

QUEST FOR SPIRITUAL TRANQUILITY IN ARUN JOSHI'S THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

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The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a study of the total alienation of its protagonist Billy Biswas from the modern bourgeois society of India. Arun Joshi's novel is meant to be the reader's novel in every meaning of the term. In this novel Arun Joshi seems to be mediating between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, between the two distinct cultures – the sophisticated and the primitive. It is indeed a strikingly strange novel which stands as a class by itself. The novel presents the barren and imperfect modern civilized society contrasted with the fertile and perfect primitive society. It presents a viable alternative to the futile cry of the sensitive individual in the modern world and accounting for the behavior of people like Billy. The novel is almost entirely devoted to the hero's experiences in the tribal world.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, is narrated from the witness-narrator's point of view. The narrator in this novel is Romesh Sahai(Romi), a friend of the protagonist Billy whom he meets as a student in New York. Romi performs the task as an involved friend and of a detached narrator. Romi become more and more involved as the novel progresses, he follows the tale to the end. Romi disclaims in the beginning of the narrative that he has understood Billy:

As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is even more futile. If insipite 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 and unrelkieved 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. (7)

The novel is thematically centred on motifs like alienation, friendship and quest for spiritual tranquility. But mainly, it is the story of Bimal Biswas and reads like a suspense novel. In this novel Joshi highlights Billy's restlessness in this complacent modern society and how he quits the sophisticated life in quest of spiritual tranquility. Billy's life may be divided into two phases – a phase of spiritual disillusion and a phase of spiritual tranquility. Billy Biswas is altogether a man of different mould. He has unusually sharp eyes, a sense of premonition, intuition and love for the primitive life. Romi narrates the story of Billy's life in New York and Delhi from his own observations. He is soon impressed by Billy's "Poise without pose: (11) and

“almost inhumanly sharp eyes” (43). Romi, the Collector friend of Billy describes at the very outset that Billy belongs to the “upper upper crust of Indian Society.”

The central character are Billy Biswas, a teacher of Anthropology in Delhi University and his Collector friend Romesh Sahai, the narrator who meets Billy at Columbia. Billy’s justification for living in the worst slums of Harlem is that “White America is too civilized for him.” (9) As he has an aversion to the civilized world, he has his apartment in the slums of New York City. Billy seems to be a misfit even in the “heart of Delhi’s Smart Society” (7), because he has strong streak of primitivism. Both friends are educated in the U.S.A. and develop an unusual friendship which lasts till the end.

Billy is man of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsessions. He belongs to a rich venerable family, his father being a judge of India’s Supreme Court. His father expects him to take Engineering, but he earns his Ph.D in Anthropology because that is his first love. Billy is an Anthropologist and studies deeply the tribal attitudes and customs. In fact his whole life is organized “around his interest in the primitive man” (14). At a party in a friend’s apartment in a music session at midnight, Billy’s playing of a pair of bongo drums has something primitive about it and Romi and others feel “the mesmeric pull that held them by its sheer vitality” (21). Later in the tribal abode Dhunia, the tribal chief too can sense the extraordinary rhythm of Billy’s drumming which is a powerful medium of expression of the tribal’s. Billy’s Swedish girl friend, Tuula Lindgren, is “the second person who had any clue to what went on in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas” (19). She understands Billy’s interest in the primitive. As she tells Romi: “Billy feels something inside him, but he is not sure . . . A great force, urkraft . . . a primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it . . . but it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode any time” (23). After their studies they settle down in India. In order to cure his obsession for the primitive and to settle down in life, Billy decides to get married. He hopes that marriage would restrain him. However, his marriage with Meena is a not a success. She tries her best to understand Billy but his interest in the wild exasperates her. In a bid to seek communion with the primitive world, Billy opts out of the modern world.

From all these, it is quite evident that Billy has a secret corner. The primitive force triggers off his creative energy. He has a terrible inward longing for primitivism because still he feels awfully discontented with his life in this stilted civilization. He is alienated from his wife and child. He cannot identify himself with the society of which he is a product.

He is fascinated by the primeval beauty of the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh which he visits. During the Anthropological expedition with his students, Billy all of a sudden vanishes from the face of the earth into the Saal forests of the Mailala hills. To Billy: “It is not an escape from the realities of life but an escape into real life from the sordid, meaningless existence in the so-called civilized world” (99). Bhatnagar is of the opinion that “Biswas renounced this materialistic society and civilization not to be an ascetic but to fulfill all the demands of his self to a perfection of participated joy” (1984:32).

