



Portrayal Of Billy Biswas's Estrangement In The Primitive World In Arun Joshi's The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas

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Abstract

The aim of this research paper is to examine the second novel of Arun Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) which revolves round the crisis of self, the resultant agony and Man's quest for affirmation. The dependency of its protagonist Billy Biswas is the result of his estrangement in modern society and civilization that forces him to take refuge in the world of tribals. The theme of alienation for finding answers to some perennial questions is dealt with competently by Arun Joshi here. The motif of quest permeates the whole narrative.

Keywords: strangeness, tribals, self, quest, spirituality.

INTRODUCTION

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas starts with depicting Billy as a man of intellect, profound sensibility and unusual obsessions. The son of a judge of Supreme Court of India Billy belongs to a rich and respectable family. His grandfather had been the Prime Minister of a famous princely State in Orissa and his father had practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi after completing his law studies. His father had also been an Indian ambassador to a European country. His father sends him to America to take up engineering courses but he starts doing Ph.D. in Anthropology because it is his first love.

Romi meets Billy while searching an accommodation in New York. Billy offers to share with Romi his apartment in Harlem, the black colony in America. Though Billy could very well afford to live in some other posh areas like Manhattan; as he comes of an "upper crust of Indian society" (p.5), he has chosen to live there because, as she tells Romi, he finds it "the most human place" (p.5). Romi accepts Billy's offer and the sharing of the flat develops into an unusual friendship which lasts till the end.

The first part of the novel gives us glimpses into Billy's strangeness as a man and also of his liking for the primitive and unsophisticated people. Romi narrates Billy's story in New York and

Delhi from his own observation. They are both around twenty two when they meet each other. He is soon impressed by Billy's "almost inhumanly sharp eyes" (p.39). In America, Billy is drawn towards books on Anthropology and "he tells Romi:

All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginal of the world (p.10).

It is around Billy's interest in the primitive life that his entire personality has been structure. Talking to Romi he tells of his "glimpse of the other side": "Most of us are aware only of the side on which we are born, but there is always the other side, the valley beyond the hills, the hills beyond the valley" (pp. 14-15). This other side concerns the primitive life untouched by sophistication and restraints of the civilized world.

Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady of thirty years, who has come to United States for advanced training in psychiatric course and has "extraordinary intuition" (p.75), understands the dilemma of Billy's life fully. She comes to know what goes in his "dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes" (p.15). She tells Romi that Billy is an extraordinary person and feels inside him a strange force.

She finds him "obsessed with a latent quest" (p.176). Romi on his part notes Billy's urge for the primitive at a music party at George's apartment. As Billy plays the pair of Bongo drums for nearly quarter of an hour, a hush descends on the atmosphere of the room. Romi and others feel the mesmeric pull of the music which holds everyone by its sheer vitality.

The Bhuvaneshwar episode presents Billy's personality to be still more mysterious. He tells Romi how at the age of fourteen, he had experienced the urge to live like a primitive man in the primitive world. He had received the intimations of his primitive self from the moment he emerged from the railway station. He remembers: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake" (p.120). It had seemed to him that the sculptures at Konark can give him a solution to his questions about the problem of his anguish and identity. "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where I was going?" (p.20). If anyone had a clue to it, it was only the adivasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark inscrutable faces (p.122). One night, he happens to go to the tribal people with his uncle's chauffeur and with deep interest he watches the tribals dancing, drinking, singing and being extremely sensitive.

While Romi is in America trying to understand Billy's psyche, he receives an urgent message of his father's death. Romi returns to India and after putting in great efforts here he enters the Indian Administrative Service. Billy on the other hand, finds himself itching to be back to India after the completion of his doctoral degree in Anthropology. Even on his return to India, he does not feel homely and temperamentally satisfied at home. A sense of nothingness pervades him. He suffers from a sense of loss of socio-cultural ethos, finds himself in a vacuum which his psyche is unable to comprehend.

In order to overcome his aberrations, Billy decides to get married. He thinks for one moment that marriage would give him a new anchor to cling to and would lead him to an affirmation in life. His marriage to Meena Biswas, a pretty young daughter of a retired Civil Servant is solemnized. Romi gets another opportunity to mark Billy's bizarre approach when he finds the later defending before his father the conduct of a clerk who has sacrificed someone else's child to appease the goddess for the recovery of his ailing son.

The domestic strife accentuates Billy's ingrained alienation and he loses temper even at minor issues, quarreling "all the time", "snapping at everybody" remaining in a "dark mood", not touching his wife for six months, always making fun of Meena, not keeping his promises to his wife and several other things.

Utterly disgusted by the external scenario, Billy is gripped by strange hallucinations as he recounts to Tuula, "A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man's house" (p.93). Such

behaviour leads Romi to infer that Billy's mental condition is "closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God" (p.140). Traces of such abnormality were also noticeable in his American sojourn. At the age of twenty, he had visions "of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times, full of strange primitive people" (p.123). Such hallucinations continue to haunt him when he teaches at Delhi University. Whenever Billy takes his students for expedition to Central India, he hears an irresistible call from the hills he traverses on.

