



EXPLORATION OF HUMAN PSYCHE: THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

Dr. SHALINI MATHUR

Associate Professor,
IPS Academy, Indore[M.P]



Dr. SHALINI MATHUR

ABSTRACT

Crisis of self and a quest for fulfilment is the central experience of Arun Joshi's second novel 'The Strange Case of Mr. Billy Biswas'. In this novel he explores the theme of alienation and rootlessness in a strange way. Arun Joshi offers a dramatic presentation of a complex character of Billy who finds himself rootless and alienated from his surroundings in the first part of the novel. There is every possibility of his breaking down. In the latter part, he takes refuge in the world of tribal where he finds his identity and his roots. There he feels 'established'. When certain external forces try to uproot him from there, he prefers dying, to succumbing to their black and deep desires. The so-called civilized world destroys him by all means; the tribal world guarded him as his own. Thus the novel stands as a bitter commentary on the tyranny of the forces of phoney civilizations that crushes man's desire for self-existence and kinship with nature.

Key Words: Existentialist, Rootless, Primitivism, Tribal

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In one of his interviews, Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore "that mysterious underworld, which is human soul." Being the writer of individual, he writes for his own understanding of the world and his own true self as he replies to Mr. Dua in an interview: "My novels are essentially an attempt towards a better understanding of the world and of myself." The Strange Case of Billy Biswas develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than the treatment meted out in his first novel, 'The Foreigner'. It is apt to quote K.R.S. Iyengar here, 'In *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* (1971), Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of hapless rootless people a stage further and has revealed to our gaze new gas-chambers of self – forged misery.' (P.514)

Though Billy is with his family members, yet he does not feel any sense of security. He is not in

harmony with his family and surroundings. Although he lives with them, still he is all alone, isolated and alienated, a stranger in the real sense of term. He writes to Tuula Lindgren:

It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment, I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together. (Joshi 97)

The theme of alienation and problem of identity, which was dealt by Joshi in his first creative venture, 'The Foreigner' is followed in his second novel but in a slight different way. Billy's quest is deeper than Sindi's. Billy is not uprooted in the sense Sindi is; he has roots the type of which Sindi craves for. He has a

family, a tradition, a set of values. He is not anchorless in the way Sindi is. He is born and brought up in fairly comfortable background. He comes from the upper-upper crust of Indian society. His family has all claims of aristocracy. It had originally come from Bengal. His grandfather had been the Prime Minister of a famous Princely State of Orrisa. His father, after completing his law studies at inner temple, had practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. His father also served as Indian Ambassador to a European country. Billy had his education in Britain and America. He joined Delhi University as lecturer of Anthropology. He has got number of good friends around him. So for him, it is not a quest for anchor, he is interested in exploration of self-his inner being. He has little or no interest in the phoney, hot-shot and sordid modern civilized society. Romi rightly observed:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and having received a signal, abandoned herself so recklessly to its cell. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts, He left behind in his turbulent wake. (Joshi 6)

Romi finds Billy to be a man of extraordinary obsessions. He is very sensitive to the world and this peculiarity makes him a rare being. He is an unusual person of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsession. He is one of those rare creatures who have poise without pose. Billy's awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist being, estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life. His is the predicament of an alienated personality who never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society. Billy has a dislike for an organised life. Though born and brought up in an aristocratic family; he is filled with virulent hatred for the systematized civilized life, which aggravates his problem of identity instead of resolving it. He went

to America to study engineering but joined Ph.D. in Anthropology instead. He was very much interested in the study of aboriginalness of the world.

