

ARUN JOSHI'S THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS: A SPIRITUAL ODYSSEY

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a satire on the modern materialistic world where man finds trapped in the clutches of phony glitter of the outward world. He seems to give a clarion call as what the Romantics exhorted in the late 18th century— 'Return to Nature'. The portrayal of Billy Biswas' life-journey answers the questions related to the meaninglessness and fulfillment, peace and prosperity, tradition and modernity, body and soul. The juxtapositioning of the primal, tribal and modern, materialistic world by the writer raises many issues to be addressed in a world where the people at the margins remain out of the focus in present times. By mapping the meandering of Billy's internal conflict in search of fulfillment and meaningfulness in life this paper aims at analyzing his life as a spiritual odyssey.

KEYWORDS: *Primal, Materialistic, Spiritual, Meaningfulness, Phony*

INTRODUCTION

The two world wars in the first half of the twentieth century left the entire humanity rattled and distressed. Their impact was felt all across the world among all sections of society. The varied forms of art, particularly literature, caught the stupefied post-war man staring in oblivion and became a refuge to the inner turmoil that the human mind went through. Writers across the globe, some of them exposed to first-hand horrible experiences or belonging to harassed class like Arthur Miller, presented a lot of the bewildered masses in their body of works. They captured not only the physical sufferings and prosecution but also the torture to the inner spaces of man. The existential crisis loomed over the world characterized by man's aloofness, alienation, absurdities meaninglessness in life, temporariness, frustrations, and disenchantment with life. The fifties produced a galaxy of existential and absurdist writers, giving a fresh vigor to the philosophy of Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger—Albert Camus, Sartre, Smauel Beckett, Kafka who captured and presented this predicament of man in their works. As India was also at the receiving end during these two wars and was immensely affected by these developments, the writers here responded to their times by depicting the fate of man amid the utter senselessness and meaninglessness surrounding the world.

Like his Western Existential predecessors, Arun Joshi revels in creating a dark, imperfect, mysterious and fractured world, leaving everybody askance about what the future holds for man. His novels *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Foreigner* (1958), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The Apprentice* (1974) display a uniformed pattern by meandering through an imperfect, disenchanting and disillusioned world. Joshi says: 'My novels are essentially attempted towards a better understanding of the world of myself. If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my

exploration.’ (Dhawan, 18) Relations between man and man, between man and the outside world are marred with a void, leaving the individual without any emotional bonding or attachment with the world surrounding the humanity. Through Billy Biswas, his central character in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Joshi raises multiple questions—from man’s existential dilemma to his alienation, sense of belonging and emotional vacuum. The juxtapositioning of primitive-modern, urban-tribal, rural-civilized, location-dislocation, body-soul, spiritual-material binaries turn novel into a spiritual odyssey for the protagonist Billy (Bimal) Biswas. Joshi by introducing two narrators as Ramesh Sahai (Romi) and Billy Biswas presents two viewpoints—one stereotyped, traditional and the other as breaking from the tradition and questioning the majoritarianism point of material success. Born in an elite family and the son of a Supreme Court judge, Billy, much to the disappointment of his family, prefers Anthropology to Engineering, and his quest for knowing and understanding the world beyond this phony world makes him leave the dreamy, glittering happening places like New York, Delhi and Shimla takes him to hitherto unknown, mysterious tribal, mysterious world of ‘saal forests of the Maikala Hills’. Billy despite belonging to an upper-class family never feels at home with the modern civilized world he inhabits: ‘That [Harlem] was the most human place he could find, he said. White America, he said, was much too civilized for him’ (p. 9). Even amid the glitterati, he feels lost and lonely, and restless in his quest for knowing the primeval world of forests, rivers, hills and the inhabitants of this dark yet fascinating world: ‘The other side. You know what I mean, don’t you? 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.’ (Billy Biswas, 15)

Even in New York instead of any upscale locality, Billy chooses Harlem the worst slums in the world, to stay with the care-free niggers. He recalls his visit to his maternal uncle in Bhubaneswar when he was fourteen when he stealthily visited the tribals during the night and witnessed their celebration of life to the full. At this, he realized that ‘Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong to. This is what I have always dreamt of.’ (91) This thought keeps him revisiting again and again, sometimes hallucinatory. But certainly, Billy didn’t belong to the traditional world we live in. Later on, when he finally disappears from the eyes of the civilized world and joins the world beyond hills, he feels a communion with the tribals: ‘... I felt as though I was a tribal myself.’ (94)

