

'Return to Nature': A Study of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* faces the problem of the barren, modern sophisticated society and hanker after the inner peace to be found in harmony with the Nature. In this sense, the novel is a record of a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life - the kind Rousseau, Thoreau, Gandhi and Wordsworth talked about. This essay discusses how the novelist expresses his distaste for the money-mindedness of the civilized people leading to the degradation of their souls.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, Billy Biswas, Nature

The longing for natural mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is pre condition of our survival. In this state one can remain pure, sensitive and mystically linked with the Nature, its authentic humanity and instinctive spontaneity. Rousseau, too, considered everyman as innately good and pacific in his 'natural state', but when he entered into contact with society he was bound to become impure, materialistic in attitude, corrupted codes and conventions and incapable to understand the real meaning of life.

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* faces the problem of the barren, modern sophisticated society and hanker after the inner peace to be found in harmony with the Nature. In this sense, the novel is a record of a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life - the kind Rousseau, Thoreau, Gandhi and Wordsworth talked about.

Billy has a dislike for the elite class and its character and to him all the people around him are "hung on this peg of money" (97) and are nothing more than a "heap of tinsel" (141). The novelist expresses his distaste for the money-mindedness of the civilized people leading to the degradation of their souls.

The novel is a severe condemnation of the spiritual uprootedness of the post-Independence Westernized Indian Society. Billy is totally fed up with the superficialities of a grossly materialistic and sterile Indian society. He finds himself trapped like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, a traveling salesman brought to disaster by accepting the false values of the contemporary society. To escape this disaster Billy decides to flee from the phony society. The tribal life of Maikala hills in Central India is the ideal world-

view for which he rejects the post-independence, pseudo-Western values of the Delhi society.

The very epigraph of the novel is from Arnold's "Thyrsis": "It irked him to be here, he could not rest" make the thematic direction of the novel clear. Like Arnold's Scholar Gipsy, Billy too flees from the so-called civilized society and seeks shelter in the idyllic Maikala hills. Billy was in search of something that reminds us of the following lines from Matthew Arnold's "Thyrsis":

This does not come with houses or with gold
With place, with honour, and flattering crew;
'T is not in the world's market bought and sold
(Arnold 1966:288)

Similarly, '*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*' is a scathing attack on the materialistic civilized society and an exaltation of the past ancient culture wherein lies the panacea for the ills of the modern society.

The first section of the novel establishes the character of Billy and his degraded and sterile surrounding, thereby making his escape convincing. Therefore, Billy's decision to leave the civilized world is not made on the spur of the moment, as some critics make it out to be, but is naturally consequent upon what preceded it.

Billy hails "from upper-crust of Indian society" (9) and has "claims of aristocracy" (12). His grandfather had been the Prime Minister of the famous princely state in Orissa. His father practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi, and had been the Indian ambassador to a European country. While he is in America, his father is a judge in the Supreme Court. After gaining a Ph. D. in anthropology, he is a lecturer at Delhi University. Despite having such a background, he is ill at ease in the so-called civilized set-up of society, and is much interested in exploring his inner being. As Romi remarks:

Of life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, ... then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, ... abandoned himself so recklessly to its call (8).

Even in his family, he feels alone and alienated like Camus's outsiders. This exploitation of his real inner being makes him estranged and alienated; and never feels at home in the bourgeois society for he knows his innermost voice will go unheeded.

A very human association between two Indian students in New York is depicted where Romi meets Billy while desperately searching for a room. Billy offers to share his apartment with Romi, which is situated in one of the worst slums of New York City. It is very surprising for Romi to find the upper class Billy

living in Harlem, a black ghetto in white America, which is “much too civilized for him” (9). Though Billy was born into an aristocratic family, he dislikes organized life of civilized society. “Billy feels that this civilization is a monster. It is not a civilization but degradation” (Ghanshyam 2002:66).

Billy’s case is a strange case as his personality is split between the primitive and the civilized. For Billy the modern civilization is degenerate, shallow and self-centered:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. 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 (128).

He finds himself a misfit in this civilized world, and in search of a place where he could fit in and feel at home.

Billy, a thorough misfit in civilized white America, finds himself “itching to be back” (27) in India. Billy returns to India and experiences only a change of scene and, Eliot-like finds the society in Delhi as spiritually dead and emotionally empty as materialistic America. To him, the people everywhere are the same—artistically dry and intellectually barren. He returns to India and joins Delhi University as Professor in anthropology. Soon, he marries Meena Chatterjee who is “quite usually pretty in a western sort of way” (37), loquacious and hallow. But this hurried marriage, as he later realizes, is a blunder. Meena’s money-centric outlook leads to the marital fiasco. With every passing day, the estrangement between the two mounts and their conjugal life turns into the “most precarious of bustle-fields” (81). This leads to his total sense of alienation and isolation from his wife, family and his own self.

