

**IDIOSYNCRASY IN THE MATERIALISTIC SOCIETY, ARUN JOSHI'S THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS**

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**Abstract**

*Indian English has engrossed an extensive attentiveness recently both in India and abroad. It occupies a greater important place in world literature. It is now clear that Common Wealth Literature and Indian English Literature are in no way inferior to other literatures. Fiction is the most powerful form of literary expression nowadays. It is generally agreed to be the most acceptable medium to share the experiences and ideas in the context of our time. The Indian Fiction in English has been attracting worldwide attention. In this paper, a brief analysis of one of the post-modernism themes of self-search with the current scenario with Arun Joshi's novel "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas".*

**Keywords:** Common Wealth Literature, post-modernism, self-search etc.

Arun Joshi has written five novels namely The Foreigner, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, The Apprentice, The Last Labyrinth and The City and the River. His 'The Last Labyrinth' won the Sahitya Akademi Award. Joshi unravels the facets of crisis in modern man's life. His characters are lively picture of dilemma of dual cultures. His novels form a corporate cluster. They are searching themselves in wherever they go. The inward journey is also called as a journey for existence, a search for identity and a struggle for self-expression. This is totally different from his first novel 'The Foreigner'. After three years of his literary

career, Joshi published this. He excelled in his themes and he attempted a serious probe into existential problems of the human. The deep significance of the primitive life explored beautifully in his novel. Each and every one comes closer to the primitive life then only they realized the mental and spiritual tranquillity, solace and contentment. According to Arun Joshi *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* "is about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away... In a number of Indian legends and religious texts people go away to forests to heal themselves spiritually, possibly that's what he is suggesting, though not consciously" (Banerjee:4)

The novel presents a metaphysical quest and deals with a deeper survey of human soul. As *The Foreigner* was inspired by the theory of karma yoga, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* draws its motivation from Jnana Yoga (the way of knowledge). The novel is influenced by the oriental theories, the novel attempts to explore "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul" (Mathai:8). In his reply to M.R. Dua in an interview, he says: 'My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself'. The novel is a disapproval of the spiritual uprootedness of the post-independence westernized Indian society and is also a representation of the union of the male and female as expounded in the Sankhya System of the Bhagavad Gita.

Arun Joshi uses Hindu Philosophy to understand the predicament and meaninglessness of the modern society. To 'know Thyself' is the supreme wisdom of the Vedanta as well as of Existentialism. To the existentialist, knowing oneself is a means of to change oneself in order to face the reality of one's situation. Billy chooses the way of Jnanayoga (the way of knowledge). His renunciation is effort to free him from all desires, longings and egotism which is pre-requisite for man to attain peace in the way of knowledge.

Through this novel Joshi revealed the falsity of the Indian tradition and culture and its consequential chaos. The first part of the novel gives us sights of the anxiety of Billy's soul in the middle of the upper class Indian society, which is lost in the trivialities of life. The restlessness is not due to the loss of traditional values in the materialistic searches by people in general. Romi, whom Billy meets in New York while searching for accommodation relates the story. It is an attempt to understand 'a man of ..... extraordinary obsessions (p-7). Both of them stay together during their higher studies. On his return to India, he is appointed as a lecturer in Anthropology at Delhi University. Billy does not find the false, consumerism-ridden world of Delhi much different from the American materialistic society. He feels like 'a vision from the wilderness to the marts of the big city' (p-92). He reflects:

I see a roomful 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 whisky glasses in their furred paws. I sometimes wonder whether

civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilised man do? (p-92)

Billy Biswas does not enjoy his role and finds it difficult to get used to the workings of his job and place. He is in an oppressive atmosphere. The people whom do we meet mere puppets and forsake of western ideas. There is a wide gap between his thought and Delhi society. Billy's quest for self begins and he knows that he will be able to glance into dark cells of his soul by escaping from the suffocating modern civilised society.

Joshi's search further extends in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* when Billy, son of a judge, educated in England and America and a lecturer in Delhi University changes to be a primitive and like to live with Bilasia, a primitive force. This withdrawal of Billy is almost mystical. His alienation from the sophisticated society leads him to opt for a primitive pilgrim that longs for an identity. The tribal's dedication to the deity and their deep and overpowering love for him becomes the driving force and code of his activities.

He finds a world where he is related to it through love not through submission or dominance. Billy's identity merges into the cosmic identity. His love for the tribals and their love on him which makes him a feeling of rootedness, belongingness. He begins to realize his own self and he refuses to do anything with the modern world. By becoming a tribal himself he knows that it is only in this world he can understand the ultimate motive of life. Billy stays among tribals for their faith, their love which helps him to understand his self and he stands midway in his life and takes the path that leads him to his salvation first in love and then in death. He accepts the death and it is a precondition of life.

