

Soul's Craving for a Way Out of This Artificial Material World in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

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Abstract

As the result of the rapid growth of industrialization, technology, mechanization and the so-called modernization the contemporary scenario of the human world has undergone a drastic and an undesired change. The psychology of modern man seems to be trapped in a strange kind of chaos and confusion. Arun Joshi is one of those Indian English novelists who represent the confused and conflicting inner-self of modern man. The root cause of this predicament of the modern man's inner-self is his growing interest in the materialistic way of life. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the protagonist, Billy Biswas, is seen in a constant search for a way out of this hypocrite, artificial and material world.

Keywords:- Mechanization, Predicament, Anti-materialistic, Westernized society, Self-realization, spirituality,

Introduction

In this age of steel and technology man has become himself steel activated by technology. To quote Eugene O' Neill, an American dramatist in his *The Hairy Ape*, where Yank, the protagonist represents the modern man when he identifies himself as steam, smoke and steel:

I am smoke and express trains and steamers and factory whistles....

And I am what make iron into steel! Steel, dat stand for the whole

ting! And I am steel-steel! (O' Neill, 17)

In the wake of mechanization modern man has just become mere a motion without emotion. Man is confronted with his rootlessness. He is obsessed with his lack of a sense of identity and belongingness. The emotional stuff of his own self has run short.

Arun Joshi notices the collapse of the age-old values resulting in the disjointed, purposeless and absurd world; and, moreover, he sees the contemporary man in his constant search for a way that would help him to face the existential problem in this modern and constantly changing world.

Modern man is illusioned to think that he is getting his heights in the wake of modernization and industrialization. But, in fact, it is leading our civilization to disaster. Joshi finds man in the contemporary society totally frustrated, separated and alienated because of being detached from his fellow beings. The present society is full of exploitations. There is only chaos, confusion and anarchy in social life. Arun Joshi is pained to see the chaotic conditions of the society. He, therefore, takes into his hand the task of providing a solution to the society, to escape from the vicious circle of rapid industrialization and materialism. Through the struggle of his protagonists, he aims at achieving a good society and happy and joyful individuals.

Though Arun Joshi himself belongs to the upper-crust of Indian society following the materialistic way of life, he has his roots in Indian cultural soil. He carefully studies the inner-self of the modern man overcome by the crisis of existence as the result of this materialism. For the solution of this crisis, he goes to the Indian philosophy. The *Vedanta* philosophy, the teachings of the *Gita* and the way of life taught by Mahatma Gandhi have a great influence on Arun Joshi. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the protagonist, Billy (Bimal) Biswas, goes to the hills in the lap of nature, like the seers in Indian legends and scriptures, in search of his spiritual self-height and to get inner peace. Joshi presents the quest for spiritual commitment of the inner soul that craves to transcend all the bounds of this materialistic life. In fact, the actual experiences of Joshi have been a perennial source of all his novels. He seems not to have written only for entertainment but with a view to sharing his own experiences with his friends and readers. He studies modern man's predicament and his psyche and gives his study a shape of novel.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas presents the journey of Billy Biswas from his reluctance towards the westernized society run by the norms of materialism to his irresistible pull towards the unsophisticated primitive world too far away from the fatal touch of materialism. In portraying Billy, Arun Joshi seems to be a bit influenced by the life Mahatma Buddha. Billy's transformation under a *saal* tree, during the tribal dance, seems to be similar to Buddha's attainment of *Bodha* or knowledge under the *peepal* tree at Gaya. Other similar aspects can also be noticed. Buddha belongs to a royal family and Billy belongs to an aristocratic family. When Buddha renounces the world, he is married and blessed with a child and in the same way Billy, when he leaves this so-called civilized society, is married and has a beautiful child. Both of them are searching for their identity and craving for self-realization and the meaning of their existence in this world. They leave their houses for seeking answers to so many questions arising in their restless and querying minds. Thus, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* very beautifully deals with the theme of man's restlessness in the modern materialistic world. The crisis of

human and cultural values in the contemporary civilized upper class Indian society, in particular, and the modern industrial and commercial world, in general, have been artistically presented by the novelist. In the novel Arun Joshi deals with the chaotic state of human mind in the modernized and complex world. He presents the conflict between the civilized norms of the materialistic society and the anti-materialistic human self.

