

Search for Individuality in the Novel of Arun Joshi: *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi deals importantly with the theme of anxiety like the existential writers of the West. The range of themes depicted in Joshi's novels is quite wide and varied, and covers temporal as well as timeless issues. But the search for individuality is a pronounced and recurrent motif in all his fiction. All his heroes are "men engaged in the meaning of life". His main characters are in search of their lost self, their identity.

*A keen analysis of the novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* of Arun Joshi depicts that the protagonist, Billy Biswas, son of a judge, retreats from the so-called civilized life to the primitive world of his tribal mistress, Bilasia. Billy Biswas is a character with greater depth than that of the general run of the western existentialist heroes. His alienation from the civilized world leads him to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that long for an identity, the godhead of self. He aims at reaching the divine heights. Finally Joshi suggests that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be felt in the lap of Nature and primitive atmosphere and not in the sophisticated urban area. According to him one can realize the essence of life by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and by hearing the calls of the inner being. For Joshi this is the only way out of saving man from the purposelessness of the contemporary sordid, meaningless world.*

KEYWORDS: *alienation, primitive, civilized, tribal, existentialist*

INTRODUCTION

In Indo-English Fiction, the foundation was established by the great trio of Indian Novelists Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao and others who were followed by the younger generation of novelists like G. V. Desani, Anita Desai, Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, Arun Joshi and so on. As it is evident that in twentieth century man belongs to "Lost Generation", so consequently some Indo-English Novelists have persistently dealt with the question of the search of the individual for his identity. As the problem of knowing himself has become very acute so Arun Joshi, portrays this dilemma in his fiction and tries to provide a solution which of course cannot be final. He is perhaps the first Indian novelist who takes up this current social problem of alienation and of individuality. He tries to answer the basic question "Who I am?"

The twentieth century faces a cultural vacuum, where man has lost his sense of identification. In the fragmented world of our age, man is unable to define himself and to understand how he stands in relation to the

rest of the world. So Arun Joshi takes from existentialists the picture of a man as a lonely anguished being in an indifferent world. His fictional world is characterized by frustration, disintegration, and a sense of alienation. In the words of Hari Mahan Prasad, “His novel is both, a chronicle of chaos and a mode quest.” Though he may not be ranked with the major writers of his time like R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, his genius is deservedly in the process of being recognized. He had given five valuable novels to the modern literary world of Indo-English Fiction- *The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, and *The City and The River*, and a collection of stories entitled: *The Survivor*.

In *The Foreigner*, the first novel of Arun Joshi which brought him into limelight, the most striking features of the protagonist Sindi Oberoi are – his alienation, his aloofness, his loneliness, his detachment and his inability to form meaningful relationships in life. His second novel “*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*” was published in 1971 which shows the continuation of the theme, viz., search for individuality. As K.R.S. Iyengar observes: “In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of consciousness of hapless and rootless people a stage further, and has revealed to our gaze new gas-chambers of self-forges misery.” The novel is a severe condemnation of the spiritual uprootedness of the Post-Independence Westernized Indian Society. Billy’s search for meaning, however, is conducted in a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price with his life for not conforming to the norms of the urban civilization- for daring to step out of its stifling confines. The novel, thus, deals with the existential theme of estrangement from self and from society which is a common experience in the modern world of urbanization, changing values, and rootlessness.

Arun Joshi is, thus, preoccupied with certain existential themes in his novels. There is an overriding sense of rootlessness, restlessness and “foreignness” in his protagonists, for the reason of their not being able to adjust themselves emotionally or morally to their society. Infact, this rootlessness and foreignness becomes the recurrent motif of his novels. However, in spite of his existential themes, his solutions to the problems of life are pragmatic and not extreme as those of the existentialists. As it is thought that man’s existence is in danger and futile but Joshi thinks it other way. For him, man has a purpose to live.

THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS: TOWARDS PRIMITIVISM

Arun Joshi, an author of rare sensibility and style, attempts a serious probe into the existential problem and spiritual disturbances of mankind by fixing his focus on certain individualistic character like Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Joshi’s second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, seems to be a sequel to his first novel, *The Foreigner*, in regard of the quest for identity by the protagonist. There is recurrence of the themes of the first novel-crisis of self, the problems of identity and the quest for fulfillment in Joshi’s second novel. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, is single character based, and is mainly concerned with the sensibility, beliefs, quest for individuality, and the destiny of his hero. In the novel, the hero continues his odyssey and leaves New Delhi for Maikala Hills in search of inner peace and his spiritual roots. He is in search of individuality and feels alienated from the environment in which he has been brought up and he is at least able to find a meager amount of fulfillment in his escape to primitivism. Hence, it may be opined that the writer’s vision in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is not as bleak, dark, pessimistic and cynical as his hero feel alien to

his world. Billy at last feels a sense of belongingness in the tribal and primitive way of life. But even here the vision cannot be regarded as quite optimistic, for the writer is considerably bitter about the civilized world. The book ends with the hero realizing the “insensitivity of the civilized world towards a gesture of conscientious dissent.”

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas aims at presenting a viable alternative to the futile cry of the sensitive individual in the modern world and accounting for the behavior of people like Billy. Bimal Biswas or Billy is a man of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsessions. He is introduced as an “engineer, anthropologist, anarchist” a man of an extraordinary obsession, is born and brought up in comfort and affluence. He is son of a Supreme Court Judge, who is educated in Britain and America. He is a person who is deeply aware of deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. The ordered, systemized, civilized life which fascinates common man intensifies Billy’s problems of identity that is in search of a “human world of emotional fullness—a world of meaningful relatedness.” Unable to seek inner-peace, self-recognition, and salvation in the so-called civilized world, he searches for a place where he would not feel an outcast, culturally uprooted, socially isolated, and self-estranged. But his quest leaves behind a trail of shattered hearts.

Billy’s persistent quest for individuality persuades him constantly to live at Haarlem, where he can nurture in himself a sense of belonging, a spirit of superintendence, by wholly preserving his identity, he studies anthropology and not engineering, which his parents want him to. The restlessness and chaos of Billy’s soul finds a poignant expression in his desire to travel and is symbolically externalized in his extraordinary reading obsession. His sense of restlessness and his longing for primitivism is almost engrained in his personality. He receives the intimations of his primitive self from the moment he emerges from the railway station at Bhubneshwar, where he goes to spend his holidays in his childhood: “It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake.” But at that time he is not able to analyze his feelings properly: “I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” It seems to him that the sculptures of Konark can provide a solution to his problem of identity and quest for self. Watching the tribal dance, the young Billy has these feelings: “Something had gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong; this is what I have always dreamt of.” Billy is brought face to face with the futility of civilized life, which makes him terribly unhappy. And thereafter throughout he goes on making efforts to retrieve his identity, which eludes him for a long time. Tulla Lingdren, a Swedish girlfriend of Bill, who has come to America for advanced training in psychiatric social works, and has extraordinary intuition. She has mastered hypnotism, that’s why she understands the dilemma of Billy’s life fully. She knows what goes on in his dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes. She finds him obsessed with a latent quest.

In his desperate attempt to get away from the hallucinations and his fear for loneliness, Billy, ironically gets caught in social conventions that he so terribly abhors. In order to get rid of his obsession for the primitive and to attain emotional anchor, Billy marries Meena Chatterjee - a sophisticated and beautiful girl of his own Bengali community. This marriage however turns out to be a miserable failure, because of lack of understanding. Within a year after his marriage, he realizes that he has committed a blunder. He says, “The

game I had been playing was the stupidest gamble one could think of. I was lost even before I had put up the stakes.” Unable to realize his ‘self’ in the marriage, Billy’s whole being is shattered.

