

## THE THEME OF ANXIETY AND ALIENATION IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

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*"A most unusual novel. The events narrated would be hard to believe,  
were they not related in such a matter of fact, down to earth fashion."*

- *The Hindu*

### Abstract

Today, The Indo-English Fiction has finally created its own standing at the international level. Contemporary Indian fiction in English is multi-dimensional. It has spread in several directions dealing with racial prejudices, economic disparity and tribal violence to domestic and material problems. But one of the most prominent and conspicuous traits of the Indian English fiction of our time is the theme of alienation. Arun Joshi is a novelist writing in a contemporary context. His novels are structured in the native socio-cultural situation. His novels are concerned with the moral and spiritual problems of contemporary Indians. Joshi claims to have written his novels to reveal that mysterious underworld which is the human soul. His second novel **The Strange case of Billy Biswas**, is concerned with the crisis of self, the problem of identity, and the quest for fulfilment. It develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than the treatment meted out in his first novel, **The Foreigner**. The novel is narrated from the witness.... narrator's point of view. Romesh Sahai, known as Romi, is an intimate friend of Biswas(Bimal Biswas), is the narrator of this story. Romi meets Billy while searching for accommodation in New York. Billy offers to share with him his apartment in Harlem, the black ghetto in America. Billy likes his place because he finds it "the most human". They live together and develop an unusual friendship which lasts till the end. Billy feels choked in the sophisticated and phoney atmosphere of the civilised society. So he opts out of the modern world. He retreats from his systematised, and civilised life to the primitive way of Bilasia. He madly falls in love with Bilasia, an Adivasi girl. She is the primitive force. Billy is the archetypal man who finds solace and comfort in Bilasia. His leaving the civilised world gives him an opportunity to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of life for which he has a longing since his school days. Joshi unravels the facets or crisis in modern man's life. The self imposed alienation from the phony civilisation enables him to live with Adivasis. The simple tribals believe

that Billy is endowed with mysterious supernatural powers. Billy again visits Romi after a few days and cures his wife Situ's chronic migraine with some herbs. Romi promises not to disclose his whereabouts to anyone. But Romi's wife Situ tells Billy's wife and father that Billy is alive. During one of the raids on tribals a constable is speared to death by Billy. This irritates Mr. Rele, the superintendent of police, is bent upon nabbing the culprit dead or alive, despite the collector Romi's best efforts to avoid the tragedy. The protagonist ultimately has to pay price with his wife for not conforming to the norms of the so called civilised society.

Literature is a mirror and interpretation of life. It relies on imagination, which is moulded in the frames of reality and vice-versa. A writer is known for picking up things from the socio-cultural milieu. The small unnoticeable matters are thought upon, elaborated and then presented in a new light with the free play of imagination. Literature is essentially configuration of human reality assuming diverse forms. Indian fiction in English has also revealed deep concern with the changing facets of Indian life and reality. Arun Joshi has been an outstanding Indian English novelist, who has impressed us immensely with his thoughtful utterances, masterly treatment of themes, and skilful weaving of fictional techniques. Joshi has published merely five novels and a collection of short stories to date, but that is enough to immortalize him in the annals of Indian English fiction. Joshi a writer by chance and management consultant by training and profession has published five novels so far.....

*The Foreigner (1968)*  
*The Strange case of Billy Biswas (1971)*  
*The Apprentice (1974)*  
*The Last Labyrinth (1981)*  
*The City and The River (1990)*

