

“Quest for the Primitive Self: A Study of Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*”

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Abstract

The tug-of-war between the civilized world and the primitive one is reflected as an interesting study by many authors. Joshi’s second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, depicts the story of the protagonist who is pulled by the unknown and mysterious world of the tribal society. Billy’s strange quest leads him to leave his much advantageous position as the sole inheritor of a wealthy family and go to live a primeval life among a Bhil community. This paper looks at the root of Billy’s quest, which is found inherent in his nature right from his childhood days. His life in America and his education there offer him no solace. The pull of the primitive world comes in between his marital life too and destroys it. The study attempts at understanding Billy’s quest for individualism and self-identity at the cost of leaving everything materialistic. Finally, this paper attempts to depict the clashes between the civilized world and the primitive one while exploring Billy’s negotiations with both.

Keywords: civilization, primitive, identity, existentialism, alienation, tribals, hallucination

Indian Writing in English, over the years, has seen tremendous growth and contemporary writers have been successful in bringing about fresh themes and perspectives to the existing body of literature. Arun Joshi (1939-1993) is one such writer who has been successful in creating interest in readers by delving into existentialism while integrating the Indian tradition and ethos. His second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), makes a mark in the Indian literary tradition and is regarded as a compelling and thought-provoking book even after more than four decades of its publication. Joshi’s book gains its popularity primarily as it takes the readers on a terrain much different than the usual ones. Even though the author takes up a medley of inter-connected themes, but the most prominent issue is

undoubtedly the tug-of-war between primitivism and civilization and based on this, the protagonist's quest for self-identity and individuality.

Narrated by Romesh (Romi), an excellent observer and a good friend of the protagonist, the novel tells the strange story of Bimal (Billy) Biswas, belonging to a wealthy and cultured family, and the son of a retired Supreme Court judge and at one time India's ambassador to one of the European countries. Billy receives his early education in Dehra Dun in India and England, where he acquires a distinct British accent. Later Billy goes to America to pursue a course in Engineering as desired by his father, but takes up Anthropology, without the knowledge of his parents. He acquires his doctorate in Anthropology from an American university, and later joins as a Professor in Delhi University. Billy's choice of the subject and his passion towards it signifies his attachment towards indigenous people and primitive life, a far cry from what his father had in mind for him. It seems as though the protagonist has everything under the sun – wealth, status, education – which every common man craves for. Billy, however, is consumed by a steady restlessness and discontent which grows leaps and bounds over time. The shallowness of the upper-class and so-called civilized society starts frustrating him and he finds himself a misfit among family and friends. Commenting on the falsity of the refined upper-class society as revealed in the book, Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "It is a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore to reiterate its elemental concerns." (203) Romi senses the tension in Billy's home when he is invited to dinner. He realizes that born in the same family, Billy seemed to be completely different from his parents in his outlook towards life.

Billy realizes his pull towards the primitive world quite early in his life. An incident in his childhood, as narrated to Romi, confirms Billy's interest towards a world completely different from his own. At the age of fourteen, accompanied by his mother, Billy visits Bhubaneshwar and is immediately captivated by the landscape and the natural beauty of the place. His visit to Konarak and a look at the sculptures there seem to offer him answers to long-probing questions in his mind about his identity. Explaining his feelings, he tells Romi, "...what appealed to me was the shades of the same spirit that I spoke of although I knew then, as I knew then, as I know now, that the spirit was a much, much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples. If anyone had a clue to it, it was only the *adivasis* who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark inscrutable faces." (*TSCOB*, 90) The visit to Bhubaneshwar is also significant for Billy as this is the place where he first gets the exposure to the tribal world. He accompanies his uncle's

chauffeur one night to a nearby tribal village and gets to see their ritual dancing, singing, drinking, and love-making. Instead of fear, a strange interest envelopes the mind of the young boy and he understands that he is on the threshold of a life-changing experience. He narrates his feelings to Romi thus:

“First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me although, mind you, there was nothing particularly erotic about the whole business except once when a boy and a girl, their arms around each other, loitered past me giggling and tumbled into the bush beyond. The shock of erotic energy was followed by the same feeling of unreality or, as I said, a reality sharper than any I had ever known. It was a bit like having taken a dose of hallucinatory drug, something I realized many years later when I was in Mexico. I remember saying to myself, even though I was only fourteen, I remember saying: Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of.” (*TSCOB*B, 91)