In the second phase of his life Billy reaches the tribal village and becomes one among them. He becomes a typical tribal in decorum, costume, custom and convention. He drinks and dances with them waiting for the rise of the moon. He is one among the Bhils. He is not disillusioned, but exhilarated. Billy had the premonition that he should not go back home. As a refugee from civilization he settles down by the side of a White Cliff called Chandtola. He also falls in love with Dhunia’s niece Bilasia, a tribal beauty and marries her. The dark forests

revitalize him, the huge mountains nourish him and so he leads a life of a tribal with loin cloth. Being the grandson of a Prime Minister of a famous Princely State in Orissa and the son of a judge of the Supreme Court, it is not an easy joke to lead the life of a tribal, devoid of all comforts. He had definitely undergone a “deep metamorphosis”. As Billy is spiritually tranquil in the forest in the company of the tribal’s, his Collector friend favours his transformation into a tribal. He is a refugee from civilization who has undergone the final metamorphosis under a Saal tree just as the Buddha had achieved Nirvana under the Bodhi tree.

Billy explains his mysterious disappearance to Romi: “I had two clear choices. I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to tal decay” (190). And he chooses to respond to the tribal girl Bilasia’s call. When Billy first saw her he fell madly in love with Bilasia who he feels is “the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year” (120). To Billy, she is the very cause of existence. The climactic point of their union is nothing less than a perfect moment of bliss.

Joshi depicts the matchless beauty of Bilasia with an unforgettable lyrical fervor fusing myth and nature so remarkably. With Bilasia, Billy feels, “she had that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people. A figure so graceful and has enormous eyes whose brightness made our pulse quicken” (143). The union with Bilasia makes Billy discovers that bit of himself which he has been searching for all his life and without which his life has been merely a replica of others. As Billy tells the narrator, the secret of this unalloyed happiness in the tribal world is : “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” (146). Thus Billy is entrapped by the charm emanating from her eyes, which are like those of a Chandini Chowk whore. Her sensuality lures Billy. The mysterious glow of the Chandtola peak revives after the idealized union of Billy and Bilasia in the tribal world.

Billy becomes the Mahaprasad of Dhunia, the headman. Dhunia says “he is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound” and “these hills have not seen the like of him since of our kings passed away” (180). Dhunia identifies Billy as the mythical king. Billy says the whole hilly forest appeared to call him to its primitive world. Billy’s is not merely a search for the tribal way of living, he is “seeking something else” (189), and his quest is “the search for truth” (179). Throughout his life he makes a serious effort to seek his identity, but he finds it missing every time. Billy’s renunciation represents his reaction to the so-called sophisticated way of life.

Billy makes his reappearance not for the open world but only in Romi’s presence. As a refugee from civilization, Billy shares the zest and pleasure, worries and agonies of the Bhills. Romi and Billy have a lot of affinity between them. He is the only person from the civilized society who has understood the inner psyche of Billy. Feeling sharply the long absence of his friend, the Collector pours out his feelings: “Where have you been for God’s sake? I thought you had perished in the drought” (143). It is believed that Billy had certain occult powers and regarded as the mythical God. He has the power to heal Romi’s ailing wife from her prolonged illness. The search for Billy revives when Romi’s wife reveals the secret of Billy’s reappearance to his father and wife. But Billy is determined not to lose his spiritual tranquility. Romi flatly refuses to tell the exact where-about of Billy. Billy’s father having no other alternative uses his influence with the Chief Secretary at Bhopal and organizes an extensive search for him.

Tragically enough, in the perilous search, Billy is hunted and shot dead, and only his ashes reach the civilized world. Then Romi’s grief knows no bounds and his suffering is

unbearable. He curses himself for being a puppet in the hands of fate. The tragic death of Billy has churned Romi's mind into a state of remorse.

Tribal life and customs have been fully dealt with in the novel. It is a strong decision taken by Billy. He lived and breathed his last among the tribal's. Ultimately Billy in his quest is successful in achieving spiritual tranquility. Billy goes to the forest and sits under the Saal trees to get his metamorphosis. Though Billy's metamorphosis is different from that of the Buddha, their goals of attaining peace and leaving the disturbing world appear to be similar. According to Iyengar

The strange case proves that there is a little of Billy in all of us, a desire to get away from it all, do something reckless or surrender to some extraordinary obsession (1983:748).

Thus Billy's transformation is progression from the mundane world to the spiritual plane. Ultimately the attempts of the civilized world in the search for Billy become futile since they have not brought Billy but only his ashes even after ten years. From another angle, the novel portrays how a man of extraordinary obsessions is destroyed by his absurd meanderings away from civilization. Through this novel, Arun Joshi satirizes the unsupportable suffocation caused by the modern materialistic society. After the death of Billy, though a late realization, it is assumed that Billy was "one of the numerous man gods of the primitive pantheon" (236). Thus the Strange Case of Billy Biswas is "disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, and its true love" (246).

Work Cited

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