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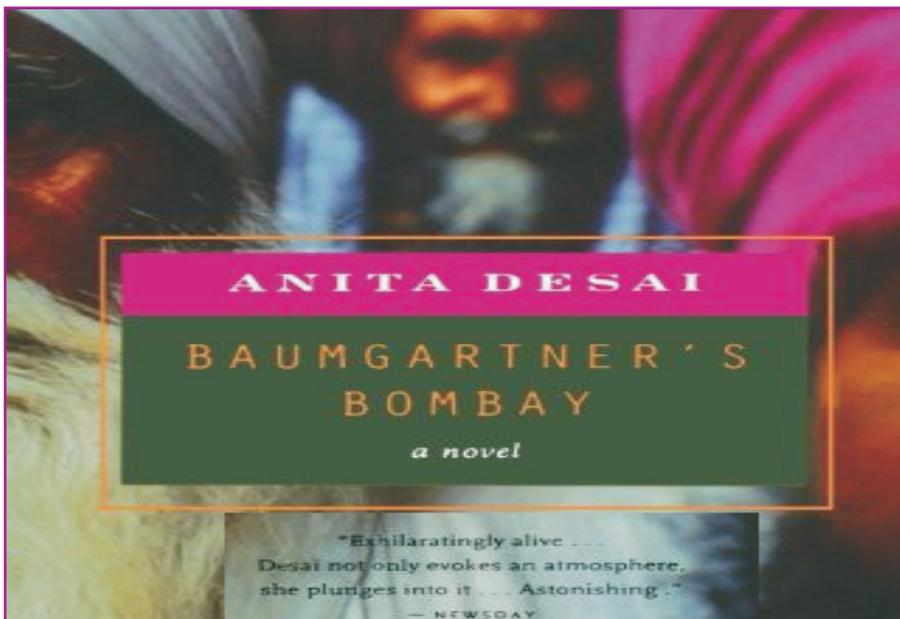


## "SEARCHING FOR SELFHOOD ROOTS IN ANITA DESAI'S BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY"

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English novelists Anita Desai is, perhaps, the most perceptive and consistent explorer of the inner life, especially that of Indian women, convulsed by an acute sense of helplessness in the face of the onslaughts of an unfeeling world and the resultant mental agony. She was born on June 24, 1937, in the hill station of Masoorie, Uttar Pradesh. She was one of four children. Desai was formally educated in English; she was brought up speaking Hindi, German, Bengali and Urdu, as she grew up in a multicultural and multilingual environment, in the old part of Delhi. She attended British Grammar Schools and after that Queen Mary's Higher Secondary School in New Delhi. She graduated with Honours in English from Miranda House, an elite women's college in Delhi, in 1957. The seeds of this chilly novel had been lying at the back of her mind since the time she was in Bombay. She knew an Austrian Jew there who "used

### ABSTRACT

**B**aumgartner's Bombay is Anita Desai's second successive novel where the spotlight is no more on the solitude and interior landscape of the sensitive women. Baumgartner's Bombay extends Desai's horizon of human concern. Baumgartner's Bombay makes a complete departure from her earlier writing. Here, Desai makes an attempt rather tenuously, to explore her roots and family background. The story of the novel unfolds against the backdrop of the Second World War and at the time India is passing through a turbulent phase in her

freedom movement. Hugo Baumgartner, the protagonist of Baumgartner's Bombay finds himself a stranger in the land of his birth and boyhood. He is a German but Hitler's Germany has no place for him, because he is a Jew. The novel is a significant milestone in the long journey of creative writing by one of India's foremost writers in English.

**KEYWORDS:** Baumgartner, Horizon, Tenuously, Protagonist and Hitler's Germany.

### INTRODUCTION :

Of all the contemporary Indian

to walk around in the back streets looking for scraps to feed his cats". He was not as poor as he appeared to be, in fact, he was quite rich. In course of time, he died. A friend of Desai knew him, the friend handed Desai a bunch of letters in German left by the old man. She found nothing unusual in the letters except the stamp number one each of them. The letters came from the Nazi regime in Germany and were the muted testimony of the Nazi Concentration camps and signified the utter depravity of the period. Desai imparted the missing history to the empty letters of the Jew and Baumgartner's Bombay began to take shape as a living entity. Desai's work was made somewhat easier as she went down the memory lane and her memories of pre-war Germany she had talked a lot about, and the memories of her German friend's who had actually been in the internment camps during the war", served an important purpose. In 1986, Anita Desai had moved to England and by that time Baumgartner's Bombay was already in rough draft: "It was a perfect book to work on in England since it allowed me to look on India from a distance, just like the characters does" (p.6) The novel took final shape in the early 1988.

