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**SOCIAL UPHEAVAL AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN
THE NOVEL 'BAUMGARTNER'S BOMBAY' BY
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Abstract

It has been observed in various studies conducted in clinical research that social stability is congruent with reduced mental illness and depressive symptoms (German and Latkin). This phenomenon points towards the question of a person's mental state when social stability is disturbed. In this article, the researcher proposes that social upheaval leaves indelible psychological scars on an individual which is reflected in their unstable relationships which overtime shapes their individual identity. To address the connection between social upheaval and individual identity the researcher uses social psychology theories. The researcher suggests that the protagonist of the selected novel, Hugo Baumgartner suffers from an identity crisis due to the volatile social situation he faced growing up. This inability to form a secure identity is reflected in his relationships with other human beings.

Keywords: Social Upheaval; Psychological Trauma; Identity; Baumgartner; Anita Desai.

Introduction

It has been proved in various psychological studies that volatility in any of the various kinds of social environment especially during childhood leaves a person unable to form safe meaningful and fulfilling relationships in the future. (Pham, Phuong N. et al.) Freud especially reflects on it in his psychodynamic theory that childhood experiences especially those of a traumatic nature affects the adult life and personality of that individual. Freud further states that certain patterns of recurring thoughts about trauma experienced remains in the subconscious mind and may result in neurosis. The extreme conditions, the physical change, and the mental torment experienced during displacement often render the person suffering to further their ordeal by the psychosomatic nature of human beings. The Merriam Webster dictionary defines psychosomatic as *“of, relating to, involving, or concerned with bodily symptoms caused by mental or emotional disturbance”*. The self-limiting psychosomatic behaviour in displaced, uprooted people who cannot safely connect to their past is often reflected in their relationship with their work, social environment, and other people. The constant reminiscing over the past trying to find a reason such atrocities happened to them, ways they could have possibly avoided it, the signs that should have warned them about the coming disaster are some ways in which the survivors of social upheaval reveal their psychosomatic tendencies. It points towards their inability to reconcile with the truth of the circumstances they faced. The ultimate result of these constant remunerations is that they cannot form a secure identity having been trapped in a perpetual struggle for survival mode. This indicates that social stability is an essential factor in the sound development of a person's identity. Anita Desai in her novel 'Baumgartner's Bombay' works with the letters of a deceased German man of Jewish origins to unravel the atrocities of war without driving home the point that crimes of war reach beyond the physical loss of life and property. In her semi-biographic novel, Desai subtly inculcates the trauma of uprooting she witnessed in her mother who is also a German ex-pat, and that

which she experienced second hand as the child of parents who had to leave their homeland for social political reasons. This sense of exile and not belonging is prominent in her novels.

Baumgartner's Bombay: An Insight into The Mind of a War Victim

Social upheaval forms an integral part of the novel Baumgartner's Bombay. Hugo Baumgartner the protagonist is introduced as a young boy being given treats and cuddled by his mother at the beginning of the novel. The storyline weaves back and forth from his childhood days to his present. The reader experiences the events of Baumgartner's life via Baumgartner's point of view. Baumgartner keeps experiencing triggers in his adult life that lead him to revisit his childhood and teenage memories in an attempt to reconcile the flailing pieces of his wayward existence. His first trigger was after he had just established a successful business in Calcutta with his business partner Habibullah and started to think of bringing his mother there with him. Civil riots break out in India and he is taken prisoner in one of the internment camps. There imprisoned in the internment camp unable to help either himself or his mother he keeps returning to his memory of the interim time he spent in Venice on his journey to India.

he stood there, as entranced as he was alarmed. Venice was the East, and yet it was Europe too; it was that magic boundary where the two met and blended, and for those seven days Hugo had been a part of their union. He realized it only now: that during his constant wandering, his ceaseless walking, he had been drawing closer and closer to this discovery of that bewitched point where they became one land of which he felt himself the natural citizen. (73)

His constant subconscious search for self-identity and a place he could naturally belong to points towards the identity crisis he experiences. This inability to form a stable identity due to his constantly changing situation is reflected in his half-hearted relationships with people who all end up deserting him in times of need. The researcher proposes that this act of reminiscing about his past isn't merely a form of visiting fond memories, but

rather this is a way via which Baumgartner continuously tries to connect the dots of his fragmented life torn apart by war and displacement.

