

LEVELS OF LIFE IN ARUN JOSHI'S THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* peeps into the life of Billy, who longs for peace and happiness and so leaves the degraded society of Delhi for the Satpura hills where he explores the different level of life. He lives among the tribals and considers himself a tribal. He traces out that the Delhian society embraces the modern values while the primitive world focuses on the traditional values. His shifting from one level of life to another is his quest for life. He searches for meaning and purpose in life and while doing so he improves his relationships with Self, God, Nature and others.

Key Words: Levels of life, slum life, advanced life, simple life, mystical urge, strange case, traditional values and modern values.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), which is chronologically the second novel of Arun Joshi (1939-1993), shows his study of three different levels of life in the present world depicting mediocre slum life in Harlem in New York, highly advanced life in Delhi and subsistence level of life in the Maikala Hills in Satpura region. The depiction of these three levels of life reveals his explorations of three different worlds in the fiction through the strange case of Billy Biswas.

The case of Billy Biswas is strange because Billy has strange mind and appearance. His mind is motivated by "a great force, *urkraft*, ...a primitive force" (*The Strange Case* 18), which unravels his mystical urge and his strange behaviour, and his "dark, inscrutable, unsmiling" (16) eyes and his grinning give a peculiar look to his mystic personality. His case is also strange to the point of view of the phony society as his extra-ordinary activities and rebellion to its value-system gags the mouths of its skeptic and materialistic people with utter amazement and perplexity. Moreover, his great choice of leaving the flossy society for the primitive world in quest for meaning of life is also the outcome of his strangeness. His task is revolutionary as D. Premapati observes:

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is likely to sound strange only to such pedestrians as are terribly scared of making choices. The rebels, the dreamers and the visionaries who are the main motive force of history are

the stuff who realize that the price of not making choices is even more terrible (180).

Billy's mystical urge, his strange behaviour, peculiar look and his deep faith in the values of an age old culture and religion depict a continuation of and a development upon the first novel— *The Foreigner*. The second novel continues Sindi's quest for identity and purpose of life in this materialistic, shallow, pretentious and corrupt world, and lengthens it to the deeper exploration through Billy's diversion from the unreceptive and spurious society to the primitive world. The novel is also a severe commentary on the meaningless existence, mental unrest, discontent, debauchery, lust, betrayal and cunning in the modern civilization. It does not merely chronicle the solemn declaration of the hero Billy against "the glossy surfaces of our pretensions", it also manifests "the final resolution of his life" (*The Strange Case* 8) to renounce the hectic and crazy life of the modern world and to adopt the hospitable and happy life of the primitive world. Hence, it is a portrayal of his search for values and total estrangement, "in his turbulent wake" (8), from the "upper-upper crust of Indian society" (9) with its longings for worldly possessions, spiritual barrenness and blind following of the Western ethos in utter negligence of pertinent traditional values and beliefs of India. As Thakur Guruprasad thinks: "*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is yet another variation on the paradigmatic pattern of the doomed existential quest for values in a mad, bad, absurd world" (99).

Billy's estrangement and escape from the grossly materialistic and unfriendly society is the offspring of his mystical urge and his love for human values that compels him to live in "the worst slums of New York City" (a) during his college-days, to renounce his family and well-established life at Delhi and finally to take refuge in Maikala Hills in Central India for spiritual sublimation and simple life. Actually, he is hallucinated by the vision with which the great explorers, the sages and the mystics pass during their turbulent days. He seems to renounce the absurd society in the way the prince Siddharth renounced his family and princedom for the spiritual growth. But, their paths and achievements are different. As Satish Kumar says: "Billy renounced the materialistic society and a life of deceit and hypocrisy to seek the fulfillment of his vision" (220).

The novel unfolds a sort of biography of Billy alias Bimal Biswas by his collector-friend, Romi alias Romesh Sahai, "the witness-narrator" with whom he first meets as a student in New York. Romi performs the task of an involved friend and detached narrator.

Billy Biswas, "engineer, anthropologist, anarchist... and thoroughly crazy, even by Indian standards" (*The Strange Case* 8), from the "upper-upper crust of Indian society" (9) and the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, with a "soft cultivated voice" (10) and "British accent" (10) learnt from a public school in England, is sent to New York, America to study Engineering. On his coming to New York, he decides to dwell in the outskirts of Harlem, "the most human place he could find" (9). Though it is one of the worst slums of America, he resides there because "white America was much too civilized for him" (9). He has left his study of Engineering for Anthropology and is already half-way through his doctoral project in that discipline. That is where he encounters Romi with whom he shares his flat and becomes his dear friend.