Billy had, probably seen the Adivasis for the first time in Bhubaneshwar and they fascinated him because they were different from other people. This probably was a stimulus to his feeling of primitiveness in him. It was further substantiated by the sculptures of the Konark temple which though appeared to be the indecent must have stimulated the erotic sense in this teen-age boy in his impressionable age. Besides, they also made him think that primitive people had better vision to introduce the element of sadness in these sculptures. The sculptures at Konark, it seems to him, are capable of giving him a solution to his questions about the problems of his identity. He is led to understand:

What appealed to me was the shade of the same spirit that I spoke of although I knew then, I know now, that the spirit was a much, much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples. 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. (Joshi 124)

One night, he happens to go to tribal people with his uncle's Chauffeur. In their merriment Billy experienced a real joy. He was surcharged with strange sensation. He recorded:

A great shock of erotic energy passed through me, was followed by the same feeling of unreality Or, as I said, a reality sharper than any I had ever known. It was a bit like having taken a dose of a hallucinatory drug. Something I realized many years later when I was in Mexico. I remember saying to myself even though I was only fourteen, I remember saying something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of." (Joshi.125)

Since his visit to the tribals of Bhubaneshwar he remains restless and now whatever he listens to, the drumbeating or folk music he is transported to different world which is an entirely different world

from the so-called civilized and organised world. He derived pleasure in the inhibitory primitive type of dance of the tribal girls and boys that left a deep impression on his mind; he probably started identifying himself as one of them. His revolt against his mother in this matter and subsequent running away from the house though temporarily was a sign of his adolescence. The impressions of these happenings had brought the instinct of primitiveness from the unconscious to the subconscious mind and appeared in his dreams in Delhi, subsequently. His busy schooling at Dehradun and in England kept the instinct dormant due to too much of pre-occupation and lack of stimuli.

However, it came to life again in America. His subject of social Anthropology which mainly dealt with tribals, primitive and aboriginal being the main instigator. And his association with Negro and travel to central and North America were also helpful in evoking that strange feeling in Billy. He got his hallucinations mainly after reading anthropology. He feels fascinated to study the mental working and responses of the so-called deranged people. He is amused to study their responses and attitude to life. He finds more meaning, in their reactions than in those so-called cultured men. Anthropology brings Billy closer to life he dreams of. Visions frequent him and he goes in a trance. In the beginning, he required a stimulus like alcohol or dance or folk Song or drum-beating to transport him to his dream-land, but as he has grown his fascination for that other life has increased; now the vision does not need the stimulus. They come automatically. One day while driving, he had an accident that left a scar. He knows nothing about it because he was in a trance. Billy throws light on his vision. It would be like a great blinding flash during which he would be totally unaware of anything else. And invariably it left him with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with his life. He wasn't where he belonged.

Arun Joshi has dealt with the theme of existentialism at length, through the character of Bimal Biswas. He was an alienated being and at least half of his life was spent in search of a place where he actually belonged. He finds himself misfit in a world like this and is in search of a place where he

may not feel self estranged, socially isolated and culturally uprooted. He was sent to America to study engineering but he finished his studies there by getting a Ph.D. Degree in Anthropology. He can well afford to live in good locality but he chooses to live in Haiden, the black ghetto of America, being one of the worst slums of New York City. It is the most human place he would find in cultured modern America.

Billy's chance meeting with Tuula Lindgren, the social psychiatrist served as a boon to him. She was a Swedish lady, she possessed extraordinary intuition, through which she understands the dilemma of Billy's life. Billy feels at home in her company and is fond of her. She is strongly interested in India, especially in her tribal people; a subject about which Billy knew enough to keep her engaged not one but a hundred nights. Besides Tuula was a good psychiatrist and Billy learned a lot from her. They were good friends without the involvement of sex. Tuula had a lot of interaction with Billy during their tenure of work at the mental hospital. She had attempted to understand with great success the cause of Billy's hallucinations and erotic dreams. Billy frequently discusses with Tuula who tells him "in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in everyone-all art, in a way flowed out of them."

Arun Joshi has created Billy's character very artistically. Billy was aware of his problem of hallucination, erotic dreams and his deep interest in primitive tribal, but he really did not know how to overcome it. He describes his condition thus, "I was so shaken up that the first thing I wanted to do was to get back home." He thought marriage may probably help him get over it. He comes back to India and is appointed professor in Anthropology at Delhi University. His mother introduces him to Meena, a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant. Truly speaking he is much upset by his abnormality:

I had grown terribly afraid of myself, some part of me. I thought terrible things might happen unless I did something drastic. What with being an Indian and having been brought up in a close-knit family, the only thing I could think of was to get married. It

was like taking out insurance to my normalcy.(Joshi 182).