Billy is not only sensitive in the literal sense of the term but also conscious of his being. He therefore feels concerned with eternal question of his identity which has been upsetting him since the age of fourteen when he could realize that "Something has gone wrong with my life" (p.123). Given his unhappy experiences, however, he comes to realize that he has been running only after shadowy and illusory appearances. Unable to resist the call of his inner self, he goes to the forest the next night. The call pricks him incessantly.

Billy watches the dance of the tribals and participates in it as well. He drinks the wine and watches all that till it turns into a sort of "orgy" with the feverish beats of drums. He finally decides to abjure the civilized world to join the tribals for every to find out not only his roots but his identity also.

Billy thus leaves the civilized world because he feels suffocated in the phony atmosphere of the modern society. He rejects the artificiality and hollowness of the sophisticated people totally. He leaves the smart society because he finds his affirmation of the essence of human existence in the primitive life and makes a concerted effort to join another world away from this civilization. This is not an impulsive action but a well thought out plan. Billy moves out of civilization so mysteriously that he leaves no traces behind. People come to believe that he has been eaten away by a man-eater. Symbolically, it represents the breaking of bonds between the civilized world and Billy.

He loves the unrestrained life of the primitive people who go in for drinking and dancing and open orgiastic love making. Contrary to all this are the ways of the upper class sophisticated society which seems to Billy in no way different from those of a kennelful of dogs "yawning or struggling against each other" (p.92).

The ambition and superficiality of the upper society are represented by Meena, Billy's father, Meena's father and Rima Kaul. Though Billy marries Meena Chatterjee to derive some satisfaction out of his life, he feels a corrupting force working upon him. Meena fails to understand him and they quarrel intermittently. Meena becomes the mother of Billy's child but the emotional gap and lack of understanding prevails. Meena and Billy are not made for each other. According to Romi, Billy's departure might have been avoided if only she had possessed "a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering" (p.183). It is Meena's lack of understanding that out of despair and agony, Billy seduces Rima Kaul, a girl related to Meena. His passions lead him astray and his romance with Rima Kaul is degraded into seduction.

This experience fills Billy with remorse and he blames the civilized world for this: "It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul was taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for" (p.187). The terrible shock he receives at his degradation instigates his flight from the civilized world.

Billy decides to go in for the first option viz., following the call of his vision. The tribal girl Bilasia seems to be calling him from the primitive world and Billy falls madly in her love treating her as "the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year" (p.140). Her voluptuousness attracts Billy and the sexual union with Bilasia gives him much satisfaction.

Billy feels himself at ease in a world devoid of rat race and its resultant miseries. He is very right at this place because it is "ambition" which causes anxiety and rivalry and makes people

snobbish. All types of self-possession come due to ambition which destroys man's values and drives a person to alienation. Billy is recognized not only as their King, but is treated as endowed with magical and supernatural powers also.

Ten years after his disappearance Billy meets Romi in the jungle. Romi, the district collector of that stretch, is on a tour to the Maikala Range and is startled at Billy's figure when he spots him. Billy is wearing a loin-cloth and is completely tribalized. He attributes his mysterious disappearance to an irresistible urge towards the primitive people and one comes to know about him more clearly.

After this chance meeting Billy keeps on visiting Romi again and again and in the meantime cures Romi's wife Situ's migraine with some herb. Billy takes the promise on the part of Romi that he will not disclose his whereabouts to anybody but Romi's wife Situ forces him to tell her about Billy. Romi fearfully tells Situ and Situ gives out the secret. The tragedy takes place when the so called civilized world impinges upon the world of tribals which provides Billy unusual peace and serenity. In other words, the tragedy takes place when an established man is forced to uproot himself by people whom he hates. It may be noted here that Billy finds himself emotionally attached to Rima so much so that he starts crying when Romi tells him about Rima's death in an accident. Billy is attached to none of his family members, wife, son, and father so Rima's statement that Billy "had nothing to come back to" (p.87) becomes very significant.

In this way *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Portrays how a man of extraordinary obsessions is destroyed by civilization due to his rebellious nature. This story parallels the story of the King of the primitives who staked his life in the hopeless attempt to make the face of God and got nothing. Like the foreigner, this novel is another variation of the doomed existential quest of man for affirmation in an absurd world since life's meaning lies in the "dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the Sun" (p.4). *The Strange Case* presents forth the attraction for the mysterious forces of the universe like Bilasia, the tribal girl and Billy's quest for his identity which results in the death of Billy Biswas in the end. He seems to be in a perfect knowledge of his destruction as suggested by Romi but the more important factor is that Billy takes refuge in the tribal civilization as the last resort. He seeks his identity with the civilization, society, individuals and in the process feels like losing his own identity. It is only to find out his roots that he goes to the primitive folds which "guarded him as his own" (p.239) until his reappearance from "the sanctuary of the great god of primitive world" (p.239).