The novel abounds in all that goes with emptiness and meaninglessness in modern rat-race ridden materialistic world where shallow exterior matters, not the soul. Bill always craves for an emotionally fulfilling relationship, a world which he can call of his own, the place he can belong to. And this quest gets fulfilled with his reunion, as he feels, with his roots, a real living world rather than the hollowed one— with the world beyond this superficial world, the world of woods, rivers, mountains, the real world of tribals. When he ventures into the other territory inhabited by likes of Dhunia and Bilasia, Billy instantly feels the connection and belonging he never felt so far. The sight of dark, uneducated, coarse but vivacious, tribal Bilasia enchants him in such a way that all the glorious moments of he enjoyed in the modern world disappear from his memory. No Meena or Rima or Tuula from this world can stand before Bilasia and sway Billy’s mind back to this materialistic world. The sight of Bilasia stirs Billy out of his disenchanting state and transports him into a different world full of ecstasy and fulfillment:

Her [Bilasia] enormous eyes, only a little foggier with drink, poured out 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. The top

of her lugra came down. Her breasts, when he touched them, were full. 'Desire,' he explained, 'was too mild a word for what I felt at that 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. I don't believe I had ever felt towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia that night. And I don't think I shall ever feel it again, even towards Bilasia. (102)

Billy is repulsive of the superficial, phony, civilized class where everything takes place as a pattern. The so-called civilized world appears to him as devoid of having anything of substance and meaning—relations, family and the world around. His incompatibility with the money-oriented selfish world results in his alienation. In his relationship with Rima with whom he enjoyed the pleasures of flesh Billy realizes that he himself was no different from other sullied people whom he despised, and then suddenly decides to come out of this abyss of degradation and double-speak:

After it was over I looked into her [Rima Kaul] clear trusting eyes, and I had a glimpse of my degradation. I realized what a cad I had been, what a fraud I was about to become. . . The mendacity that I had seen all around me had finally grabbed hold of me. I was well on my way to becoming all that I had always despised.(135)

But while living in New York Billy developed a healthy and somewhat lasting relationship with Tuula Lindgren. He is a disturbed soul from the very beginning; he is always in search of something that can give solace to him. No worldly pleasure-wealth, women, success on any other material – fascinates him. Throughout his labyrinthine journey Billy has a split self; physically he seems to belong to this world but his restive mind makes voyages to a different world. The voice of his soul outweighs the calls of this world of relations, friends and material success: 'I had greater responsibilities towards my soul.' (133) And this causes the estrangement of his relations with wife, parents, and friends and finally this entire empty world of pretensions. His search for genuine authentic world ends with his arrival into the saal forests of the Maikala Hills.

The novel raises the question of survival, adjustment, and adaptability in a hostile world which caters to the body and not to the soul. Taking a cue from the existential predecessors like Camus and Sartre and Beckett Joshi creates a spiritually and emotionally barren world where the individual battles with the questions as for where he has come from, where and whom he belongs to. Billy questions the system, the world, the surrounding in which he has been and brought up and thus considers himself an alien. He does not belong to anyone or anything here. His disenchantment disappears once he enters a dark, mysterious world of woods:

And so Billy Biswas, a refugee from civilization, sat in the shadow of a saal tree, a thousand miles away from home, and gradually underwent his final metamorphosis. He stood on a rock and saw in the night sky a reality that blinded him with its elemental ferocity. It was as though his life had been reduced to those elements with which we all begin when we are born. 'Come,' they cried. 'It is with us that you will end. (p.102)

The novel describes the celebration of the peripheral, marginalized world along with the disenchantment with the center- the so-called civilized, sophisticated world. Through the clash between the two worlds—the crude primitive but real on the one hand and the urbane, sophisticated but shallow on the other—Joshi presents a hapless situation where appearance outshines the substance, taking illusions for reality. And those who question this mundane, false reality are left as misfits, taking the course of rebellion. Billy is in the same state who in order to break the clutches of the world becomes a rebel because 'the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of

rebellion.” (Camus) Billy’s abhorrence for the façade worn by the superficial world is clearly visible on every page of the novel, making him a votary for the primeval world:

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 whiskey glasses in their furred paws’ I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending – the so-called thinkers and philosophers and mean like that – they are merely hired to find solutions, throw light, as they say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money. (p. 69)

Billy is a rebel with a cause and his concern being one with his roots, the genuine authentic world as Nature bestowed us with. His is a lonely voice; he is a great disappointment for all those governed with and directed by the forces of the society of the day—his father, mother, friends, his wife. The sole voice that concurs with his or acquiesces his eccentricities is Tuula who herself is at loggerheads with money-oriented society:

Another thing that attracted me to her was her total disregard for money. She was the first person I met for whom money had no value. Since I came here, I have met several others – my present wife, for example – but she was the first... She believed that to survive man needs a minimum of goods which must either be given to him by society or he must receive the exchange to procure them. Once the society or your profession ensures this minimum, you should devote all your energies to the full exploitation of your gifts – endowments she called them – gifts that you are born with, and in the process contribute as much to the society as you can (pp. 126- 27).