So he accepted the proposal of Meena Chatterjee and went to Shimla to meet her and her parents. He wishes to behave like a normal man. He wants to develop a sense of harmony with the surroundings, but he was unable to get satisfaction that he longed for. Meena fails to engage his soul to satisfy his inner urge. She is not able at all to give peace and satisfaction that Billy badly needs.

Another theme dealt by Joshi in this novel - A clash between 'Primitive' and 'Civilized', between 'Indian' and 'Western', Billy's predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality. What he feels is that real soul of India lies in primitive or tribal people and as we are civilizing, we are moving away from our soul and blindly aping the West. As this novel appeared though, two decades after Independence, this prejudice of Indian-Western was present. But novelist dealt with it, in the form of primitive and civilized. Billy's strange case becomes a universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization fast degenerating as well as normless and meaningless. He himself describes:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am, of course, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes. I didn't really get to know the others. I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could not better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago.(Joshi 178,179)

His deep love for primitivism is an unborn propensity. As a matter of fact Billy fits into the world of tribals. He is almost a stranger to the civilized world. He was particularly keen to know as much about them as possible but there were obstacles in it from Dr.Shenoy who did not provide him funds for the expeditions and Meena, who resented his going out on expeditions. In his

frustration he wanted seclusion which increases the differences between him and Meena. He affirms : "Communication between us was soon reduced to Zero"(Joshi 186). Billy is East, Meena is West, both East and West cannot meet together. He does not even touch Meena for many months. She reflects on Billy's condition thus, "God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day."(Joshi75). Romi too notices the change in Billy and says; "I had never felt so strange with Billy Biswas.(Joshi 69). He further remarks :

"It was as though some part of him had gone on strike. All my words simply sank upon the restless mind without so much as causing a ripple. Gone was the staggering intelligence, the spectroscopic interests ,the sense of humour. He had either turned banal something that I had seen happen often enough, or unknown to us, he was turned upon some obscure segments of himself, ferreting out a bitter secret, setting an old score, whatever it might have been. The Billy Biswas I had known was finished snuffed out like a candle left in the rain."(Joshi 79)

This we can say is the second stage of Billy's existential dilemma. In the first stage he himself experiences some disturbance within him. He was not feeling at ease in his surroundings but he was behaving normally and all the people that surround him very rarely notice any abnormality in his behaviour but now his behaviour became so abnormal that his wife, his friend and everybody around him observes that Billy has turned out a changed man.

He was totally dissatisfied with his wife, he complains, "The more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge, of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became."(Joshi185). Consequently Billy becomes an introvert. He forsakes his responsibilities towards the family, his wife and his son. He only cares for his responsibilities towards his soul. He is a pilgrim of the spiritual world. He becomes self-centred. His tortured soul needs application of some balm by someone who can share his suffering. His chance

meeting with Reema Kaul in Bombay provided temporary solace to him. Since Reema had been in love with him ever-since she met him in Simla, she provided him all comfort and happiness. Not that he really loved her but in order to maintain the congenial atmosphere, he also pretended as if in love with her. He points out:

“The worst of it was that in spite of this knowledge of my degeneration, I continued to behave as before. I continued to whine and lie and sham. I found out that I could not stop. I met her three or four times after that. Each time I would determine to be honest with her, with myself, and each time I would start to play the part as soon as I got the chance. You have no idea how ridiculous and fraudulent it became. I offered to divorce Meena and marry her even though Rima herself never even hinted at such a thing. I agreed to start living with her as soon as possible. And all the time I knew that I intended no such thing.”(Joshi 188).

