



Search for self-identity in the novel of Arun Joshi: The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

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Abstract: Arun Joshi is an Indian English novelist who has attempted to grapple with the predicament of modern man. He has created an enviable space for himself in the community of Indian novelist. His main thrust is on the individual psyche of the protagonists imbued with an instinctive urge to define their identity. His heroes plunge into the extremely trying situations and combat with them in their peculiar and distinctive ways. The search for values tosses them from one alternative to another leaving them battered and emaciated. This exploration is not a smooth and easy process and has its own obvious scars and bruises. However the agony of the protagonists culminates in resolving the tension. Arun Joshi has created Billy Biswas as a hero who longs intensively to locate his real self not in the matrix of westernized culture but in the most innocent, most native even anthropological past of Indian culture.

Key words – conflict, individuality, spirituality, primitive society, tribal life, civilized and uncivilized.

'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' is the story of the son of a Supreme Court judge, educated in New York, who leaves his comfortable Delhi life, his marriage, and his friends, to become a tribal healer in the Maikala Hills of Chhattisgarh. Billy is completely fed up with the grossly materialistic society. He feels that it had mistakenly turned away from the traditional values, ethics and culture of India. In fact, he supports the anti-materialistic way of Hindu life.

The first part of the novel establishes the character of Billy and his environment. He was a member of the 'aristocratic heritage' and he belonged to the upper crust of Indian Society. His father, who was a diplomat and later a judge in Supreme Court of India, wanted him to become an engineer. But Billy was greatly interested in Anthropology and chose it as his subject for higher studies and to get a doctorate degree. All this happened without the knowledge of his father who thought his son was studying some engineering course. Despite such an affluent background, he felt himself to be a misfit in the so-called civilized society and he became interested in exploring the inwardness of life. He never

feels himself at home because one thing was clear to him that he was not a man of this civilized society and that his real destination was some other place.

Romi, his room partner at Harlem in America, says that Billy was, "a man of such extra ordinary obsession'. But what even he fails to understand is his real identity and thus the question still persists with Billy - Who am I? Though he was born and brought up in the aristocratic life style, yet he dislikes the organized life-style. All of them are shallow, degenerated and self-centered in the eyes of Billy Biswas. This opinion of Billy makes him feel that he was not meant and made for this world and that this society was not meant for him. In reality, the first part of the novel provides a background for understanding the psychological tortured Billy Biswas and how he was in constant conflict with his identity. When he is only fourteen and visits Bhubaneswar, he notices the landscape of the city. And when he goes to Konark, he is fascinated by the imagery of the sculpture and feels for the first time that the true beauty of imagination is appreciated only by the Adivasis. His visits to the tribal village with the chauffeur prove to be a turning point in the life of Billy Biswas as he is, for the first time, overwhelmed by erotic energy in the tone and tune of the folk music while dancing and celebrating life. The life he was supposed to live was miles away from the life of the tribal's in reality.

Billy had friendship with Tuula Lindgren, a Swedish girl when he was in America. She had come there for advanced training in psychiatric social work. Both of them had met during a voyage and had become friends soon because of their same tastes and preferences. They discussed and argued about several matters but these arguments did not spoil their friendship and strengthened it further. They met each other regularly and even attended parties and dinner together. As a psychiatrist, Tuula understood Billy's nature very well and had once told with Romi that he had some primitive force inside him which may explode at any time.

The time passes and Billy realizes that the hurried marriage life was a catastrophe rather than a solution to his perennial problems. They seemed to be the two banks of the river that are not meant to meet in the lively life, as their choices and interests are totally different in nature. Whatever be the psychological reason for separation between Meena and Billy, it can be safely concluded that the course Billy adapted to start his new identity was a complete failure. His alienation from the civilized world becomes so complete that he blindly supports the superstitions and the blind rituals of the primitive society in the case of child sacrifice by a clerk.

A great change takes place within him when he reaches Dhunia's hut and sees Bilasia. It seems to him for the first time that the objective of his life is about to be fulfilled and he is soon going to realize his identity was going to be completed. A new sense of beingness starts emerging within and outside him.

Meena could have provided him comfort, with a future happy family, but everything was in vain. It was not merely a coincidence that he could not do all that because he was destined for something else, and that he was not created for the comforts of life in the developed modern- world because he was born with an instinct for the primitive world.

The love that emerged in the eye of Billy for the first time was only for Bilasia and it seemed that it was the love at first sight. Billy could see only and only Bilasia and nothing else. He forgets that he was the son of the Supreme Court justice. He forgets that he could have found hundreds of Bilasia like girls in India.

The disclosure of the whereabouts of Billy to Situ by Romi brings tragedy to the life of Billy. The civilized world's interventions into the primitive society have always led to the destruction of the primitive world, its ethos and culture. The death of Billy was unfortunate in many ways. The search of truth has always been crushed. None wonders about the fact that a person who takes birth in the upper crust of society has the will to find the truth- the truth of the self, the quest for the identity and the identity which gives meaning to life. The civilized people have gone bankrupt not only in their hearts but mentally too, they are all alone and alienated. They just live and live anyway. There is no use of living like anyway. Even an animal lives anyway. There is no difference between an animal and a human being.

To conclude, the whole novel is devoted to the search of self-identity. The novel has given the true picture of the post-Independence India.

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