



## URBAN TRUTH AND PRIMITIVE SENSIBILITY EXPOSED IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS* AND JOSEPH CONRAD'S *HEART OF DARKNESS*

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### Abstract

That meaninglessness of modern life after world wars was sensed by a sanatani like Arun Joshi and western writer, like Joseph Conrad for eternal bliss of living is the edifice of this paper. This problem of meaninglessness was so pervasive in post-world war era that it actually threatened to corrode every sphere of human life. It has been treated in considerable detail in American and European literature as well. Arun Joshi is among few Indian writers who presented really a strange case of 'Billy Biswas'. We would like to take his 'case' seriously in this paper and will compare with some images from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* also. The methodology used in this paper is analytical and comparative to shed light on the main arguments of the paper. The issues of Existentialism and primitive and radical world in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* are applicable, relevant and valuable in understanding the human basic instincts particularly in modern times. The study gets its thrust from the awareness that there is need to realize the significance of the intellectual encounter which takes place in primitive life.

**Keywords:** Meaninglessness, primitive life, Existentialism, Sanatani.

Arun Joshi and Conrad are among the few great English novelists who have broken new grounds in search of new themes to delve deep into the inner person in search for the essence of human living. They are really the novelists of human predicament. This is the main theme of some of their novels. They zero in the most besetting problem of modern times which we are facing specially after second world war- the problem of meaninglessness. Edmund Fuller has rightly remarked of this age in the famous work, *Man in Modern Fiction*, 'Man suffers not only from war, persecution, famine and ruin, but from inner problem...a conviction of isolation, randomness and meaninglessness in his way of existence.'<sup>1</sup> The first world encountered these problems after first and second world wars. The

second world also had to suffer in the seventies. And the third world after a decade or so. The sense of meaninglessness remained persistent for a long time. As it was seen in every walk of life, so literature started recording it. In American and European literature, it was explored in considerable details. But in Indian English Literature Arun Joshi was holding this baton to pass on to the next generation. Joshi has treated this problem of meaninglessness in his fictional works making it no less interesting. Actually we can see that last century had seen more problems in its own way than previous centuries. It saw the dissolution of old faiths, certainties, and dogmas. It was obvious then the expected reactions would be different. Paul Brunton has rightly observed: 'Never before were so many people

plunged in so much uncertainty so much perplexity and unsettlement.'<sup>2</sup> Science and information coloured new man's mind- devoid of values and meaningfulness in life. Aldous Huxley has aptly asserted that "ours is a world in which knowledge accumulates and wisdom decays."<sup>3</sup>

That Arun Joshi is one of the few Indian English writers having philosophical bent of mind, could be traced in his interview after receiving Sahitya Akademi award in 1982. To answer an interviewer he told that through his novels he always tried to explore "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul."<sup>4</sup> We can see his novels best tried to expose the spiritual agony of his characters. Joshi is of the opinion that life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of pretensions but in the dark mossy labyrinths of the soul. This is the sanatan satya. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the testimony to this fact. This novel is written in the pattern of *Lord Jim* of Joseph Conrad. There are some similarities in these two novels. The narrators of both the novels are protagonists' friend. Marlow is the narrator of *Lord Jim*. And Romesh Sahai aka Romi is the narrator of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Both the narrators are involved friends but detached ones. Both follow the tale till the end. Both the narrators are unable to understand the protagonists fully. Marlow has repeatedly accepted that he was unable to understand Jim fully. "He (Jim) was not –if I may so-clear to me. He was not clear."<sup>5</sup> Romi also accepts in the beginning of the novel that he was unable to understand Billy fully:

As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is even more futile. If in spite of this I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understood him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions. <sup>6</sup>

Later in the novel, Romi has accepted: "I had neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilections of Billy Biswas."<sup>7</sup> This statement

resembles that of Conrad's one of the narrators in *Under Western Eyes* also who begins by disclaiming "The possession of those high gifts of imagination and expression which would have enabled my pen to create for the reader the personality of the man who called himself...Razumov"<sup>8</sup> Why Billy is not understood by his best friend is something to be understood? We are known in our families, in society, at workplace by what we do, but not by what we are. Our doing and our being are different. Billy is a kind of person who wants to be what he is actually. This 'actualness' is the problem in our world which he wants to explore. His interest in tribal attitudes and customs is the search of his being also. So his life is organized "around his interest in the primitive man."<sup>9</sup>

The Bhubaneswar episode is the example of Billy's urge to live like a primitive man. This urge at the age of fourteen is something very natural but not in the advanced society. There, Billy had received the intimations of his primitive self: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake."<sup>10</sup> He thinks the sculptures of Konark would give him a solution to his queries about the problem of his identity: "If anyone had a clue to it, it was only the adiwasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark inscrutable faces."<sup>11</sup> Watching the tribal dance, the young Billy had felt: "Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of."<sup>12</sup>