This life-changing experience makes Billy restless and he looks at himself as a misfit in the civilized society. Moving to America, the epitome of western civilized world, Billy chooses to live in Harlem, the African American locale, and feels that “white America...was much too civilized for him.” (*TSCOB*B, 9) With Billy’s connections and status, he could have easily afforded to live in Manhattan or some such posh locality. Instead he chooses to live in a dilapidated apartment in Harlem which is “the most human place he could find...” (*TSCOB*B, 9). When Romi comes to share lodging with Billy, he finds strange African American men who give him company. It is Tuula Lindgren, a Swedish lady, whom Billy befriends in America, who understands him. Much alike, to Billy, Tuula too is a misfit in the selfish, commercialized world of today’s time. Tula gets an advanced training in psychiatric social work at Columbia, U.S.A., and is “strongly interested in India, especially in her tribal people, a subject about which Billy knew enough to keep her engaged not one but a hundred nights.” (*TSCOB*B, 15) Billy finds it extremely comfortable to share with Tuula his experience of “the other side” which pulls him constantly: “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.” (*TSCOB*B, 15) Billy’s pull towards primitivism is seen in his constant restlessness and an affinity to bond with things away from the civilized world. On one occasion, Romi too feels that ‘mesmeric pull’ that holds the complete attention of the audience as Billy plays on a drum. Romi becomes aware of the awakening of dormant primitive emotions in the audience as he sees a Negro girl in the room shift her position next to Billy: “Soon after Billy had finished, the little Negro girl moved

over next to him. She sat very close to him so that their knees nearly touched. They stayed like that for the rest of the night. I think she had been greatly moved – sexually I mean by the drumming.” (*TSCOB*B, 17) Billy’s alienation from the world around him marches its progress gradually as he gets drawn more and more towards a life far away from the one that he was born into.

Billy’s restlessness results in frequent hallucinations and leaves him “very depressed and really shaken up.” (*TSCOB*B, 130) Narrating Romi about his feelings, he says, “I had grown terribly afraid of myself, some part of me. I thought terrible things might happen unless I did something drastic. Being an Indian and having been brought up in close-knit family, the only thing I could think of was to get married.” (*TSCOB*B, 130) So, he ends up marrying Meena Chatterjee, “...quite unusually pretty in a westernized sort of way – the most remarkable thing about her was that she was never short of words...She talked almost entirely in English in that unique rather flat, accent that is to be found among young ladies taught in convents.” (*TSCOB*B, 130) The hasty marriage, however, cannot offer any solace to Billy’s tortured soul. Meena and her family are again a far cry from Billy’s way of life rooted in humanity. Explaining his depression and disillusionment to Romi, he says, “And the first thing I hear on entering Meena’s house is some ten-year-old American pop record braying like an ass fit to burst, and two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wiggling their hips as if that was the greatest music in the world. That certainly was not the India that I had come back for.” (*TSCOB*B, 44) Billy’s marriage to Meena was almost called off after a picnic party arranged by Meena where one of the boys passes a remark that “all banjaras were thieves and their women no better than whores.” (*TSCOB*B, 45) Billy and Meena very soon become strangers and the marriage turns bitter with everyday fights and shouts. Meena confesses to Romi her inability to understand her husband whom she feels a complete stranger.

Billy’s mental torment crosses all boundaries when he feels caught up in a meaningless marriage and a society which offers him no solace. His pull towards the primitive world keeps on ascending day by day. In fact, Romi records Billy’s affinity with a different world on a much earlier visit to the Biswas’ home. During a discussion with Billy and his father on a case of suspicious murder that Justice Biswas had to attend to the next day, Romi is surprised to note Billy defending child-sacrifice by a clerk “to propitiate the Goddess Kali in order that the clerk’s young son, suffering from leukaemia, should get well.” (*TSCOB*B, 32) Billy defends the practice of child-sacrifice and remarks, “Similar cases have been reported from Africa, Indonesia, Japan, from even a country like Sweden. As far as India is concerned,

there are enough such cases to fill a thousand-page volume. Look up the court records of any of the tribal agencies, and you will know what I mean....It is only after it happens to oneself that one comes to believe....there are worlds at the periphery of this one, above it and below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them.” (*TSCOB*B, 40) Billy’s unsuccessful marriage and his inner torment lead him to commit mistakes for which later he feels repentant. His affair with Rima Kaul is with the intention of receiving some solace as he feels that she possesses that “rare degree of empathy” and “sufficient idea of human suffering” which his wife lacks. Commenting on his relationship with Rima, he says, “I came to like it even more than I liked the sex part. I felt happy not when I took her but when she said, “Oh, how misunderstood you are, my poor boy, I know how you feel. Those who harass you should be put to death straightaway.” It was this that I was really looking for.” (*TSCOB*B, 135) But gradually he understands how his passions had led him astray and resulted in seducing a poor, unsuspecting girl. With that also dawns the understanding that no woman from this phoney society can satisfy his soul.

