

# The City, A Villainous Character: A Case Study of Anita Desai's *In Custody* and Baumgartner's *Bombay*

## Abstract

City, an alluring term for Anita Desai, has been made the most of by the Writer. People do not find themselves fit and happy in the environment of the city. In spite of the best efforts if a person gets negative responses of the people, gets rejection and hatred from the family, friends and surroundings, if his dreams are shattered, as a result the soul of such a person becomes tormented and tortured. There are some reasons of one's soul being tormented, such as: Defeat, Isolation, Hopelessness, Lack of Equality and Meaninglessness. The City is the centre of commerce and culture. In the novels of Anita Desai the city has been shown with its huge dimensions, attractive and alluring avenues and high-towered multi storeyed buildings projects a sense of pigminess in the characters. The city has been presented as a villain who overpowers the patient thinking and judicious mind and enslaves them to act upon their instincts. Deven Sharma is one of the main characters of the novel *In Custody* around whom the whole story revolves. Anita Desai shows how his soul becomes tormented and tortured under the vicious forces of the city Delhi. He feels neglected and isolate here. Delhi haunts him like a "Nightmare" and chains him through the "Stained Wall" and stupefies him through the "Suffocating Crowd". In *Baumgartner's Bombay* Hugo Baumgartner comes to India to get the company and love of the Indian people but he, in the big cities like Bombay and Calcutta faces the hatred of the people. The sense of alienation haunts him here at Calcutta, he finds the city of Calcutta, a villain. Anita Desai, indirectly, seems to suggest her readers that at least once everyone will have to face the defeat in the big cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. After seeing defeat either one will try to rise again and survive, or will decide to move away from here as one is completely crushed here and lacks confidence and courage to survive further.

The paper will focus on this aspect of Anita Desai making a case study of her two novels: *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*. This paper will have three divisions: (i) Depiction of the city as a protagonist by Indian English writers. (ii) Anita Desai's depiction of the city as an antagonist in her novels. (iii) A case study of *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay*.

**Keywords:** City, Literature, Society.

## Introduction

The city has been the potent subject matter in literature in English. The creative writers have used the city as the backdrop of literature. The city has many dimensions. Therefore, it would not be out of place to mention that "The city is an environment created by society, in which for the purpose of community living many aspects of the natural environment are modified or entirely eliminated." (MacIver 310) The city is a centre of population, commerce, and culture; a town of significant size and importance.

The tormented souls are those souls who are in great pain or suffering. These souls do not find themselves fit in the environment. The people who get negative results from everywhere in spite of giving their best efforts, the people who get rejection, hatred from their family, friends and surroundings, the people whose dreams are shattered, the souls of such people become tormented and tortured. Such people suffer from the extreme pain of mind. They become pessimistic; there remains no hope in their lives.

There are many reasons of one's soul being tormented and tortured as:

**Defeat:** If a person despite his best efforts gets negative results from every side again and again then the feeling of dejection becomes powerful

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in him. He then thinks of measuring the depth of dejection which means he becomes pessimistic.

**Isolation:** When there is an unhappy atmosphere of one's house as if one sees quarreling in one's house, when there is communicational gap between the children and the parents and when one's parent's relation is on the verge of collapse then, in the child, the feeling of isolation becomes powerful. And later on this condition of the child proves to be the main reason of his soul becoming tormented

**Hopelessness:** When a person does not get hope and satisfaction from anywhere not even from his family, friends and country such person becomes hopeless. And the feeling of hopelessness becomes one of the main causes of his soul being tormented and tortured.

**Lack of Equality:** When there is the presence of strict differentiation among the members of the family, and also among the people of the society then the feeling of inequality overpowers the mind of the people.