This novel is primarily an account of the soul's quest for integration and its spiritual commitment. Joshi's depiction of the interior recesses of human soul, his preoccupation with the individual-self and psychological treatment of grief, suffering, rootlessness and loneliness, and further, his use of the technique of self-introspection has gained him ground as a mature artist. The novelist presents the upper-crust of Indian society turning to be materialistic with spiritual shallowness and imitating the western culture blindly forgetting its traditional values and beliefs. The novel seems to be "a severe indictment of the meaningless existence, mechanization, urbanization, discontent changing values and spiritual uprootedness of the society in the modern civilization." (Bhatnagar, 64) In the novel, the protagonist, Billy Biswas, longs for going deep into the human life of the unsophisticated society, unintruded by the modern civilization. His soul is aching to come out of this artificiality of the surrounding. Billy finds himself misfit in the modernized society and he is aware of the incessant enchantment from the primitive world. He feels uneasy in the artificial environment of so-called cultural America. He craves for a simple society, untouched by any kind of make-up from outside. On reaching India Billy marks no difference between the social atmosphere of India and that which he has left in America. It seems merely a change of theatres the show being the same. Despite getting a permanent job in a reputed institution Billy's inner-self gets no satisfaction. He finds the upper-crust of Indian society, which he belongs to, as devoid of spirituality and emotions as materialistic America. Here, people are indulged in imitating the long-forsaken norms of the west. Billy's inner-self becomes a battlefield of conflicting forces, the one being the money centric society and the other being Billy's spiritual quest triggered by primitive passions.

Joshi projects Billy's disappearance into the *saal* forests of the Maikala Hills in central India to present his reluctance to the materialistic sophisticated society. Billy's abrupt disappearance is not the result of an instinctively sudden decision but the background has already been prepared. His intentions to escape into the simple society of genuine emotions from the hypocrite Anglicized materialistic society are confirmed through his letters written to Tuula, who, when she comes to know about Billy's disappearance, sends these letters to Romi hoping if they can provide some help in

conducting the search. The first excerpt discloses his feeling of being an outsider in the materialistic civilized world:

The curious feeling trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the
wilderness of the marts of the Big City and not the other way round. (Joshi, 69)

In the next two letters Billy despises the materialistic upper-crust of Indian society:

I see a room full of finely dressed men and women seated on downy
sofas and while I am looking at them...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 the civilized men do? (Joshi, 69)

Here, Arun Joshi seems to represent the Wordsworthian observation of the practical life of modern man who is in the grip of material tendency:

The world is too much with us; late and soon
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers:
Little we see in Nature that is ours; (Wordsworth, 299)

In fact, Billy does not renounce civilization, but he condemns the upper-class Indian society aping the emotionally dehydrated and spiritually barren western society. In an interview with Purabi Banerjee, Joshi says:

Tribals are very civilized according to mine and Billy Biswas's understanding. It is
the post independence pseudo-western values that he rejects. (Ghosh, 76)

On his sudden reappearance before Romi after ten years Billy seems to be completely indifferent to the activities of the world outside the forest, even the news of his mother's death does not move him and he receives it calmly. Telling about Billy's indifference Romi says:

Billy was woefully out of touch with what had been happening in the country,

leave alone in the world. He listened, however, with attention just as I might have

listened to the stories of a primitive tribe. (Joshi, 79)

Billy is completely fed up with this materialistic world and feels itched to return to primitivism. As he comes for the first time in contact with Bilasia, an embodiment of nature and anti-materialism, Billy's unsophisticated and anti-materialistic inner-self feels an irresistible pull to the primitive world. He seems to have been forgetful of his present identity as a civilized man. He feels:

It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of

Supreme Court judge, husband of Meena Biswas and father of a handsome child; (Joshi, 88)

All the phenomena of nature, flora and fauna seem to be waiting for him and calling him to join them:

Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man.

Come. We have waited for you...come, come, come, come.... This is all there on

earth.... You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your

destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come.

Take us until you have your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night. (Joshi, 88)

As a result he undergoes a deep metamorphosis and "layer upon layer (is) peeled off (him) until nothing but (his) primitive-self (is) left..."(Joshi, 88) Billy's innermost primitive-self is so dominating that while giving his students a detailed briefing on the area, they are going to investigate, he has a very strange sensation:

I felt as though I was a tribal myself, that I was one of the primitives to be

investigated and not one of the investigators. I felt that I lived across the river

in that hut by the hill and I had crossed the river to meet these strangers who were

interested in my people. (Joshi, 94)

A conflict between modern and primitive forces goes on in the mind of Billy and ultimately it is the primitive force that wins. On reaching among the primitive people Billy unconsciously behave like a tribesman. Like the tribal folk he too, begins to wait for the rising of the moon. But earlier the case was different, Romi observes:

Earlier, he had waited for degrees, for lectures, for money, for security, for a middle class marriage, for the welfare of his child, for preserving the dignity of his family, for being just, for being well dressed, and for being normal and all those things that civilized men count as their duty or the foundations of their happiness or both. (Joshi, 99)

The novelist, here, seems to show contrast between reactions of the same man in two distinct worlds. When he is in the so-called civilized world, he thinks about worldly things, while the same man in the tribal world waits for the natural phenomenon. Thus, while sitting in the shade of a *saal* tree Billy Biswas, a refugee among the tribesman, undergoes his final metamorphosis. He feels as he is being called continuously, "Come. Come. Too long you have wandered the purlieus of our forbidden city." (Joshi, 102) Romi also observes, "...he asked himself...Why did it take him thirty years to discover this...he had been afraid and foolish, squandering the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization." (Joshi, 102) He further says:

