

Alienation from Civilization: Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

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Abstract

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas by the Arun Joshi is about the protagonist's alienation from the civilization and his flight into the primitive society. Though born and brought up in comfort and affluence, his awareness of the deeper layers of his personality make him alienated from the superficial reality of life. The novel reveals the crisis of the protagonist Billy Biswas who has disgust and hatred for the money crazy civilization and love for the most natural and free tribal life.

Keywords: Existentialism, Alienation, Absurdity, Anthropological expeditions, Buddhism and Hindu Philosophy, Siddhartha's Renunciation.

Introduction

Arun Joshi is one of the greatest novelists of Indian Writing in English in 1970s and 80s. He has contributed five novels and one short story to the Indian English Literature. *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and The River* (1990) and a collection of short stories entitled *The Survivor* (1975)

This Paper attempts to present Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as an existential novel. He is concerned with the existential states of alienation, absurdity, loneliness and selfishness of civilization. If in 'The Foreigner' his first novel, the crisis of identity arises out of a conflict between three different cultures. In 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas', it is a conflict between civilization and the primitive life and between art and nature.

The *Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is about a mythical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away. As Arun Joshi himself points out "The *Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is primarily concerned with religious issues- The problem of an essentially Hindu mind"¹. Further the novelist himself being an upper-class Hindu has setup this story in the traditional Hindu society. Most of his characters in the novel are seeking some sort of spirituality and a philosophical view of life.

Billy Biswas, the only son of a Supreme court Judge is sent to school in England and further to America to study engineering, on his arrival in New York he takes up his lodging in the outskirts in Harlem famous for Slums, because White America is much too civilized for him. Even on his return to India he could not feel very much happy at home.

He does not find the meaning of life either in white America or in the upper class of Indian society. According to Billy the white America was much too civilized. Hence, he has decided to stay in the outskirts of an American city, this itself shows Billy is alienated from the civilization. Instead of studying Engineering he finishes his Doctoral degree in Anthropology.

He has enough materials, wealth, friends and money, his father was an ambassador and has everything that the civilization could give his son. Billy has been married to a beautiful and well educated Meena. But all there would not please his inner cravings or fulfil the emptiness of his soul. The tired, frustrated and empty life of civilization makes Billy alienated from it and flee into the primitive society.

During his anthropological expeditions Billy finds himself in Satpura Hills and vanishes there in order to know the meaning of life and human relationships. As R.S Pathak remarks "Billy who is in search of a human world of emotional fullness – a world of meaningful relatedness"², ultimately accepts the beauty of simple tribal life, their

dance and drums and sexual independence as something natural.

Billy's aversion to the people and their civilization is reflected in the following extract from his letters written to Linda at different times.

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 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 do the civilization do?

It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life, why else this constant luring of reality? Who am I? who are my parents? My wife? My child.....? I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together (96-97)

These letters show his concern for civilization, society, individuals and also himself. The ways of the sophisticated upper-class society seem to Billy in no way different from those of a kennel of dogs "yawing or snuggling against each other" His pinpointing several weakness, hypocrisy and superficiality also show how much he has been alienated from all that is around him.

The product of this bloody old phony and materialistic civilization disappears him even more. His frequent change of beloved is really a search for a true partner. His marriage with Meena Chatterjee a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant, is an impulse action. Perhaps Billy thinks Meena's bonds will be strong enough to chain up his split personality, but in reality, Billy does not find in her a good partner. Meena is worldly wise and is a product of the money machine culture. She wants nothing but money and glamour which Billy hates. She neither understands Billy nor establishes any communication with him. Meena and Billy are not made for each other "Communication between us was reduced to zero"³(p 186). Thus, Billy is not only alienated from his self and society but also alienated sexually in his marriage.

Consequently, Billy leaves this world of the so-called civilized men in search of a place where he is not treated as an outcast, not culturally uprooted, socially isolated and self-estranged. According to SK Sharma, Billy rejects "The

post-Independence pseudo western values"⁴ and reaches a place where nobody is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. It is a place where friends 'can die for each other' (110). It is in such a world that Billy is able to discover himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of million others.'(p140)

Joshi has partly used the theme of Hinduism because he felt Hinduism too is a largely existential – oriented philosophy which attached great importance to the right way to live. In this novel the protagonist not only moves from social control to individual freedom but also, he moves from social corruption to spiritual purity.

Besides, the theme of existentialism and Hinduism Joshi has also brought out the theme of Buddhism. While existentialism manifests itself in the novel in terms of the alienation of the protagonist and his experience of absurdity, the influence of Buddhism can be seen in terms of detachment and loneliness of the protagonist who is detached from his parents, wife and a child in order to seek the meaning of life. Naturally one is reminded of king Siddhartha's renunciation of his wife and son in order to find enlightenment in life. Meenakshi Mukherjee has remarked that "Renunciation or alienation has always been Indian ideal life."⁵ Like all ideals it is a difficult condition attainable only by a few.

The words in the title of the novel, 'The Strange' and 'Case' have thematic significance. Billy's case is both Strange and not so strange either. It is strange because in a world where everybody is greedy about material, comfort. Billy Biswas the American educated engineer anthropologist and a member of the sophisticated upper strata of the Delhi Society opt out of civilization for the primitive life. But in another sense, it is not so strange either for many people in the past in India had felt similarly frustrated with civilization and had opted out.

Thus, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a study in the total alienation of its protagonist Billy Biswas from the modern Indian bourgeois Society.

References

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