Anita Desai concentrates on the problems and hardships faced by the individuals in her novels. Her novels show that how the simple, weak and innocent people face problems in the big cities like Delhi and Calcutta. These cities do not allow the people to progress much. As in the novels namely *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* she describes beautifully the internal conflicts of the characters like Deven and Hugo. She shows the miserable and sorrowful conditions of these characters carefully. *In Custody*, which was published in 1986, she shows the cruel role of Delhi as a protagonist. Deven Sharma, the main protagonist, a son of a widow, is baffled by the city and its sensibility. In Delhi, he marries to Sarala unwillingly. As a man of poetic skills, Deven marries to a prosaic girl only on the forced choice of his "mother and aunts, crafty and cautious women" of Delhi.

The city of Delhi appears negative to Deven as it does not yield any fruitful result to a weak man who is a victim of his own phantasy and illusion. Being aware of his 'humble origin', he moves from Delhi to a small town of Mirpore and joins as a temporary lecturer in Hindi in Lala Ram Lal College. Murad, his old friend, comes from Delhi to Mirpore and stirs his slumbering impulses to be a critic of Urdu poetry. He advises Deven to interview a Delhi based famous Urdu poet, Nur, for materializing his dream. Here is an example for showing the negative role of the town of Mirpore:

The bus soon left Mirpore behind. It came as a slight shock to Deven that one could so easily and quickly free oneself from what had come to seem to him not only the entire world since he had no existence outside it, but often a cruel trap, or prison, as well, an indestructible prison from which there was no escape. (Pandey 84)

This town becomes an 'indestructible prison' to those who live in it permanently. Delhi as a living entity disappoints him once again as he fails to interview Nur. It appears to him like a nightmare, creating a friction between his two-halves. Here are some negative perceptions of Deven for the city of Delhi:

If it had not been the colour and the noise, Chandni Chowk might have been a bazaar encountered in a nightmare, it was so like a maze from which he could find no exit, in which he wandered between the feeling, strained walls of office buildings, the overflowing counters of shops and stalls..... The heat and the crowds passed down from above and all sides, solid and suffocating as sleep. (Pandey 84)

In fact Deven finds Delhi 'as gloomy as prison.' It is Delhi which invites him from Mirpore and leaves him friendless, penniless and shelterless. But this novel ends with a positive note. Deven is able to observe a ray of hope even in his boundless suffering and act of humiliation. Towards the end of the novel he becomes convinced that by chance when everyone 'had cut him off and he was absolutely alone he would begin to find himself and his own strength.' He feels that life is different from geometry, in which every question had its answer and every problem its solution. In order to get money and success Deven thinks of going to Delhi. His journey for attaining material progress transfers one's thoughts to the material development attained by industrialization. As the evils of industrialization symbolized 'concrete, zinc, smoke, decay and destruction' have obliterated 'a pleasant agricultural aspect' so Deven's dry and drab existence will be swamped by the life that he is going to get in Delhi – a life of driving uncertainty, of despair, of increasing desperation is prefigured by the spectacle of nature that he sees around him. Deven's imprisoned existence and illusory heaven are delineated in the landscape:

.... the impassable desert that lies between him and the capital with its lost treasures of friendships, entertainment, attractions and opportunities, it turned into that strip of no-man's land that lies around a prison, threatening in its desolation. (Dhawan 143)

Anita Desai establishes a tension between Deven's reality and illusion when he sees Mirpore through the glass panes: "Now he peered at it through a glass pane filmed with dust and gave an apprehensive shiver just as a released prisoner might." ((Dhawan 143) Deven's journey back to Mirpore is a journey from ignorance of reality to its awareness. He intends to replace nightmare by reality, illusion by facts of life: "Henceforth he would avoid that mirage, that dream that so easily twisted into nightmare. Any reality was preferable ..... even if it was the smeared window of a country bus bumping along the rutted road homewards." ((Dhawan 144)

Anita Desai shows how the main character Deven feels himself in prison and trap in the city of Delhi. Deven thinks of taking an interview of a famous Urdu poet Nur, but he realizes that he lacks courage and does not have enough ability to do the job of interviewing Nur. He thinks that it is an ill omen and so he will not be successful in his mission. His very close friend Murad does not make Deven comfortable but enjoys teasing him. The disgusting atmosphere of Nur's house breaks Deven badly. He thinks that the person whom he regarded as a God is worst than

even a man. Here comes a realization to Deven that he is a great failure. His roots will not grow in such atmosphere of the city of Delhi where the people give more importance to money rather than one's feelings and emotions. His soul becomes so tormented and tortured that he wants to run away from this world but he cannot do this anyhow.