A look at Billy’s hatred toward civilized world can be had from the letters that he wrote to Tuula Lindgreen, his Swedish girlfriend. Certain excerpts from the letters are worth citing. The first excerpt is expressive of his feeling as an outsider in the civilized world:

When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smell of the forest. The curious feeling trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big city and not the other way around (96).

The next excerpt is scathing attacks on Westernized Indian upper-crust society and its materialistic value system. The animal-imagery used to describe the so-called civilized people is an objective correlative of Billy’s deep-seated hatred for the society. He Writes:

I see a room full of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose, they turn into a kennel

of dogs yawning [their large teeth showing] or snuggling against each other or holding whiskey glasses in their furred paws (69).

In order to escape from the agonies of life, he takes to anthropological expeditions to the various parts of India with his students. Once he takes his students on an anthropological expedition to the tribal areas of the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and becomes enamored of the idyllic surroundings and its inhabitants. "His quest for identity originates here in search of which he bids farewell to the civilization" (Saxena 1985:73).

A great change overtakes him when he reaches Dhanias's hut and sees Bilasia. He gets totally enamored of Bilasia's sensuality. She enlivens Billy's soul that has been deadened by Meena Biswas and Rima Kaul. Unlike Meena and Rima, Bilasia is not sophisticated and shallow. She is an integral part of the rhythmic life of Nature. She is the right woman to satisfy his soul. There is a conflict between his present identity in the civilized world and his soul's longing for 'Return to Nature'. All the phenomena of nature – flora and fauna – seem to be waiting for him and calling him to join them:

Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you ... come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? . . . This is all there is on earth. This and the women waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night" (88).

In the God's plenty while sitting on the rock he feels as if he was undergoing a deep metamorphosis.

Billy renounces the sophisticated Delhi urban society in favour of tribal life in the Maikala forest. His is not an escape from reality but an escape into reality on the lines of Prince Siddharth. Billy renounces a life of hypocrisy and deceit to take a life of noble savageness. Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Billy forsakes civilized human society and like Scholar Gipsy returned no more. Arun Joshi may have been influenced by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but he goes beyond it as Billy's quest for identity and his search of the meaning of life make him revolt against civilized society and his mistress Bilasia unlike Kurtz's mistress plays a very significant role in his self-realization. For the sake of his longing for Return to Nature he forsakes even his life.

Billy Biswas reminds us of the White lady, the protagonist in D.H. Lawrence's *The Woman Who Rode Away*, where the White lady, in the wake of her degradation and her utter confusion about spiritless life around her, decides to ride away to the primordial nature in order to escape from the disastrous civilization. It would be apt to quote Hari Mohan Prasad. He says:

The novel articulates, almost the intensity of Lawrence and Conrad, human craving for the primordial, the *éllan vital* of our anthropological heritage. In retreat of Mr. Billy Biswas from the modern wasteland of Delhi to the ancient Garden of Eden in Maikala Jungle, from the smothering clutch of Meena to the primeval possessiveness of Bilasia, Purush meets Prakriti serving the two ends of evolution, outlined by Sankhya, enjoyment (*Bhoga*) and liberation or *Sansara* as well as Kaivalvya (Prasad 1985:46).

Arun Joshi's this concern for Nature as presented in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* impresses upon the readers the fact that in a conflict between the civilized and primitive ways of living, it is the later that prevails. Bilasia and Maikala Hills attract the protagonist Billy Biswas more than the artificial and sophisticated atmosphere of Delhi. Real peach, pleasure and perfection can be found in the natural and primitive atmosphere rather than in the din and bustle of big cities of Delhi. In the words of T. Koteswar Rao, "His obsession with primitive life is born out of failing that the sophisticated life is not original but only an imitation of what is artificial. The complacency of the upper classes and the artificiality of civilized world are no way better than to the simplicities of the primitive life" (Rao 1994:201).

Really the novel opens a case of fictional discourse which epitomizes man's longing for 'Return to Nature' against the technological verifiable constituents of present modern society. Joshi seems to be tremendously concerned with pretentiousness, hypocrisy and snobbery of the modern civilized society and gives a message that simplicity, quietness; tranquility and spirituality of natural primitive life are the only means of achieving sublime living.

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