### SEARCHING OF SELFHOOD

A Good novelist creates a self enclosed world, "a totalized fiction" where the novelist is the master of the show. Born into a middle-class family of Germany, Baumgartner finds himself as a hunted Jew as the Nazis reign supreme. His father commits suicide and he has to leave Germany rather reluctantly in search of a place under the sun. Destiny brings him to India. Zig-zagging between Bombay and Calcutta, he finds himself unacceptable everywhere. He tries his hand in business and horse-racing but always finds himself at the wrong place at the wrong time. Baumgartner is the protagonist of this deeply disturbing novel he closely resembles Job - the central personage in "The Book of Job" like Job, Baumgartner also suffers a lot for no fault of his own. He runs for refuge from nowhere to now where. His predicament is universal Anita Desai has created a memorable character in Baumgartner the life story of this German Jew follows a text book pattern of an ancient Greek classic with all its trappings of suffering through several vicissitudes in life. Baumgartner's escape from the Nazi regime in Germany to India in search of a safe refuge leaves him bitter and frustrated. It was a jump from one hell into another. If in of this phase of Baumgartner's existence is modelled on a real character, "a decrepit old man" who lived in the slum area of Bombay with his pet cats and looked for bits of left-over food in nearby eating places to feed cats. People in the neighbourhood mockingly called him "Bille Wallah Pagal". As she revealed in a recent interview "All these years I have been searching for a way to return to that German part of my background". The Indo-German aspect of Desai back ground is the centre piece of all her writings and no worthwhile study of her work can be made without taking notice of her parent's past and their influence on Desai's sensibility.

In Baumgartner's Bombay Anita Desai profiles a city which is nauseating with its squalor, violence and oppressiveness. It is some significance Germany, Hitler termed the Jews are "Sub-human races". In India they were labelled "Hostile aliens". In the traumatic war years the Jews had not much to choose between Germany and India. Baumgartner's arrival in Calcutta of Pre-war years unveils the other face of this metropolis. Anita Desai is superb in sketching and environment. The Calcutta she profiles in the novel may not be "the most wicked place in universe". Baumgartner meets his nemesis in Bombay which to quote Anita Desai is an "abrasive city with its unrelieved ugliness, squalor and noise," Anita Desai's portrayal that a perceptible change is gradually emerging in her writing lately. She asserts that the disgusting picture of Bombay she has presented in the novel is without any motive. She was just trying to create Baumgartner's experience of Bombay, which wasn't the glittering side.

Baumgartner's Bombay is a cruel book laced with her fine prose and keen observation of objects around her: "That was the evening when the breeze came up with the tide, and the sun fell headlong into the waves..... and people strolled..... one was not conscious if one loitered too". Anita Desai is superb in evoking sharp images which go deep in the mind and provide a visual intensity to her writing. As Anita Desai pointed out to Andrew Robinson, "There's just as much violence and cruelty going on in India. Baumgartner's had left Germany and gone far away but never really left crime & violence". In her novel Anita Desai starts with Baumgartner and before we know it "Billi Wallah Pagal" becomes a part of our psyche, our consciousness. Here in lies the true significance and achievement of Anita Desai's art as a novelist.

## CONCLUSION

Thus Baumgartner was able to live like an ostrich under the churning process of the whole world. He use to make Herculean efforts to renew the old acquaintances in Germany; he use to write people's addresses he remembered but he did not receive any reply. Apparently, Hugo's domestic axis is very weak. In fact Baumgartner could never be in the main stream of the Bombayites. It was not possible for him to capture it, it could be all elusive. The novel ends on a tragic note, as one of the rogues of Colaba Causeway murders Hugo. It is a fresh riddle for the Bombay police. Anita Desai's abrupt ricocheting of Baumgartner's Bombay remains a fluffy push to her cavalcade.

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