The novel contains two parts. The first part describes Billy's life at New York and Delhi and the second part consists of his escape to the Satpura Hills and his life in the company of the primitives till his death. His story runs parallel with the tale of Romi's life. The novel opens with the description of a song popular in the tribe of *Bhils* of the Satpura Hills: "I came a

thousand miles to see your face, O mountain” (*The Strange Case* 7). This song has a mystic note in itself and reveals some mystic power of the mountain that is worshipped by the *Bhils*, who travel a thousand miles to see its face, beauty and divine aura. This song has great importance in their lives as “it is sung both at births and also at the time of funerals” (7). This song also depicts their deep attachment with their traditional values and paganism. In order to have happiness and ensure its continuity, they understand nature and develop an affinity with it. The Nature worship of this tribe has its own charm and piety, which reflects the transformation of Billy Biswas and his rebellion against the modern society.

Romi comes back to India after the death of his father. He appears in the competitive examination of the Indian Civil Service and is selected as an I.A.S. Later on he is married with Situ. On the other hand, Billy also comes back to India after completing his doctoral degree and starts teaching Anthropology at Delhi University. He gets married to Meena Chatterjee. But his life in Delhi is not easy. He feels disgusted with the ‘bloody old phony’ society of Delhi.

Billy’s return to India has a reason. He wants to live in a society, which could grant him internal peace and happiness. Unable to find it in the flossy, indifferent and morally degraded society of Delhi, he sneakily leaves Delhi for the Satpura Hills. “Naturally, Billy left this world of the so-called civilized men in search of a place where he was not treated as an outcast, not culturally uprooted, socially isolated and self-estranged” (Sharma 164). Here, the shift from one level of life to another made by the protagonist is also the shift from one paradigm of value-system to another.

In the Maikala Hills, he is fascinated by Bilasia and simple living of the primitives. Bilasia symbolizes the primitive force and ethos. She enlivens Billy’s soul, which has been deadened by Meena and Reema, and this is made possible only by a perfect union of the two. Bilasia is his ‘*Shakti*’ from her he gets the spiritual power to look after the primitives. Billy finds similar human values in Bilasia, as he studied in the books of Anthropology and hoped for. Now he is happy in spite of meager resources, as he has no high ambition. He lives a simple life, have calm desires and small wishes in the midst of Nature. Billy’s sojourn in the Maikala Hills is the call of Nature, the Black Rock as well as the call of the self, and which are answered properly. Dhunia, his best friend, and other primitives consider the Black Rock as their Master and when he calls, man has to answer his call. So is done by Billy. The reason behind the call of this Rock for Billy is to make him realize his own self, the cause of his birth and the relevance of the primeval life and Nature.

Moreover, this shift in the level of life from the phony society to the tribal world is also a shift in the value-systems of both the levels of life. In this novel, the Delhian society harbors modern values, while the primitive world focuses on traditional values of an age-old society. The novelist presents that difference between these two values-systems of India and their impacts upon the lives of these different societies. This synthetic approach of the novelist towards emerging paradigm of values reveals his deep observation of different levels of life and his pang bulged out due to the deterioration of traditional values due to materialistic and indifferent life. Perhaps this is the reason that the hero Billy leaves Delhi’s smart society and comes in the Maikala Range and lives among the primitives. His presence in this region makes him feel as though he were a tribal himself. He begins to love this primitive world for its geography, the people, their origin, their livelihood and their customs.

The wheel of time has been rolled ten years since the disappearance of Billy Biswas. Romi is now the Collector in one of the districts of central India. The plains of this region have

been ravaged by “a terrible draught” (*The Strange Case* 73). Being the Collector of the district, Romi goes to several places to provide possible assistance to the draught-suffered villagers. He is deeply moved by this great disaster: “From morning to night I bumped along dirt roads strewn with carcasses of dead cattle, cursing my bosses, cursing the gods, baffled by the enormity of it all” (73). He knows very well that the assistance given by the Government to “these luckless crowds of men, women, and children” (74) is insufficient. He feels the pang for them, as he is unable to provide the proper help to them. During these visits Romi also notices traditional values of Indian woman in this part of India. The novelist writes: “The women, their hair matted and clothes reduced to rags, tried, nonetheless, to preserve their modesty and stayed in the back” (74).