In order to cure his obsession for the primitive and to settle down in life, Billy gets married also. But his marriage to Meena is a failure in this respect. Though Meena tries her best to convince Billy, to understand Billy, but gets frustrated at the end. Billy has his own version. "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."<sup>13</sup> Ultimately on one of his anthropological excursions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh, he secretly vanishes. He, like Siddhartha, leaves his wife, his only child, and his old parents. He ignores his family responsibilities. He ignores filial expectations. He ignores societal obligations also. He disappears in the *Saal* forests of the Maikala Hills of Madhya Pradesh. He finds solace in the forest far

from so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. He feels meaningless existence in civilized world because he is choked by the fake atmosphere of the modern society. He feels like rejecting the artificiality, hollowness and pretentiousness of the sophisticated people. Billy analyzes it later:

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 no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the west abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year-old town. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud-mouthed woman and man. In three-piece-suits dreaming their little adulteries.<sup>14</sup>

Thus Arun Joshi through Billy Biswas rejects 'the post-independence pseudo-Western values.'<sup>15</sup> Billy finds his fulfillment and the essence of human existence in the primitive tribal life. He likes living with the foresters because they are not materialistic: "Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that."<sup>16</sup> He likes the unrestrained life-style of the primitive people who go in for uninhibited drinking and dancing and open orgiastic love-making. Romi remembers Billy's explanation of his mysterious disappearance: "I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay."<sup>17</sup> Billy chose the first. He chose to respond to the tribal girl Bilasia's call. He is madly in love with Bilasia who he feels is "the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year."<sup>18</sup> Her sensuality lures Billy. The sexual union with Bilasia is

the climactic moment of the forces of darkness claiming Billy:

Her hair was loose. Just behind her left ear there was a red flower. The necklace of beads glowed a little in the darkness. Her enormous eyes, only a little foggier with drink, poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them. Come, come, come, she called, and Billy Biswas, son of a Supreme Court Justice, went... It was closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally hinds himself in the presence of his god. <sup>19</sup>

There is striking resemblance in the writing of Arun Joshi than that of Joseph Conrad's. In *Heart of Darkness*, towards the end of the story Conrad gave out a whole page quiet unexpectedly on an African woman who has obviously been some kind of mistress to Mr Kurtz and now presides like a frightening mystery over the unstoppable imminence of his departure:

She was savage and superb, wild-eyed and magnificent...She stood looking at us without a stir and like the wilderness itself, with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. <sup>20</sup>

This woman, Amazon, is drawn in considerable detail, though of a predictable nature, for two reasons. First, she is in her place and so can win Conrad's special brand of approval; and second, she fulfils a structural requirement of the story: a savage counterpart to the refined, European woman who will step forth to end the story:

She came forward, all in black with a pale head, floating toward me in the dusk. She was in mourning...She took both my hands in hers and murmured, 'I had heard you were coming'...She had a mature capacity for fidelity, for belief, for suffering.<sup>21</sup>

Arun Joshi's contribution like Conrad's falls automatically into a different class of writing. It is of the permanent literature which will be read and taught and constantly evaluated by serious academics. Bilasia of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the antithesis of Meena, Billy's wife as in *Heart of*

*Darkness* the Amazon projects the image of Africa as 'the other world' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization. A place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant bestiality. What a symbol! The book opens on the river Thames, tranquil, resting peacefully 'at the decline of the day after ages of good service done to the race that peopled its banks.'<sup>22</sup> But the actual story will take place on the river Congo, the very antithesis of the Thames. Thames too has been one of the dark places of the earth in olden times. But it conquered its darkness, of course, and is now in day light and at peace. But if it were to visit its primordial relative, the Congo, it would run the terrible risk of hearing gross echoes of its own forgotten darkness, and falling victim to an avenging recrudescence of the mindless frenzy of the first beginnings. These suggestive echoes comprise Conrad's famed evocation of the African atmosphere in *Heart of Darkness*. In the final consideration his method amounts to more than a steady, ponderous, fake-ritualistic repetition of two antithetical sentences, one about silence and the other about frenzy. We can inspect samples of this on pages 103 and 105 of the new American library edition: (a) 'It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention' and (b) the steamer toiled along slowly the edge of a black and incomprehensible frenzy.

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance, to be subdued at the cost of profound anguish and of excessive toil. But suddenly, as we struggled round a bend, there would be a glimpse of rush walls, of peaked grass-roofs, a burst of yells, a whirl of black limbs, a mass of hands clapping, of feet stamping, of bodies swaying, of eyes rolling, under the droop of heavy and motionless foliage...

The earth seemed unearthly. We are accustomed to look upon the shackled form of a conquered monster, but there—there you could look at a thing monstrous and free. It was unearthly and the men were—No, they

were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman. It would come slowly to one. They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity—like yours—the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly. Yes, it was ugly enough; but if we are man enough you would admit to yourself that there was in you just the faintest trace of a response to the terrible frankness of the noise, a dim suspicion of their being a meaning in it which you—you so remote from the night of first ages—could comprehend.<sup>23</sup>

Thus we see that to know the root, to go and meet the beginning is the ultimate human desire. We are the only creature to feel our collective memory of the past and our ancestors. Some of us are in search of the sound, light, smell, taste of the primitive times. Some of us can sense it very vehemently. This sense is felt worldwide. This is the reason two writers of different parts of the globe are having same kind of feeling of their origin. As literature is the record of humanity in these novels we can see some obscure but true human sensibility to fight the meaninglessness of modern times.

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