Billy Biswas has stronger vision than the sense of harmony in his surrounding, family life and the life with his wife Meena. He gets introverted, he opts for the life of a pilgrim and he retires within himself. Billy feels that there was a communication gap between his wife and himself. So his mind attracts towards Rima. At last, he found Bilasia who is the quench for his thirst and she is the only person to enlighten his senses and save him from the materialistic world. Billy unifies himself with Bilasia and her culture. He finds his real self while he is with her. And feels that he is freed from his corrupted culture. He proves himself the saviour God of the tribals:

He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound, these hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away (159-160)

He is an over sensitive, have intense feelings and his mind is constantly under pressure and stress. The main concern is with his inner world and the world in outside. He consciously give up the modern day world as he feel suffocated within his society. In at the alien culture as well as his own society, he suffer, but this suffering is a purifying process, leading or at least pointing towards the promise of self-awakening rather than

disillusionment. He has a positive vision in the newly found world. Billy, after his exposure to western cultural values becomes more conscious of his journey towards cosmic selves. After return from a foreign land, he is sad and spiritually barren. In two different socio-cultural environment and the contrastive experience adds a spark in his life.

In the post modernism, the theme of self -search, existentialism, east-west encounter are common. The heroes are mostly completed their higher studies in Abroad like Arun Joshi. The Gandhian values and ideas, Bhagavad Gita, Western philosophers are influenced Arun Joshi. The same post modernism trend has returned in the twentieth century too. Now people has searching themselves in the materialistic world. They don't know for what purpose to born and live. All of them are running behind the money. But they don't understand the human values. There is a life behind the money. The detachment has played an important role in westernization society.

Some of the factors of human development in all its dimensions are impact of technological fall, hostility, materialistic aggrandisement and self-delusion. The modern man lacking of faith and insight remains in a self-centred vacuum unable to breathe the refreshing air of a liberating truth. Joshi's novels being a continual search for reality in the present day world, deal with the problems faced by the modern man. The industrial and technological advancement has created dilemmain the society and in the individual.

Man cannot realize happiness through mere possession. Eternal joy and happiness can be achieved only through self-realization and spiritual-enlightenment. But, unfortunately, influenced by Western-culture and technological progress, man has forgotten his culture and attaches himself to the routinedaydreams and short-lived pleasures of materialistic world. The world today is in a hazardous condition because it brushes aside the central questions of the values of life of philosophy and religion as "empty notions and mere fancies" (p-9)

His embracing of primitive life is a part of the maturation of his being. He begins to realize his own self. Billy finds his real self among the forest people and never enters into the modern world. He is not only rejecting the modern society but also the all wrong self-images to recognize his true self. Billy was comfortable in his primeval life and all his restiveness was replaced by tranquillity. Billy belongs to the upper classes entirely cut off from their roots. He hates the western civilization because of its neglectful attitude towards the traditional ethics. For him, it is not the civilization but the degradation of human psyche.

Arun Joshi on being asked by Banerjee in an Interview, if Billy's escape implies a total rejection of modernity, remarks: "Tribals are very civilized according to mine and Billy Biswas' understanding. It is the post-independence pseudo-western values that he rejects (3). The first part of the novel reveals the deprivation of human values by the material progress of modern civilization. Expressing his disgust over the phoney culture of the indian upper-class society. Billy tells Romi:

“ 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... Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouthed ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago” (TSCBB 176-77)

He is very much averse to the corruption rampant in the contemporary society and more so in the urban elite in India. For Billy, the westernized upper class Indian society is spiritually barren and depraved. Modernization and Urbanization are also one of the main causes for the human existence. It motivates Billy’s existence from the sophisticated culture to the primitive world.

Arun Joshi’s hero Billy is compared to Matthew Arnold’s Scholar Gypsy in *The Scholar Gypsy*. Scholar Gypsy avoids the company of the Victorians, suffering from the infectious diseases of materialism and scepticism. He was lured by the gypsies. Gypsies are also considered as tribals. Arnold has made him a symbol of health in spiritual life. Like Billy also leave the materialistic society to get peace and spiritual eternity through primitive life. The existential theme of alienation and the crisis of life and identity dealt with in the novel.

The hasty scientific and technological progress that man is supposed to be making for himself by his very own hands and mind slowly appears to be turning into a trap. The very comfort, the modern facilities, seems to be dominating man and the effort of this rush has increased his fears and uncertainty and material comfort is comfort no more. The present civilization, may be termed as a scientific civilization: the fundamental flaw of our civilization being the defeat of man by the material.

However, Joshi says that the modern civilization can be saved by love of truth and beauty, sympathy with the oppressed and beliefs in the brotherhood of man, justice and mercy and above all by limitation of the machinery” (78). By following our age-old spiritual culture, Joshi trusts that the scientific civilization can be made to save humanity from suffering and destruction.

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