In various letters that Billy writes to Tuula revealing his state of mind, it becomes clear that he was completely frustrated with the civilized society and was getting drawn more and more to the primitive world. In one of his letters to Tuula, he writes, “When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells 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 round.” (*TSCOB*B, 69) He records his agitation with the so-called civilized society, thus: “I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at the 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.” (*TSCOB*B, 69) He also writes to Tuula about the frequent hallucinations and visions of a woman which haunts him:

“A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man’s house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benares. And once I saw her, her face strangely luminous in the twilight, loading a freight train with sulphur on a siding in one of our eastern ports. Yes, this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand.” (*TSCOB*B, 70)

Billy's letters to Tuula depict the overpowering of primitive instincts in him which paves the path later on for his sudden and mysterious disappearance.

This pull of the hills, streams, trees, forests and the tribal people, ultimately lead Billy to the Satpura hills in Madhya Pradesh, and leaving his family and the upper-class society he settles down in a village among the Bhil community. Explaining Billy's sudden disappearance and decision to leave the civilized world, R.K. Dhawan says:

All of a sudden, Billy is seized by a phantom which makes him anxious to leave the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. On one of his anthropological excursions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh, Billy mysteriously vanishes. His love for the primitive life makes him leave his wife, his only child and his aged parents. Ignoring family responsibility, filial expectations and societal obligations.... (*The Fictional World*, 32)

By the time Romi sets his eyes upon Billy after a long period of time, he had thoroughly 'tribalized', dressed only in a loin-cloth, sporting a long beard. He has already got his comfort zone in the uninhibited drinking, dancing, and open orgiastic love-making of the tribals. Later, while explaining his ease with the tribal society to Romi, he says, "nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, and rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, and singing. And we talk – a lot about women and sex." (*TSCORB*, 83) He further explains the no-nonsense world of the tribals to Romi, "What kept us happy, I suppose, were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love-making, and more than anything else, no ambition, none at all." (*TSCORB*, 107) The ease with which he could cut off all communication with his original world was primarily due to his attachment towards Bilasia, the niece of the tribal leader, Dhunia. Romi's impression of Bilasia is recorded as "not merely a human being but also the embodiment of that primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these hills, perhaps this earth, since time began...." (*TSCORB*, 162) On meeting Bilasia, Billy undergoes "his final metamorphosis" (*TSCORB*, 102) and is lured by her primitive sensuality. He finds and completely different from the earlier women in his life. Hari Mohan Prasad explains this difference thus:

Meena deadens his seasons, Rima corrupts him and the material civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who causes explosion of senses-the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and its symbols in Meena and Rima. From Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not a mere trifling in Billy's life, it is a development from

sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. In Bilasia the physical and elemental meet. She is both Lawrentian and Blakean. (Prasad, 58)

Billy's union with Bilasia does not have the similarity of his union with Meena or Rima as it is not only the coming together of two bodies. Recognizing the primeval force in Bilasia that he was drawn to, he says, "Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year." (*TSCOB*B, 103) Narrating the story of his metamorphosis to Romi, he says, "I arrived at the fork in my life that, without being conscious of it, I had waited for all my life. I took the turning that was as irrevocable as it was awesome. Why all this happened to me I do not know, and even if I knew, I could not put it into words." (*TSCOB*B, 104) Billy's completeness in the tribal society of the Bhils comes also as a result of his inclusion to their world as one of their own. For Dhunia and his tribe, Billy is a king, equivalent to God, a priest, and a magician. Dhunia tells Romi: "He [Billy] 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." (*TSCOFBB*, 115) Dhunia believes that Billy possesses extraordinary powers and quotes instances of Billy sending a tiger away which had been roaming the jungle for a week killing their cattle and also bringing back his grandson to life after he "had been dead for two hours." (*TSCOB*B, 114) Romi too gets to see this mystic side of his friend when he cures Situ of her chronic migraine problem by giving her some herb and a touch with a metallic rod.

Billy's quest for individualism and his ultimate satisfaction at having found his recluse could not, however, end on a positive note. The man-hunt by the police force leading to his tragic death highlight the end of Billy's quest for meaning and values outside the maddening civilized world. As the forces of this civilized world come crashing in to destroy the primitive, Billy breathes his last uttering his final words to Romi, "You bastards" (*TSCOB*B, 167), highlighting his anger at the betrayal of friendship and the assault of the civilized world on his private life and quest for truth. Commenting on Billy's death, Tapan Kumar Ghosh says, "Billy's death is metaphorical. The modern Indian city is disoriented that kills sincerity....This kind of killing goes on when the social organism does not know its values. We only understand the values of money and power." (183) Joshi, however, does not give a finality to the end of man's quest for his primitive self with the death of Billy. Such quests would never end as long as man's instinct to know the unknown and explore the unexplored horizons is still alive.

Notes:

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