The effects of mass social upheaval due to war leaves a country afloat in chaos and in Baumgartner's case, it affected the entire European continent. The physical loss suffered and endured during the war like the loss of property and economy although more visible and loud in their dismantling can still be regained, but the loss of life, status, mental health and a sense of security are the more precious and fragile areas of life which once lost cannot ever be recovered in complete measure. The holocaust survivors like Henri Kichka, at the cost of reliving the horrors of their trauma shared with the world their horrific experience in the concentration camp in order to reveal what really went over in the camps. Henri Kichka reveals;

"You had no name in the camp - just a number tattooed on to your forearm".
(BBC 2020)

This gives an indication of how the monstrosity at work in the camp tried to rip them of their identity. Reduced to a number, skeletally thin those who survived the holocaust were tormented with the design to rip them of any dignity or sense of self they might have had. When asked how he survived in the camp Henri replied;

"You did not live through Auschwitz. The place itself is death," (BBC 2020)

This sentiment he conveyed to BBC 75 years after the termination of the concentration camps. When such terrors were introduced to the holocaust survivors only the worst can be imagined for those who died there. It is only natural then that those who escaped the concentration camp but lost members of their family or friends or neighbours to it or didn't hear from them would suffer survivors' guilt and be tormented by the possibilities of what could have happened to their loved ones and how it could have been avoided in hopes of a better outcome. Baumgartner who has escaped the war and was in India in his attempt to establish a new home for himself and his mother had come to India solely with the intentions of rescuing his mother from war-torn Germany. When he was captured and kept in the internment

camps in India during the political uprising against the British imperial government in India, Baumgartner gradually stopped receiving letters from his mother.

He was able to live, ostrich-like, under the sands of their illusion, because although the letters written by the Jews were now taken in and posted- so they were assured- there was still no word in reply... What could this continuing silence from his mother mean? Had she been swept up into the horrors of which the others in the barracks whispered and muttered in the dark? The terrible thoughts flooded in, an invading army that his closed eyes would not keep out, could not stop; they advanced like a nightmare to the inevitable. (138)

The inability to accept is the first act of dissonance that victims of social upheaval experience. This silence from his mother pointed towards the inevitable fate of Jews in Germany at that time, but Baumgartner still could not believe it. He didn't want to. He was in denial. He hoped for the best despite all evidence pointing towards the opposite. This reflects the difficulty and mental torment a person goes through in the absence of news from a loved one in peril even if the person himself is safe.

The struggles of a displaced person don't end at the inability to accept their reality and accordingly deal with it. The more insidious form of torment survivors suffer is the guilt of having survived while their loved ones suffered.

He knew it was craven not to desire freedom, but 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. (153)

Baumgartner's guilt stemmed from feeling safe in the internment camp in India. He found himself luckier in terms of the fate of those in Nazi Germany, and of those outside the camp in the politically unstable India. He felt like he was one of the primitive cave dwellers who feared the outside world and felt himself to be a coward. This reflects that Baumgartner did not allow himself to mourn the immense grief that he was enduring. He saw the

suffering of those outside and in comparison, found himself better-off and despised himself for his comfort. These self-loathing thoughts did not allow Baumgartner to comprehend the precarious position he was in and the dissonance left him unable to comprehend his identity. He envied the ability of his fellow prisoners their ability to share the traumatic experiences of their life.

For others, this initial interrogation often led to friendship, in his case it never did. The habits of an only child, of an isolated youth in an increasingly unsafe and threatening land and then of a solitary foreigner in India had made Baumgartner hold to himself the fears he had about his mother, about what was happening in Germany, allowing it to become a dark, monstrous block... Baumgartner watched and marvelled at this gift for passing on or even shedding whatever was burdensome: it seemed to him he shed nothing, that- like a mournful turtle- he carried everything with him; perhaps it was the only way he knew to remain himself. (127)

This passage highlights the point that Baumgartner's isolation wasn't due to his choosing to not share, but rather due to his fear of reliving the terror of the endless torturous possibilities that awaited his mother in Germany. He was subconsciously continuously trying to bring his mother away from Germany into safety in India, but her refusal to leave her homeland for a foreign strange land left Baumgartner no choice but to worry about her safety there. Her initial replies to him stating her safety and well-being did not convey the message of comfort to him. Rather he worried his mother lied to him to shield him from the horrors and tragic conditions she was facing. Thus, the efforts at making friends inside the internment camp left Baumgartner exhausted and thus he could not shed any of the heavy weight he carried in his conscience.