His hatred for money and false pretenses lead him to denounce this world. At the call of his soul, he renounces all the physical comforts and pleasures, all the name and fame that this class conscious world bestows with. No power, relation or attraction can keep him from joining the primitive world. The skin-deep beauty and polished manners of Meena pale before the untamed energy and unadulterated, raw grace of Bilasia and her world. Speaking about incompatibility with this world as well as his saving of his marriage with Meena, Billy remarks:

And only one chance in a thousand could have saved my marriage. It might have been saved if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. These, I am afraid, she did not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phony society—all had ensured that she should not have it.’ (133)

Billy completely associates himself with the pains and pleasures of the tribals and eschews their cause when the occasion comes, because ‘This is where I belong.’ (91) When there is conflict between the police and the tribals, he comes out of his ‘primitive home’ and crossing the threshold enters back to the forsaken shallow world of pretences just for the safety and security of his tribal brethren. In his meeting with his friend Ramesh the DM, he puts forth the demands with regard to the concerns of his people. Like absurdist writers, Joshi presents meaninglessness and futility of life where the individual finds himself sandwiched; but here, unlike the world of Beckett and Camus, man doesn’t have to make a choice; rather he commits himself completely to the one his conscience asks him to. Billy’s renunciation for the world beyond brings him a sense of fulfillment and completeness where he is worshipped as a representative of God by 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.’ (169)

Billy throughout the story appears afflicted with an anxiety syndrome. In his hallucinations he feels attracted towards the dreamy world of aboriginals, a world far real than reality he has witnessed in and around his life. Only those who have a different outlook from the mainstream thinking of the day and have chartered a new territory, much to the chagrin of the stereotyped elders, in their life appear closer to him and with these people and things he feels a spiritual bonding. That's why the relationship Billy enjoys with Tuula Lindgren as well as with aboriginals is unique. About Tuula Billy says:

. . . thing that attracted me to her was her total disregard for money. She was the first person I met for whom money had no value. . . Tuula. . . was different. I had met people who talked about the same things but did quite the opposite. Tuula, on the other hand, treated money for what it was: a whole lot of people. (126-27)

Further, like Billy's hallucinatory flights to another world, eerie things belonging to a world beyond like occult, and hypnotism attracted Tuula. This love for the unique, mysterious, dark world strengthens their relationship. The similarities in their perspective of life brings them closer enough to have romantic linkages, as Romi relates in the beginning: 'That night I was to realize that, for all her oddity, it was with Tuula Lindgren that Billy had spent all those summer evenings and that she was the second person who had any clue to what went on in the dark, unscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas.' (16) All worldly relations-familial, societal, except the pursuit of truth and spirit – are meaningless for him. Tuula is the only character who appears like a mentor or a torch-bearer for him. Initially, he is hesitant and inhibitive about his feelings, his likings for the primitive world but Tuula's support helps in inching towards his suppressed urge: 'A great force, urkraft, a . . . a primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it.' (18) Quoting Tuula that 'the search for truth [is] a lonely business,' (127), Billy's own life stands testimony to this. He has to cut off all his ties with this world in order to be a part of real truth. In the novel, Billy goes through an epiphanic process where he is constantly besieged with the existential question related to life and its meaning. The novelist captures the gradual extension of Billy's perception towards the inimical, soulless world, and his predicament reminds of the dilemma faced by the protagonist Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce's *The Portrait of Artist as a Young Man*. In his letter to Tuula, he expresses his anguish and feeling of loneliness: '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.' (70)

Billy like any other human being has his fair share of momentary lapses in his relations. His marriage with Meena Chatterjee he admits is just an outcome of such a coincidence when one evening inclement weather in Shimlabrings Meena closer to Billy and her snuggling to Billy results in the latter saying yes. Similarly, he goes through guilt pangs for using Rima for brief pleasures. Billy's split self becomes the cause of his anxiety. The call from the primitive world torments his soul and awakens him when he is involved in indiscretions: '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 been clamoring for.' (135) Billy's unfulfilled cravings for belongingness in the civilized world mentally leave him in a wretched condition till he is embraced by Maikala Hills and Bilasia - his home and wife. His plight evokes O'Neill's Yank in *The Hairy Ape*.

Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* highlights man's desperate search to find meaning in life in a world where he is at loggerheads with each and everything. The existential question compels Biswas to go on a spiritual odyssey to find a communion with the outside world to which he can belong. Camus' words describe his situation: 'Man stands face to face with the irrational. He feels within him his longing for happiness and for reason. The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world., (Camus, 28) Romi's comments sums up how Billy's aversion to the modern world eggs him on to explore the primitive world in order to give meaning to life:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, 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 himself so recklessly to its call. 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. (8)

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