Anita Desai in her another novel *Baumgartner's Bombay* shows the negative picture of the cities like Bombay and Calcutta. She shows how the main protagonist Hugo Baumgartner feels alone and alienated in these cities and he becomes doubted of even his existence and self. It reveals the organic role of the city and its sensibility. Spending his childhood in Berlin and having strained relations with his parents, Hugo Baumgartner visits Venice, Calcutta and then Bombay in connection with his business of a timber merchant. The entire structure of this novel is based on the working of unconscious memories. As a wandering Jew through life, Hugo undergoes many social, racial and political pangs. In Germany, he lives with his mother, but his life is not fully contented here. Even his mother, like his own anxiety in India, creates in him sometimes to realize the deformity in his physique:

Even if he had used hair- dye and boot polish, what could he have done about his eyes...? Accepting but not accepted 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 firanghi. In both lands, the unacceptable. (Pande 86)

After a strained childhood with his father in Germany, Baumgartner comes to Venice and then to Calcutta for seeking his existence. But he finds many possibilities for the tropical disease of Malaria here in Calcutta. Moreover, he does not find the environment of the city favourable to his future belongingness. The sense of alienation and isolation so haunts him here at Calcutta as he leaves it and comes to Bombay in search of a place for his belongingness. He settles here in a small flat of Hira Niwas and becomes a business partner with Chimani Lal. Living in Hira Niwas he feels Bombay as his home. He now accepts India, especially Bombay as his native place. It is seen that in Desai's novels, the city always baffles and nullifies the pleasure – loving and nerve – soothing instincts of the protagonists due to its overbearing presence. As an inhabitant of Hira Niwas, Hugo displays the villainous role of the city of Bombay. Here at Bombay, the women are engaging themselves long before day – break till late in the night washing and cleansing the pots, "yet no where could one see any sign of cleanliness – the tape only created a morass of mud and slime; children squatted anywhere to urinate or defecate." (Pande 87) If the city of Bombay obsesses him by its dirt and filth, he also finds the city of Calcutta as a villain.

There is 'no truce in Calcutta,' every street in Calcutta seems to be in war: "The streets were black with litter's the lights broken, the odour of decay strong. At Howrah station, he found himself shrinking, unwilling to step into it". (Pande 88) Again, he is also murdered in Bombay by a deranged German boy who

kills him at his own residence when he was sleeping. Thus, the entire structure of this novel rotates around the cruel acts of the two cities- Bombay and Calcutta.

This novel shows the condition of a German Jew who is neither accepted in Germany nor in India. He feels terrible over his condition. He thinks that when he will go to India then the Indian people will accept him and love him; he will get the affection from the Indian people. But all his dreams are shattered in India. Nobody is here ready to accept him as one of them at any cost. Hugo Baumgartner is compelled by the circumstances to arrive in India to undertake some business to earn his livelihood. In due course of time, India becomes his home country, and he lives there till his death. But unfortunately he is not accepted as one of them by the Indians.

One of the causes of Baumgartner's being sad all the time is that his parents do not have same interests, and though they live peacefully together, they do not actively participate in each other's world. The relationship between his parents and him is very suggestively painted through the residence upstairs and the showroom down stairs: "Hugo skittered back and forth between the apartment and his father's showroom, the stairs case in between a place of perilous choice, the no man's land where he might be summoned and drawn by either." (Sharma 134)

Hugo did not enjoy much his childhood as the other children of his age group do. He was always tensed due to the problem found between his mother and father. They did not share a happy married life. The communicational gap could be seen clearly between both of them. They did not understand each other. This confused relation of his parents tortured Hugo's soul. He feels alone and alien. As in Germany, he is an outcast because he is a Jew and is forced to leave his native land for an alien country. When he reaches India, he desperately strives to adopt and adjust to the Indian life so that he may be accepted by Indians and may truly belong to the new country. He wishes 'Would he one day be darker? It seemed desperately important to belong and make a place for himself.' His life in India is portrayed in these words: "the coolies did not trouble him he had no luggage they could carry- he was left to himself. On that first day as on every other day, left to himself." (Sharma 137)