Billy's unconscious self drives him to renounce the monotonous respectability of his high middle-class society and seek his roots in the company of a primitive tribe....Haunted by nature the primitive man in Billy yearns to lead a simple life. (Dhawan, 85)

Billy finds his missing-self in his union with Bilasia. It is during these moments of ecstasy when he suddenly discovers "that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of million others." (Joshi, 103) Bilasia represents that primitive force which has been calling Billy constantly "night after night, year after year." (Joshi, 103)

Billy's desire to run into the primitive society is not the destination of his spiritual quest for perfection but it is merely a way through which he has to reach his spiritual height. He does not get even in this desired world of his a feeling of complete satisfaction. He frankly tells Romi:

Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. Of course, I realized it only *after* I ran away. I realized then that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else...something like (God). (Joshi, 136)

He longs for the heights of divinity and it is for this purpose that he comes to the forest as the seers and saints in Indian mythology would come to the forests and hills to realize and satisfy their own craving-selves and to gain spirituality. Here, Arun Joshi seems to present an idea that it is only through the anti-materialistic way of life that man can discover his spiritual identity and feel real pleasure. The materialistic way of life may provide all the sophisticated facilities but not the inner peace and satisfaction and these are the things Billy has been constantly searching for in the primitive world. After joining the tribal land Billy is unwilling to establish any link with the sophisticated world. He does not want to go back to the phoney society of the so-called civilized people, whose main concern is the material gain with the least consideration of genuine emotions and spirituality. That is why Billy asks Romi not to disclose the fact of his being alive before the world lying outside the forest. In case the secret is disclosed, Billy says, "There could be all sorts of complications...I am sure the civilized folks in Delhi will immediately try to reclaim me.... And that could be dangerous." (Joshi, 108) He does not want to go back to the society in Delhi because he is fed up with "the superficiality, the sense of values... of the so-called upper-classes." (Joshi, 128) In fact, in the form of Billy Biswas Arun Joshi creates his own self presenting his own analysis of the moods and manners of the people belonging to this so-called modern world:

I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty year old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud-mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming there little adulteries. (Joshi, 128)

In the above extract the words and phrases like "pompous", "mechanically mouth ideas", "American movie", and "wretched restaurants" indicate his reluctance to the modern Indian life following the western norms of civilization, which he finds in the so-called sophisticated Anglicized society of Meena. Arun Joshi has presented primitive Bilasia as a sharp contrast to modern, sophisticated Meena Biswas, whose own self is in the grip of this materialistic money-minded society. When Romi informs Billy about Meena running a boutique, Billy comments, "I can't imagine Meena doing something that did not make money." (Joshi, 79) That is the thing that disappoints Billy and he takes turn to Bilasia seems to be Indian counterpart of his Swedish girl-friend Juula Lindgren, who like the primitives has no attraction for money. He is attracted towards her because of her humane attitude. He tells Romi, "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.” (Joshi, 126)

With the death of Billy by a stray bullet, Arun Joshi tries to suggest his deep reluctance to the modernized sophisticated society. Billy, like O’ Neill’s Yank in *The Hairy Ape*, embraces death but is not ready to return back to the bloody phoney society of the “bastards”. (Joshi, 167) Joshi seems to suggest that it is the anti-materialistic way of life lived by the primitive people, and not the materialistic trend of living, practised by the so-called civilized people, that gives eternal pleasure and inner peace to the restless soul of man.

In the novel a sense of surfeit regarding the complex incoherent westernized world seems to overwhelm the psyche of the novelist. His deep disgust comes to surface without any reservation when he out pours his disdain for the modern society. Billy’s observation about his father that, “He thinks man is governed by only engineering and law and nothing else...” (Joshi, 25) and his calling Mr. Chatterjee as “The bloody old phoney” (Joshi, 35) show how misfit and uncomfortable he feels in this incoherent and meaningless world where people are pursuing their enthusiasm. He further observes, “What need would there be of psychiatrists, research foundations, learned societies, great scholars, scientists, ministerial advisers, ambassadors, generals, had the world not initially been hung on this peg of money.” (Joshi, 69-70) Here, the novelist seems to have been swept by the strong wave of anger against the spiritual vacuity that has doomed the human society to the extent of mechanized beings. In his emotional sweep the novelist has been betrayed by fancy in promoting the love for primitive world discarding all else pertaining to the progress of civilized world. But this idea does not seem to be practical in the general welfare of mankind because such ideas hamper the growth and development of all the activities related to human welfare.

To sum up, Arun Joshi has reasonably advocated and artistically presented the anti-materialistic approach to life in his *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. No doubt, all the mundane pleasures are satisfied, all the physical needs are fulfilled by material gain. But what about soul? It cries for its own due. Joshi responds to the desperate call of the unheeded soul, and through his novel seems to give a message to the worldly beings to have an ear to soul, and to follow the path indicated by it. This will, no doubt, lead the follower to the realm where he is destined to feel genuine peace and perfection sprouting extreme pleasure, and feeling himself on the verge of spirituality.

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