raus (190).

Conclusion: It is obvious in the study of *Baumgartner's Bombay* that the working of the mind of Hugo Baumgartner the protagonist of the novel is revealed to us. Most notable is the predicament of the protagonist that he is accepted by none of the people, none of the societies, none of the races and none of the countries. He is always and everywhere put aside and outside of the mainstream of life because of the morbid feelings of xenophobia. "He is thought to be unwanted, unimportant and unfamiliar in the prevailing system of society and this causes him meaningless depression" (Chakranarayan 83). The protagonist, "Hugo Baumgartner is depicted by the novelist, Anita Desai as a tragic character in whose life there are diverse experiences and facts that by nature and temperament that he is a social man bearing some of the most enduring human qualities but he spends his whole life with the utter feeling of hatred for him" (Gupta 8). He had been of no importance, is of no importance and perhaps will be of no importance anywhere; everywhere he becomes the victim of xenophobia.

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