Billy’s marriage and its tragic aftermath lead him to the edge of despair, culminating subsequently in the seduction of Reema Kaul. Absence of any meaningful relationship and communication in marriage, coupled with his unfulfilled yearning for primitive life, Billy feels awfully discontented with his life in this stilted civilization. His obsession with primitive life is born out of the feeling that the sophisticated life is not original but only an imitation of what is artificial. So he longs to escape into the simple society of genuine emotions from the hypocrite materialistic society. In the beginning, he does not understand his fascination for the primitive life. However, soon he realizes that it is not merely a fascination, but a search for his own self through a sensory enlivening brought in him by Bilasia. Being fascinated by the primitive surroundings, fed up with the strange, wooden Meena and corrupted by the charm of Rima Kaul, attracted by Bilasia, he disappears into the Saal forests. Billy’s attraction to Bilasia is not sexual but it is the primitive element in her as she is an incarnation of the primitive force. She is the missing self of Billy and the union with her makes him whole. It is as though Bilasia is Prakriti and Billy is Purusha and the cosmic whole is experienced in their union. Billy’s tragedy is the tragedy of every man who wants to know his identity, his individuality. Billy abandons the civilized world not because he is a psychic case or a criminal, but because his vision can see beyond what is actually visible. The most tragic part of the story is that none tries to understand Billy’s problems even after his death. Nobody realizes that Billy was making a search for truth which is hard to come by and harder to understand.

The story of Billy has been divided into two parts very aptly as he has lived two lives in one birth- the first in an unambitious, uncivilized but contented and natural world. In the second part, that is primitive world, he experiences real mental and spiritual tranquility, solace and contentment when he comes into closer contact with primitive life. He is a refugee from civilization who has undergone the final metamorphosis under a saal tree just as the Buddha had achieved Nirvana under the Bodhi tree. “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.” He realizes the significance of that moment which rarely comes in a man’s life. He says: “Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight.” Billy is now completely transformed. For him, his transformation is an inexorable movement from darkness to light. Like Siddartha, he realizes that one could attain salvation and happiness not by rigid penance and self-mortification, but by participating in life vigorously and whole heartedly, yet without attachment.

On the whole, *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* impresses the readers with its originality and sensibility. It has rightly been regarded as a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore. This novel is likely to remain extraordinary responsive to the successive generations of its active Indian readers as it delineates the existential quest for values and individuality in a mad, bad, absurd world.

CONCLUSION

Arun Joshi deals with various fictional themes as alienation and involvement, east-west encounter and compromise, existentialism and individuality, and quest and complacency. In his novels, he delineates the spiritual agony of his lonely questers. His second novel seems to be a sequel of the first in which his protagonist is lonely and misfit in that world where he has to live and face the meaninglessness of life. He is restlessly searching for his roots and trying to know the purpose of his existence on this planet.

In the novel, the protagonist, Billy Biswas, son of a judge, educated in Britain and America, and a lecturer in Delhi University, retreats from the so-called civilized life to the primitive world of his tribal mistress, Bilasia. Billy Biswas is a character with greater depth than that of the general run of the western existential heroes. His alienation from the civilized world leads him to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that long for individuality. Finally Joshi suggests that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be felt in the lap of Nature and primitive atmosphere and not in the sophisticated urban area.

Arun Joshi's novel suggests that one can realize the essence of life by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and by hearing the calls of the inner being. For Joshi this is the only way out of saving man from the purposelessness of the contemporary sordid, meaningless world. Joshi's hero is lonely individual, faced with predicaments of existentialist order and proving misfit in the world in which he has to live. Joshi's career as a novelist so far represents various modes of quest for self, a common factor of them all being that of decimation of one's pride and cultivation of humility in the service of others.

On the whole it can be said that Arun Joshi's canvas is broad enough to embrace many aspects of life. He is successful in representing the quest of individuals for their individuality in the hullabaloo of the world. His protagonists are lone questers in search of their uniqueness, consequently leading to the realization that only love, sympathy and devotion to one's own identity can balance the sense of worthlessness and barrenness in our life. Arun Joshi has an optimistic approach to life which sets him apart from the rest of the crowd and helps to find out the remedies for various troubles of our life.

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