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## Cross-Cultural Conflicts in Anita Desai's Novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*

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### Abstract

The term cross-culturalism generally used to denote process of cultural hybridity emerging due to dislocation or displacement. In today's mobile and global world, the external borders are disappearing but the psychological blocks still exist. Therefore, to uproot and re-root is a challengeable task for the migrants. Still the material intentions and educational opportunities are dragging the flow of migrants towards the advanced world. So, it is quite essential to focus on the problems affected to the migrant community. The new land offers pressure on the migrant community to observe in-land's accepted norms and customs. Moreover, the native affinities make it difficult to forget the past life and culture that causes variety of conflicts.

Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist of the novel, is one of the victims of these conflicts. These varied conflicts, such as cultural violence, identity crisis, alienation, restlessness, insecurity, anxiety, nostalgia, make it critical to lead peaceful and healthy life.

Anita Desai, being a prominent writer of Diaspora community, portrays cultural divergence and ambiguity in her literary creation. The present paper is an honest attempt to explore little bit about the pangs of migration with special reference to Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

**Keywords:** Migration, Cross-cultural Conflicts, Anita Desai, *Baumgartner's Bombay*

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In today's mobile and global world, the external borders are disappearing but the psychological blocks still exist. Therefore, to uproot and reroot is challengeable act for the migrants. Still the material intentions and educational opportunities are dragging the flow of migrants towards the advanced world. So, it is quite essential to focus on the problems affected to the migrant community. The present paper is an honest attempt to explore little bit about the pangs of migration with special reference to Anita Desai's novel *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

New land offers the pressures on the migrant community to observe in-land's accepted norms and customs. Moreover, the native affinities make it difficult to forget the past life and culture that causes variety of conflicts. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist of the novel, is one of the victims of these conflicts. These varied conflicts, such as cultural violence, identity crisis, alienation, restlessness, insecurity, anxiety, nostalgia, make it critical to lead peaceful and healthy life.

Desai's innovative, trilingual and multidimensional novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* (1988) is an account of an exile life of a German Jew, Hugo Baumgartner who travels from Germany to India in search of safety. The novel opens with Hugo's murder and the subsequent chapters exchange between scenes of his last hours and flashback that take us chronologically through his life. Lotte, his friend witnesses the whole incident and reports his life history to the readers. The story ends with Lotte's arrival at the scene. Thus, the novel opens and ends with the same incident and the whole story happens in between it.

Desai beautifully describes the state of exile people as "enemy aliens" (BB 124) and "hostile aliens" (BB 127) existed in the new adopted land. The novel opens in 1970s India and crisscrosses to 1930s the pre-war Berlin, pre-partition Calcutta, and the post partition Bombay. Set in Berlin, Venice, Calcutta and of course Bombay, *Baumgartner's Bombay* is a story of the twentieth century layman and a memorable portrait of Hugo Baumgartner who is survivor,

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victim and everyman. At the juncture of Hitler's Nazism Hugo's voyage of mishap began who like picaro travels a lot and dies disastrously.

The title of the novel itself is most ironic as Baumgartner and Bombay has no any relation or connection, it is not Baumgartner's Bombay because he is a foreigner in the country and he is unable to live in the country as his own. The sense of detachment is highly entrenched in his mind. The novel deals with the two spaces and moves between the homeland and the abroad, the familiar and the strange, the old and the new, the past and the present and the dream and reality along with contrasts and comparisons. Hugo is hanging between two cultures as "he was both in it and travelling to it, at a distance and yet one with it" (BB 79).

Hugo's journey starts with his father's friend, Herr Pfuel's advice. Herr Pfuel's thinks that to reside in Germany is perilous for Jews and India is safe place for employment as well as to start a new life for Jews. Therefore, Hugo left Germany with great expectations. But he becomes helpless and restless because of dangling in between the situation "against his will, miserably" (BB 26).

The cross-cultural conflicts become quite apparent by the disparity between the eating habits, dressing-style, cultural codes and use of language. In India, Hugo is unknown to menu, every item is unfamiliar to him. In order to get console he tries to search Jewish quarter. He thinks, "... it was important to find their quarter. Perhaps over here he would find for himself a new identity, one that suited him, one that he enjoyed" (BB 77). Unfortunately, he could not find it. Moreover, the religious things in India make him aware of his separateness, he found Indian's worshipping God as problematic because he himself never left anything in the hands of God, "and would not have known which ones to choose from the plethora available in India" (BB 220). Thus, being alien he faces certain problems while adjusting with the new land and culture. Finally, he remains no more perhaps the God has spat him out saying not fit for consumption,

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“German or Hindu, human or divine” (BB 226). He is a man crushed by multi-anti-cultural, socio-political factors.

Hugo is also a victim of racism. He suffers a lot due to his Jewish race. He is doubly exiled man, who was marginalized as a Jew in Germany and as a refugee in India. He has migrated to India for getting escape from hostile atmosphere in Germany. Ironically, in India, at the height of the second world war, Hugo spends six years at the Internment Camp in Ahmednagar because of his foreignness. He makes various efforts to convince Indian officers that he is not harmful to India placing before them his “passport, visiting cards of business associates, a few letters from his mother” hoping that “they would see he had been arrested for no reasons, being harmless, no enemy, merely a refugee from Nazi Germany who wished only to pursue his business interest in India” (BB 128). In the camp, he spends days with other Jews but without mingling with them as the sense of alienation is entrenched in his mind from his childhood in Germany and that is growing wider and wider still present days. His own life seems to be hopelessly tangled and “unsightly, symbolized aptly by the strands of barbed wire wrapped around the wooden posts and travelling in circles and double circles around the camp” (BB 134). He is only able to live “ostrich-like, under the sands of this illusion” (BB 142).