This loneliness becomes a part of Baumgartner's life. Again, he grasps the truth about India when he asks the Tonga- Walla to take him to the Taj Hotel, but is taken to a small hotel. This is symbolic of the difference between reality and dream. On the very first day he understands this difference and never again tries to search for the India of his dreams. Later Baumgartner decides to go to Calcutta with the hope of restarting a good business but when he leaves for Calcutta the barrenness of the land on his way makes him depressed and apprehensive. The 'hard, flat earth-at first a friable red, then a crumbling black, and finally mile upon mile of dun colourlessness.' The dry barrenness of the earth gives rise to fear in Baumgartner's heart, and he thinks that he cannot adjust in such a place. One sees that Baumgartner has a good time in Calcutta in the beginning, but is not accepted as one of the countrymen. Then the war between Germany and

Britain puts him into internment camp for many years and when he returns, Calcutta is no more the same. Forced by the circumstances, he goes to Bombay and stays there till his death, but only as an outsider. So he is destined to make his life-journey only through a dry, barren earth which cannot give him any happiness and true love.

This nature of Baumgartner leaves him without a friend. The Jews of the camp are scared by the Nazi Germany, and the camp is split in to two groups - the German Nazis and the German Jews. The tension and the sense of insecurity of the Jews are very subtly portrayed by Anita Desai. The Nazis take over the camp authority from the British Commandant who 'was seen to wilt.' The Jews remain silent in the presence of the Nazis. The post-war, post-famine Calcutta, which is on the verge of the tragic partition, represents the present condition of Baumgartner 'the hopelessness of it seemed right to Baumgartner; this was how the world ended, there was no other ending.'

Anita Desai in these novels reflects her deep interest with the different problems, which her characters have to look. She tries to trace the origin of such problems and depicts sufferings. She shows the critical times of her protagonists namely Deven and Baumgartner. Anita Desai in the novels *In Custody* and *Baumgartner's Bombay* depicts the sufferings of the tortured and tormented souls. Deven and Baumgartner face the negative reactions of the people in the cities of Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. They find themselves tiered of the selfish and materialistic motives of the city people.

The city people do not have time for personal meetings and gossiping. They are too busy in their own worlds; even the husband-wife relationship is not satisfactory. The lack of communication and understanding can be seen between the husband and the wife. This type of atmosphere of the cities disturbs a new comer a lot, he finds himself unable to adjust in such atmosphere. The same is the condition of Deven and Baumgartner; they are helpless and rootless in the cities of Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. Their

dreams of getting the success in these cities are shattered. They get just one thing in these cities and i.e. 'Defeat'. The city as a social force often appears winning and thus thwarting all progressive efforts of the protagonist. The futile resistance of the protagonist to the gigantic powers of the city seems a complete failure, but the recurring defeats do not dispirit him. Defeated and disenchanting, the protagonist of Desai's novel leaves an indelible impression on the readers.

Anita Desai through her novels tries to depict the suffering and mental tortures of the people living in the big cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. She tries to show the picture of these big, cities that how these cities attract the people like magnet and finally they become the main cause of the sufferings of the innocent and simple people. These type of people lack confidence and courage to revolt against the surroundings and the gigantic powers of the big cities; hence they are forced to lead a miserable life. Their soul becomes so tormented and tortured that it is unable to bear sufferings and problems anymore. Anita Desai, indirectly, seems to suggest her readers that at least once everyone will have to face the defeat in the big cities like Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. After seeing defeat either one will try to rise again and survive, or will decide to move away from here as one is completely crushed here and lacks confidence and courage to survive further. One will have to fight against the merciless and blind forces of the cities to regain one's wealth, power, position and social prestige.

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