In this way the outward journey performed by Billy Biswas is symbolic of his relentless quest for a personal salvation. His spiritual concern highlights the meaninglessness of our prosperity and civilized society in the first part of the novel when he finds himself alienated from individuals, society and civilization as such.

The novel is divided into two parts, the first one consisting of about hundred pages and the second one of another one hundred and fifty pages. Both these parts may be named as "The Civilized World" and "The Primitive World" respectively. These two worlds represent two distinct cultures which these geographical locations embody. The novel reveals to us the falsity of the so-called refinement of the Indian upper class society. It is obviously anti-bourgeois in taste and "testifies a loss of confidence in the anglicized Indian tradition of high culture" (Prempati: 175) which is the offshoot of the Western culture.

It is remarkable that the novel opens in New York's Harlem, the black ghetto of America. It is a conscious choice on the part of Billy Biswas to take residence in Harlem which cannot be regarded as a dignified place by the middle class standards. It appears that he takes refuge in Harlem after being totally fed up of the dissipation around. He is a rebel from the very beginning. An individual of such temperament defies all theories of rebellion.

The novelist has portrayed the primitive girl Bilasia as a foil to the sophisticated Meena Biswas. This contrast colours the central vision of the novel. Billy, though born and brought up in the

same culture builds his own glass castle because his soul is yearning for affirmation and he cannot compromise with forces opposed to it.

Billy's experience just before his momentous decision to make his final departure into the jungle on the second day of his expedition has apparent mystic undertones. Driven by elemental human impulses which are in consonance with his own innate nature Billy's conduct is the manifestation of those organic drives which are at loggerheads with the rational forces. His rejection of all familial ties tantamount to renunciation which "has always been an Indian ideal of life" (Mukherjee: 97). The inevitability of events which happen in Billy's life support the metaphysical touch of his quest. His withdrawal from the world is in the nature of a reflex action, he withdraws in order to preserve himself from "those rapacious representatives of civilization".

The *Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* suggest different approaches to solve life's meaninglessness. The *Foreigner* presents detachment as a possible panacea for life's problems. Commenting on the nature of quest-motif, Meenakshi Mukherjee seems to be closer to the heart of the narrative: "it is a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folk-lore to reiterate its elemental concerns" (Mukherjee:203).

Arun Joshi has very remarkably maintained the contrast between the impulsive behaviour of Billy and the cool account of Romi, the collector friend of Billy. The novel begins with a very humane relationship between these two Indian students in America, Bimal Biswas and Romesh Sahai. The novelist has placed them in an American setting to convince the readers that a great force, "urkraft" as Tuula puts it, is very strong in him and even an expensive schooling and his exposure to a highly civilized and modern western society cannot destroy or overcome that force that possesses him completely.

In fact, the entire novel is an attempt to discuss Billy's instinctive yearning for affirmation. It is not merely the events of his life that the narrator recounts but he also tries to find the truth hidden behind them. So, instead of a straightforward narration of events in their chronological order, the narrator deals with introspective memories, in most thoughts and feelings, intimate human relations, personal letters and discussions.

Though the novel runs along existential lines, it strives to assert much needed values. In a way the novel speaks for spiritual realization in contrast to mundane entanglements. One observes this when the novel opens in New York's Harlem against some posh American localities and ends in Satpura Hills which stands as a contrast to New Delhi's smart set. These two geographic locations suggest the quality of life which they represent along with their hazards or otherwise. The complexity of the novel is substantially based on parallelism and contrast. Though Arun Joshi does not use symbols in any significant way here, we can find events and happenings which seem to be symbolic.

The novel deviates slightly from *The Foreigner* in the end as Sindi Oberoi finds his meaning in the civilized world itself and learns to live like a Karmayogi whereas Billy derives his meaning only after renouncing his city life and joining the primitive world for pure and righteous living. The modern civilization is presented as a great usurper of souls and Billy strives to find out viable alternatives for "the most futile cry of man... in ... smart society" (p.3).

Arun Joshi's novels are a projection of human predicament and the tormented self of mankind in this indifferent and mysterious universe. Even though he was influenced by the western existentialist writers, Arun Joshi has his roots deep in Indian culture. He has firm faith in the Indian way of life which he suggests in his works. He has tried to highlight some of the constant metaphysical and ethical questions.

Presenting a metaphysical quest and dealing with a deeper survey of human soul, Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, in regard to the spiritual quest of the protagonist and his itching for identity in the modernized superficial world, appears to be a sequel to his first novel, *The Foreigner*. Expressing his perception of life in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*,

Arun Joshi tries to establish that it is the primitive way of living which prevails in a conflict between the civilized and the primitive cultures. Joshi suggests that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be felt in the lap of Nature and unintruded primitive atmosphere and not in the sophisticated urban setting.

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