It has been put forth by licenced marriage and family therapist Katie Morton that people mimicking the standard of acceptable and non-acceptable behaviour as witnessed in their interactions with their parents (Katie Morton). Baumgartner constantly finds himself in relationships where his friends abandon him when he needs them the most. This is due to the fact

that subconsciously he keeps repeating the relationship he shared with his father. His father had killed himself after being released from the torture camp at Dachau due to the mental torment and psychological scar the episode in Dachau gave him. Baumgartner was left alone with his dainty delicate mother to deal with the horrors of war. The suicide of his father was an abandonment he never recovered from. Therefore, since that is his first model for relationship with males, he constantly keeps finding himself in such situations where his male friends desert him when he needs their assistance the most. Even in his school days, he was never able to form any meaningful friendship with his classmates. This was due to his excessive attachment towards his sole parent, mother and his severed memories of his father. (Karlen Lyons-Ruth) This unsatisfactory fragmented relationship he has with those around him add another element of instability and turmoil in his identity. Baumgartner has a tendency towards forgiving others for their flaws, yet being unable to forgive himself of his shortcomings. He doesn't accept help from others since it pronounces his not-belonging element. This tendency he had even when he was a child in Germany and his teacher tried to gift him the shining great ball of red glass sitting on top of the Christmas tree.

Nothing would persuade him that the twinkling glass globe was his. He knew that it was not- that Fraulein Klutke had made it up on seeing that there was no other gift for him. (41)

This incidence happens on Christmas day at his school in Germany when he was just a little boy. All the other children in the school who were Christian were receiving gifts secretly given to their teacher Fraulein Klutke by their parents which was intended to be presented to the children later on as that was the custom there. However, since Baumgartner's parents were Jewish, he knew there couldn't have been a gift for him there. At his young age to be so acutely aware of the aspects that made him different from others points towards his sensitive nature and a desire to be one of the students there, to belong. This childhood desire to belong never gets fulfilled even in his adulthood which adds another dimension to his unstable identity. As seen in the novel, when Hugo Baumgartner's mother takes him with her to her old

college friend Adele and her family from before her marriage to Siegfried Baumgartner, Hugo finds himself gradually getting bored in the company of her friends who sat there reciting poetry and enjoying the literary atmosphere of the sophisticated university bred people, and Adele's son Albert who took him to see the swans swim in the lake. Baumgartner had initially felt that he belonged to the masculine world of his father in their furniture showroom and the racecourse- *"he had revelled in the masculine atmosphere created by his father- the somewhat roguish, slightly inebriated air of gentlemen of the town"*(52) but the untimely tragic death of his father which resulted in them losing their furniture showroom left a gaping hole in his identity. He didn't know anymore where he belonged. He felt he could not tell anyone what he was experiencing for the shame he felt in not belonging.

Baumgartner's release from the internment camp leads him to establish business anew in Bombay with the help of his old business partner Habibullah's recommendation letters. There he meets Chimanlal, who impressed by Baumgartner's tenacity in securing business immediately befriends him which turn out to be the only stable relationship in his life. He goes on to winning bets on racehorses multiple times with Chimanlal who kept this streak of gambling a secret from his family. This ultimately leads them to buy a racehorse together. Even this however doesn't provide him stability in his relational identity. After the death of Chimanlal due to heart complications, the business-minded son of Chimanlal swindles him out of their joint partnership of the horse based on lacking legal documents of it. Old and dejected thus, and no longer interested in the race to thrive and be successful Baumgartner doesn't seek employment anywhere else. He gives up on himself and focuses rather on witnessing life as it passes by.

In the last days of Baumgartner, he wanders the streets of Bombay trying to gather food for the hurt yet feisty street cats who he rescued and kept imprisoned in his small smelly unkempt apartment. Here he is repeating the pattern in which his mother care for him in his early days after the death of his father. He sees himself as the cat who got hurt in the struggle for survival and sees his imprisoned apartment as the safest place for the discarded,

unwanted cats just as the internment camps had been for him- a safe spot despite the odds of his situation. This act puts him in a position- however precarious- of restructuring the dismantled parts of his life. The lack of identity suffered by Baumgartner is not a dilemma he faces alone. Those around him did not know what he represented as an individual either. Just as much as he tried avoiding contact with the ever-increasing street dwellers rendered homeless due to the yearly flood and drought and driven to the streets of Bombay, who peopled the lane to his apartment for fear of being robbed by them, the homeless street dwellers mocked his slatternly state of being and disrespected him by sneering in his presence due to his skin colour.