Thus, Billy reaches the climax of hypocrisy in his way of working. He comes to realize that his relationship with Rima is another shame, degradation. It is a corruption of his being. “It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that other thing that it had been clamouring for.”(Joshi 189). Billy now intensely feels that no woman’s body of this phony society can satisfy him. It is not a hunger for sensual satisfaction. It is a quest for self-realization for a union with the missing part of his soul. At this time, he merely feels that the material society corrupts him, degrades and estranges him from his own soul. Sitting outside his tent on a fateful night; he was in Hamletian dilemma. He hears two clear choices:

“I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay” knowing that “the price of making such choices is terrible” and that “the price of not making them is even terrible”.(Joshi 190)

He is in search of a surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. He listens to the calls of the hills, the streams, the trees, the forests and the tribal people. Billy did think of the charm and comforts of the civilized world. He also thought of his responsibilities towards his family, his wife and his son, but he thought it would be better to live with simple and sincere tribal protecting his soul than to live here with guilt, tension, hallucinations, depression and frustration. Once he gets an opportunity to take his students on an anthropological expedition to the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh. He gets so much fascinated by the intense beauty of the hills and their inhabitants, particularly women with graceful figures and bright eyes that he disappears into the Saal forests of the Maikala Hills. With the Bhils and their leader Dhunia, he eats, drinks and waits for the rising of the moon and “he could for the first time see clearly the change entering him. While he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back”.(Joshi 137). Being fascinated by the primitive surroundings, he gets a glimpse of Bilasia in Dhunia’s hut. This pull is very powerful. An enormous search is launched by the police to find Billy out, when they failed to find him out, it was presumed that he has been killed by a tiger prowling in the area.

Thus finally Joshi’s protagonist reaches the third stage of his life, after much restlessness he is now landed on his desired heaven. This is the peculiarity of Arun Joshi’s creation that almost all his existential heroes finally able to get such surroundings that is congenial to their being. Now Billy knows what he has practically realized. He knows that he is ‘the primitive pilgrim’ and it is primitivism that will lead him to his destination. He knows that his love for the primitive is a step towards his spiritual awareness, his realization of the soul, his existentialist quest for meaning and values in life.

With a skilful weight of the details, Joshi manages to explore the protagonist’s psychological instincts. Billy’s enigmatic behaviour can be understood in terms of certain psychological and anthropological facts at work with reference to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. “In

addition to the immediate consciousness, which is thoroughly personal in nature and which we believe to be only an empirical psyche, there exists a second psyche system of a collective universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give a definite form to certain psychic contents. "But if we consider the tremendous powers that lie hidden in the mythological and religious spheres in man the aetiological significance of the archetype appears less fantastic." (Mukherjee 97). He only expresses something which millions of the people before him have believed. The phantom that Billy once saw and has described to Tuula is vividly objectified and visualized in Bilasia, the tribal girl with beauty and dignity.

The charm of Bilasia is not only sensual. It imparts thrill, nay vitality, to the very soul. Her presence transforms him:

It was I who had changed. Or, rather quite suddenly and unaccountably I had ceased or resisted what was the real me. All I had been confusedly, driving towards all my life had been crystallised, brought into focus, so to speak, by what I had gone through during the interval between this visit and the time I had first met Bilasia. (Joshi 116)

So in Bilasia Billy finds the right woman who can enliven his soul. Meena deadens his senses. Rima corrupts him and the material civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who causes explosion of senses, the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and it symbolizes in Meena and Rima. From Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not a mere trifling in Billy's life. It is a development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. In Bilasia, it is the physical and elemental meet. "She is both Laurentian and Blakean. Bilasia, to use Jungian concept, in his missing self. Arun Joshi's protagonist are Purandello's cluster of identities in search of wholeness. In terms of psychoanalysis, Billy and Bilasia are two selves of the same personality .It is

merging of a split self to realize the whole." (Pandey 86).

"Desire was too mild a word for what I felt at the moment. It was 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. It was that passing moment that rarely comes in a man's life, when he suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life." (Joshi 146).

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