His novels have an existential flavour. He has been influenced by *The Bhagavadgita* and Mahatma Gandhi. He has also been influenced by creative writers and philosophers like Kier Keggard, Camus, Sartre, and Kafka. As an intellectual novelist, he locates the real self beneath the apparent tip of an Ice-berg. His creative consciousness, therefore is invariably preoccupied with the intricate synthesis of both the intrinsic and intricate synthesis of human life. Joshi has an articulate voice. He narrates the inner crisis and consciousness of an individual. Joshi emerges as a mature craftsmen endowed with remarkable command over style and technique in his second novel *The Strange case of Billy Biswas*. Billy, the protagonist of the novel is an engineer and an anthropologist. He comes of a very high family. He belongs to the upper crust of Indian society. His grandfather had been the Prime Minister of a famous princely state in Orissa. Billy's father is a judge of India's Supreme-court. He had also been the Indian ambassador to a foreign country. Billy had his education in Britain and America. Billy is alienated and estranged from upper class Delhi society. He has an urge for primitive life like Mathew Arnold's "Scholar Gipsy". The story of the novel dangles between New Delhi and Maikala hills. It enacts a mild, confrontation between the primitive and the civilised. Billy's father expects him to take up engineering as a career but Billy goes to America for a degree in engineering but opts for anthropology and earns a Ph.D. degree because of his first love for this subject. He appears to be basically an Anthropologist and studies deeply the tribal attitudes and

customs. Billy craves for spiritual anchorage as he suffers from discontent, a sense of meaninglessness in life and constant blurring of reality. Billy is haunted by the vision that has also haunted the seers, the mystics and the visionaries in all the ages throughout the world. It is as good as Siddhartha's renunciation of family and kingship. The strange case records an existential protest against superficial, materialistic and imitative western culture. Billy has a friend called Romi. He is so affectionate to Billy. Billy has little interest in the Phoney, hot shot and sordid modern civilization. He is so much interested in the exploitation of his inner being. Romi rightly remarks:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretension, but in those dark mossy Labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake (p.8)

Billy is an extraordinary young man who dares to break the boundaries of the civilised society to which he belongs by birth and finds entry into tribal society to which he belongs by his temperament. The novel seeks to provide an alternative to the futile cry of the sensitive individual in the modern world. Romi, the narrator voices this cry in this manner:

I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile. If in spite of this, I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understood him as it is on account of a deep unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions. (p.7)

The novel begins with the song that is very popular among the Bills of the Satpura hills. The narrator quotes that song to introduce us to the tribal world where the mountains and rivers are worshipped as the gods and goddesses. Billy is drawn to this world despite his birth and upbringing in a sophisticated society of a metropolitan city like Delhi. When Billy was only fourteen he went to Bhubaneshwar and visited konark. One night he, along with uncle's aid went to the tribal people. His chauffeur wanted to enjoy life, but Billy sat there and saw the tribals dance, drink and sing and make love. A strange situation overtook him. Billy remains restless whenever he hears a drum beating or listens to folk music, he is transported to a different world. Gradually his interest in the primitive man increased. It appears that his entire life was organised for them. It is in born for him, this is why in New York he chooses to live in a place where Negroes live. Billy stays in Harlem an abode of American aborigines, instead of Manhattan. Billy at times does such crazy things which betray a streak of primitivism in him. At a music party in George's apartment, Billy all of a sudden starts playing on a drum at a feverish pitch which attracted everyone. Billy starts teaching anthropology at Delhi University. He marries Meena, a sophisticated and beautiful Bengali girl, who tries her best to understand him but his interest in the wild disturbs her. Billy has a dislike for an organised life. He is filled with virulent hatred for the systematised civilised life which aggravates his problem of identity instead of resolving it. He thinks that it is a degenerate society that has ruthlessly topsyturvied age old traditions and cherished belief's and values. Joshi critically examines the degeneration of high society. Billy favours without ostentations. A life which has no cravings for money or

ambition, Billy likes. Tuula Lindgren, Billy's Swedish girlfriend and Bilasia, his tribal wife represent this type of life in the novel. Billy's friend Romi returns to India when his father dies and joins I.A.S. Billy also comes back and gets a teaching job in the department of Anthropology at Delhi University. For his intense interest in Anthropology he undertakes a number of expeditions for investigations of primitive. Billy's wife Meena Chatterjee tries to get rid of his deeply rooted obsession for a primitive pilgrim. She tries to understand him for his best cure, but Billy's interest in the wild life continues to overtake him. He is sick of the culture out of which he sprang. His predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality.... split between 'primitive' and 'civilised'. Tuula Lindgren who is getting advanced training in psychiatric social work at Columbia gives it an expression when she ruminates. Billy is fed up with the modern culture. He argues:

I know what got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am, of course, talking mainly of the so called upper classes. I did not get to know the others. 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 no better than mechanically mouth ideas the vest abandoned a generation ago.....(p.128)

Billy's love for primitive life is not sudden. It is not merely a fascination, but a search for identity. He always felt drawn towards liberal life which he supposed to have answered to his quest for the purpose of his life. His interest in tribals intensifies with the passage of time. Instead of sparing time for his wife and son he devotes a larger part of his time to the library studying the books on Anthropology. This leads to his strained relationship with his wife. His wife Meena rightfully impedes his efforts to satisfy his interest in tribals. As a result, inner conflict is born in his mind as to whether he should eschew his wife, his small son and aged parents and join the tribal people or not. Purposefully he arranges a tour to the Maikala hills near Jabalpur. He visits a tribal village where he meets Dhunia, an influential tribal. Bilasia is his niece. At first sight, Billy falls in love with her. His sensibility gets almost blunted. His married life turns into a miserable failure. Billy chooses the company of Bilasia. He is madly in love with her. He renounced high middle class society and seeks his routes in the company of tribals. Like all the tribals, Billy is a fatalist. He believes that fate plays a very crucial role in the life of man. He is of the belief that the divine favour that one can be achieved through worship performed not in man-made temples but in god-made temples is fate. His departure from the civilised world, in the words of doctor R.S.Pathak:

*Is not an escape from the hard realities of like, but an escape into what he considers to be real life far from the madding crowd and sordid meaningless existence in the civilised world.*<sup>1</sup>

Billy's true companion in the tribal world is Bilasia whom he marries soon after joining the tribal society. She is introduced to us in the latter half of the novel as a divorced tribal lady who fascinates Billy by her beauty and simplicity in the first meeting. She is head and shoulders above other characters except Billy to whom she is the very purpose of his life. the moments he spent while waiting for his first meeting with her were most crucial moments of his life. As he put himself:

*It was as though, during that half hour it was not Bilasia I had been waiting for, but my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life(p.83)*

In Bilasia, he finds the right life partner who can be proper medium to complete his search. His meeting from Meena to Rima and Rima to Bilasia is his three dimensional development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. His journey ends when he finds his destination in Bilasia. She is not only sexually attractive but also captivating as the primeval force. It is because of this pulls and visions that Billy decides to escape into Satpura Hills. His escape is not an escape from the realities of life but an escape into real life. The dense and dark forest holds forth immense promise of a primitive force that can give him satisfaction. The mysterious disappearance the son of a judge takes place behind the screen of the day to day life. Now Billy is not only recognised as the king of that part of Chattisgarh but is also treated as endowed with many divine gifts. He cured Situ's migraine who the doctors of the civilised world could not do for almost ten years. He predicts rains when there is no sign of relief from the scorching sun. He has unfathomed knowledge. These are only stray examples of the knowledge possessed by Billy. This is just like the tip of an Ice berg of knowledge. He is considered as the king of the tribal world. Joshi, a great psychological novelist withdraws from outer reality and delves deep into inner recesses of human heart:

*He explores human pains and predicaments, sense and sensibility.<sup>2</sup>*

Joshi's protagonists suffer from existential anguish, feeling of alienation, estrangement from the self and lack of belongingness. Romi, the narrator of this story and a friend of Billy is posted as a collector in a district of central India(Madhya Pradesh). Once on a tour of the Maikala hills, Romi sees Billy wearing a loin cloth and nothing else. He takes him to his bungalow and spends the whole day and night in his company listening to the story about his life after disappearance. He comes to know that Billy is thoroughly tribalised. He wears a loin cloth and grows beard. He is lead to the tribal uninhibited drinking, dancing and the open orgiastic love-making. With a skilful weight of the details, Joshi manages to explore the protagonist's psychological instincts. Billy's enigmatic behaviour is understood in terms of certain psychological and anthropological facts at work with reference to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. Arun Joshi tries hard to tackle the dilemma of the evolution of the human personality in an alien world. He finds that self alienation can affect an individual worse than social alienation and this is a great obstacle in the path of an individual's mental and psychic development. Alienation, defined in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is as follows:

*Alienation is the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody. It is a condition of the mind.<sup>3</sup>*

Billy cures Romi's wife Situ of her agonising chronic migraine by giving her some herb to smell and touching her with a metallic rod. This incident costs Billy his life and gives the story a tragic end. Romi promises not to disclose his whereabouts to any one but his wife, Situ tells Billy's wife and father that he is alive. On his father's persuasion a thorough search is made to comb Billy out. Despite all the possible efforts of Billy, Dhunia and Romi, the news of Billy's whereabouts does not remain hidden from the civilized world. Romi's wife Situ, plays a very crucial role in the disclosure of this news. Situ conveys this fact to Meera who along with her father-in-law reaches Romi's residence with the desperate hope to meet her lost husband. But, to her dismay, Romi refuses to divulge any information about Billy as he is bound by his promise. Mr.Biswas approached the Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh for putting the administrative pressure on Romi. Purposefully Mr.Biswas narrates the entire the episode which drives the Chief Secretary to sympathize with him. Out of sympathy, the Chief Secretary directs his subordinate to help the old man in search of his lost son. The Chief warns his

subordinate to do this immediately. Romi recollected the advice given by Mr.Biswas at the time of his joining the civil services: `

*'Don't ever quarrel with your boss, whatever the provocation,' he exhorted. 'And, secondly let the police get an upper hand in a time of crisis. Remember these, and you will never have trouble.'* (p.41)

This advice changes Romi's mindset. He sends Mr.Rele, the Superintendent of Police to catch hold of Billy. Mr.Rele leaves for Dhunia's village. He orders the soldiers to raid the entire village and forest surrounding it to round up Billy. The aim of this raid is not to kill Billy. The entire authority of the government is brought against Biswas, who by his act of rebellion, has put the civilized society to shame. The search leads to the final tragedy. Billy, who spears down a police constable in order to wrench his freedom, is shot dead. Despite the Collector Romi's best efforts to avoid the tragedy, Billy is shot dead by a Havildar. Romi feels alarmed:

*'Billy,' I cried, 'Billy.'*  
*He opened his fast-glazing eyes for a moment and appeared to look at me.*  
*'you bastards,' he said hoarsely. Then he died.* (p.167)

This is final verdict of Billy to the civilized society which is not natural but bastardly and which has put an end to his quest. Only a handful of ash in a mud pot of Billy reaches the civilized world. Joshi, in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* replaces Billy with Romi as narrator. Romi's function is to act in disguise as it is subjective, spiritual autobiographical journey of a man like Bimal Biswas. Joshi gives Romi some distance from the real events. In this novel the first person narration is interspersed with a variety of introspection, memory, monologue and then flashback. K.R.S.Iyengar aptly remarks:

*In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness to hapless, rootless people a stage further, and has revealed to our gaze new gas-chambers of self-forged misery.*<sup>4</sup>

Billy's predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality. In the title of the novel, the words 'strange' and 'case' have thematic significance. Billy's case is strange because in the naturalistic world where everybody is mad after civilization and its comforts, he being a professor at a renowned university, the America-educated anthropological and a member of the sophisticated class of Delhi, opts for the primitive life of the tribals. Billy's case also a strange one because his predicament is concerned with the inner psyche and "those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul"

## Notes

1. Pathak, R.S. "Quest for meaning in Arun Joshi's novel" in R.K. Dhawan(ed.), *The Novels of Arun Joshi*. New Delhi: Classical publishing House, 1992.
2. Pramod Kumar Singh, *Major Indo-English Novelists and Novels* (Jaipur: Sublime publications) p.102
3. Cuddon J.A.; *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd;1987).
4. Iyengar, K.R.Srinivasa. *Indian Writing in English*. (New Delhi: Sterling publishers, Pvt.Ltd.1985) p.514.