However, in the captivity also he feels released because he knows that he is not intended to get freedom and “it was true that captivity had provided him with an escape from the fate of those in Germany and safety from the anarchy of the world outside” (BB 158). When the news of death of Hitler came, prisoners enjoyed it, but Hugo remains impassive without expressing his feelings, as he knows that the late victory of German Jews is their defeat. He stood under the weight of their defeat, “burdened by their defeat, finding it gross, grotesque, suffocating” (BB 162). He remains helplessly unspeakable in awareness of his representativeness of “crushed and wretched” (BB 162) victory. The captivity of six years makes him incapacitate and unfit for the outer world. After returning, he found that “Germany destroyed – no possibility of returning, so

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that he would have to accept India as his permanent residence. He wondered at his ability to survive in it, reduced as he was to such an abject state of helplessness and the knowledge besides of being alone” (BB 159).

At last, he remains a marginalized, a man without a family, an identity and a country. This sense of marginalization and racism begets a fractured and fragmented psyche. Consequently, he becomes an isolated and alienated figure. He fails to reconcile with the existing world because he has a strange childhood from which he has developed a negative self-image. This inferiority complex never gives him full meaning of life or satisfaction and he began to see the whole world as a hostile place.

His condition is like a three-piece mirror, which shows you “unfamiliar aspects of your head, turning you into a stranger before your own eyes as you slowly rotated to find the recognizable” (BB 36). Consequently, he experiences strangeness everywhere, walks on the streets hoping to draw comfort from the “familiarity of the objects displayed season after season, but found them lacking in colour and interest – it might have been a trick of the light but they seemed covered by a layer of dust” (BB 40).

Thus, he is a nomadic Jew in quest of roots. The resentment of a deserted childhood, the horror of being haunted and hounded out of his own country, exposure to an eccentric ambience in an alien land, forever condemned to the life of an exile, he moves from one existential place to other. He has been living in India for nearly about fifty years and it no longer seems fantastic and exotic; the land is more utterly familiar now than any other landscape on the earth. Yet the eyes of the people who passed by him glanced at him as if he is still stranger and unfamiliar to them and all say, “Firangi, Foreigner” (BB 28).

After spending a long time in India, he is still uncertain regarding the use of language, “uncertain as ever of which language to employ” (BB 13). No one would like to consider his

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presence since “to them he was nobody, an old man with empty bag” (BB 15). He is very well conscious regarding his lack of business, but this thing gives him a feelings of both – shame and relief, because it makes him possible to live apart from “the crowd, the traffic” (BB 16). He is very dependent upon the owner of the restaurant even to feed his cats, everybody recognizes him as “the Madman of the Cats, the Billewallah Pagal” (BB 17).

He fails to create any dominant social identity except “madman or Billiwallah Pagal”. He tries to live distinct from the mainstream of the people, but “it required an effort, an almost physical effort, to crack it, to break through to the liquidity and flow and shift and Kinesis of language” (BB 18), who thinks of himself as “an old turtle trudging through dusty Indian soil” (BB 18). His existential predicament is tragic one. His journey started from nothingness to nothingness, from nowhere to nowhere. He has not his own soli, not language, not family and not any home. He leads an absurd life in both Germany and India. In Germany, he was dark – his darkness had marked him the Jew and in India, he is fair – and that marked him the Firangi. Thus in both lands he remains unacceptable human being worth nothing.

Anita Desai’s trilingual experiment is an output of her heredity and like the author Hugo also uses a language of his childhood i.e. German, language of his angst i.e. English and the language of his surrounding i.e. of Bengali or Hindi. Baumgartner’s struggle to construct a new language for him is a reference to the problems of constructing an identity for himself and his escape away from a German nationality and culture. He constructs a new language for himself out of words “without knowing if these words were English or Hindi or Bengali”. His language was a “not Indian, but India’s, the India he was marking out for himself” (BB 92). However, his new language is slipping away from him, now almost as “unfamiliar as the feel and taste of English words or the small vocabulary of *bastardised* Hindustani that he had picked up over the years” (BB 150). Hugo Baumgartner, a helpless old man, spends his whole life in searching a console in the company of strayed cats in a dingy and shabby place. The novel portrays the plight

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of the refugees in the metropolitan Bombay, which is overcrowded but the individuals spend their time in aloneness.

Hugo Baumgartner experiences the feelings of marginality, insecurity and homelessness. Having escaped from the political turmoil in his German land, Hugo comes to Indian soil with great expectations. The political situation in Germany as well as India was not good, as he had to spend six years in Internment Camp at India because of his German nationality. At the same time his mother spent days in Concentration Camp in Germany because of her Jewishness, one spent days in captivity because of being an outsider while another spent it being the native. Hugo is not only a representative of Jewish Diaspora but also of all human race of displaced people and all tribes of the world.

Thus, he is a representative example of the ambivalent identity of migrants'. These migrants face a dilemma of self-identification. The protagonist is presented as a very feeble, ignorant, stupid and frightened person and in many ways a fractured personality of the story. In this way, the novel evokes right atmosphere to understand cross-cultural conflicts by delineating the Eastern culture of India and the Western culture of Germany.

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