One morning Romi visits a hamlet, thirty miles away from the district headquarters. He incidentally meets Billy, who is wearing an old loincloth. Billy is thinner than before and having great vitality. He, with Romi, comes back to Romi’s bungalow. They talk. Here, the novelist touches the mystic note of this region:

Beyond this strip of land lay the jungle, a dark and mysterious shadow whose mystery very few Collectors had unravelled since the race of Collectors began...and around these paths lay the widely scattered villages of India’s primitive people: the *baigas*, the *gonds*, the *pardhans*, and several others” (*The Strange Case* 77).

The primitive terrain has its own cultural, ethical, moral and religious values. Here, people are simple and satisfied. They have homely desires and sturdy socio-cultural ethos. They believe in the supernatural power and have deep faith in Chandtola, a cliff: “No one knows why the cliff has this colour. We, of course, believe it is the work of some supernatural force” (*The Strange Case* 78). Romi also confesses the glow of Chandtola thus: “It was a towering triangular section of rock, dirty white but somehow aglow” (78). During their talk Billy does not reveal any repentance over his running away from Delhi. He shows emotions only twice — first, when he hears about the death of his mother; and secondly, when he comes to know about Rima’s car-accident and her death. He knows that he has seduced her during his sojourn in Bombay and confesses it before Romi in his next visit. When Romi tells him about Meena’s boutique and her making of a lot of money, Billy does not show any surprise because he knows her money-oriented nature very well: “I can believe that. I can’t imagine Meena doing something that did not make money” (79). This comment by Billy unravels his hatred for such a society as gives money the highest value.

Billy’s meeting with Romi after ten years shows full proof of the secret of his disappearance. He does not want this secret to be disclosed through Romi to someone else. So, he asks him for keeping it a secret as he does not want to go back to the phony society of Delhi. As he knows well: “I am sure the civilized folks in Delhi will immediately try to reclaim me once they knew I was alive. And that could be dangerous” (*The Strange Case* 108).

Since he is a priest, he also has some spiritual powers. Billy uses his spiritual powers to cure Situ, the wife of Romi from her migraine. After her recovery, Situ realizes that “something extraordinary had happened” (*The Strange Case* 143). She wants to meet that person who did this extraordinary thing to her. At first, Romi tries to conceal the matter but at last he reveals the truth about Billy and his mystic treatment. She takes the pledge not to disclose the matter to anyone else. But she breaks her promise and informs Meena and her family about the whereabouts of Billy. And this disclosing brings havoc in the life of Billy. The district officials were ordered to search out Billy and to take him back before the Biswases. Rele takes the

responsibility of this task. The strange search takes place. Now Billy's freedom is under threat. Though Romi tries to stop Rele, the S.P. from "this senseless hunt" (157), but Rele does not obey his orders as he has special orders from the Chief Secretary who knows it well that a constable, a cousin of the *havildar*, is speared by Billy accidentally. Meanwhile, Rele and his men begin the search and they move towards the village yard. Billy tries to escape from them. The *havildar* shoots in his leg but a bullet also enters Billy's back and re-emerged near his heart. Before dying, Billy labeled the civilized society with his last words: "You bastards", a remark on the character of the modern man. Then he died.

Billy is a rebel against the modern materialistic, corrupt, shallow and pretentious society. So, it irked him and he could not rest. He left it because he could not make compromise with this social-system, which was morally, ethically and spiritually barren and debased. He has the courage, self-esteem, self-control and confidence and wisdom and vision to choose his own ways of life making shift from one level of life to another, leaving one society for another and adopting one set of values for another in search of meaning and purpose of life. Since he never wanted to become slave to inhuman economic order of the modern world, therefore, he rejected all the dehumanizing ideologies of the present world and dedicated and sacrificed himself to the intense search for values, particularly those related to internal nature of the human person— a search for spirituality and spiritual values. He improved relationships with Self, God, Cosmos, Nature and others. It created a new sense of meaning in him, resulting in reawakening of hope and peace of mind for the further journey of his soul.

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