The last fatal mistake Baumgartner makes in the novel is when he is forced by Farrokh the owner of Café de Paris, which was one of the places from where he gathered leftover food for his cats, to take the dingy slumped foreign boy with him and he agrees to it ultimately feeling pressured and obliged. It was clear to Baumgartner that the boy was an Aryan and thus, the last person he should be expected to help and more to the point that the boy himself probably wouldn't have wanted Baumgartner's help due to their cultural rivalry and the wounds of the war which were still too fresh. Still, seeing the deplorable condition the boy was in, Baumgartner offers his help to the boy on humanitarian grounds, but as his fatal fate would have it, Baumgartner was murdered at night by the Aryan boy who despised Baumgartner's apparent peace. He stole Baumgartner's silver race trophies and escaped into the night after killing Baumgartner. Even though the atmosphere of awaiting Baumgartner's death by the Nazis is predicated from the very beginning, Desai subtly introduces the element of stark strangeness in it by the way she introduces her characters to each other in an unexpected way both of who are unwilling to face their past and trying to avoid contact with the other. This torrid atmosphere is in keeping with the element of not-belonging, uprooting and experiencing an identity crisis that Desai weaves into the fabric of the novel and which forms the most essential part of the novel. The irony lies in the fact that the national identity conferred on them via hatred spread by the government policies of their time and nation, led

them to re-enacted the rivalry they had in their homeland even all those miles away from home.

Conclusion

The novel presents the terrible truth of social upheaval, dislocation and individual struggle to establish a safe identity. The idea that the atrocities of war is something that cannot be erased is presented here. Even when the economies get back to normal, the destroyed property and finances are regained, the indelible scars of the war remain alive not just in those who witnessed the war themselves, but also in the minds of those who witnessed it second hand through the difficulties their parents, grandparents, family and friends face. It drives home the point that a stable safe identity is a necessity for a successful life and that social stability is a crucial element in the emotional and mental wellbeing of people. In the article "*Voiceless Victims of War: An Absurd Truth*", Das and Sarangi put it aptly-

Holocaust threw the very existence of life on this blue planet into a complex question. People realised collectively that life on the earth could no longer be taken for granted. (Das and Sarangi 223)

National policies often play a curial role in the sentiments the general public hold towards each other, and that there are victims on both sides of the war. In the novel, the victims of war are represented by Baumgartner's internment mates in India who were both Aryan and Jew. After the war ended the Aryan Germans who had fled Germany in their efforts to not be forced to kill Jews quickly tried to Christianise their names in order to dissociate with their murderous national identity. Where initially the Jews were run out with force and terror from Germany when the war started, the Aryan Nazi's were later driven out of Germany for shame and fear of being targeted. Numerous instances of Nazi's helping their Jewish neighbours out in those difficult times exist of which the most famous example is the story of Anne Frank in her autobiography published posthumously 'The Diary of a Young Girl'. Ni, Michael Y et al. in their article "*Mental Health During and After Protests, Riots and Revolutions: A Systematic Review*" astutely point out that mass social upheaval leads to post-traumatic stress disorder and

increases the rate of depression in people which is directly related to the dangers of losing the identity a person held before the traumatic experience. The issue of identity formation becomes a crucial issue when displacement due to war takes place. How a person relates to the world depends on the identity they construct about themselves. Since humans are social beings and depend on each other in some form or another, it is essential that they possess a stable secure self-identity. The struggle to re-establish oneself after a life-changing social upheaval is tumultuous as it is even without the element of war and displacement, but when that happens along with social upheaval, the need to form an identity becomes even more difficult and pronounced because of it. Thus, the researcher concludes the topic that social upheaval leaves indelible scars on the psyche of people which destroys the process of individual identity formation which in turn handicaps their life. Furthermore, these life-shattering tragedies are mostly avertable since they are brought on by the struggle to either maintain or dissociate from the national identities that are conferred to people by their nations.

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