

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: A Universal Myth of Primitivism

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Arun Joshi is an Indian English novelist who has attempted to grapple with the predicament of modern man. He has created an enviable space for himself in the community of Indian novelist. His main thrust is on the individual psyche of the protagonists imbued with an instinctive urge to define their identity. His heroes plunge into the extremely trying situations and combat with them in their peculiar and distinctive ways. The search for values tosses them from one alternative to another leaving them battered and emaciated. This exploration is not a smooth and easy process and has its own obvious scars and bruises. However the agony of the protagonists culminates in resolving the tension.

Arun Joshi's second novel, 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' is a powerful record of the hot shot, sordid modern culture and an eloquent assertion of the primitive way of life. The novel is divided into two parts, the first one consisting of about hundred pages and the second one of another one hundred and fifty pages. Both these parts may be named as 'The Civilized World' and 'The Primitive World' respectively. These two worlds represent two distinct cultures which these geographical locations embody. The novel reveals to us the falsity of the so-called refinement of the Indian upper class society. Meenakshi Mukherjee opines,

It is a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore to reiterate its elemental concerns. (203)

Arun Joshi has created Billy Biswas as a hero who longs intensively to locate his real self not in the matrix of westernized culture but in the most innocent, most native even anthropological past of Indian culture.

Billy's case has been strange from his very childhood. When he was only fourteen he went to Bhubaneshwar and visited Konark. When he saw tribal dance there, a strange sensation took over him. Billy became restless since that time and whenever he hears a drum beating or listens to the folk music, he is transported to a different world. As a matter of fact, Billy is a stranger to the civilized world, and not to the tribal. The civilized men are estranged to him. He has an intense hatred for them. He says,

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 (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws.(The Strange Case,69)

The imagery of dogs with large teeth and furred paws reveals the hatred of Billy and the character he thinks they bear. He has no love for the modern civilization. Billy feels that civilization is a monster. It is not a civilization, but degradation. He says,

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending - the so called thinkers and philosophers and men like that - they are merely hired to find solution, throw light, as they say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money.(The Strange Case,69)

Billy Bimal Biswas, the only son of a Supreme Court judge is sent to America to study engineering. On his arrival in New York, he takes up his lodging in the outer skirts in Harlem

famous for slums because White America is much too civilized for him. He abandons his study of engineering in favour of Anthropology and is already half-way through his doctoral work in that subject. That is where he meets Romi, the narrator, with whom he shares his lodging and forms a thick friendship. The death of the narrator's father compels him to return to India. Back in India, he joins the Indian Administrative Service. He is married to a pretty aristocratic, convent-educated girl, named Meena. It is Meena's lack of understanding that out of despair and agony, Billy seduces Rima Kaul, a girl related to Meena. His passions lead him astray and his romance with Rima Kaul is degraded into seduction. One afternoon he takes her to Juhu, hires a room and seduces her. Though he gets married to Meena who bears him a son, his adulterous affair with Rima Kaul also continues. The terrible shock he receives at his degradation instigates his flight from the civilized world.

Billy inwardly suffers from pangs of conscience which keeps him in a perpetual state of irritation against the social set up in society. He admires the Swedish girl Tuula who treats money a whole lot of paper and hates the world that "hangs on this peg of money". He is all praise for Tuula Lindgren who is educated and human. She is very friendly towards him and yet remains detached from others. These constant pricks of conscience make Billy look strange. Back home in India Billy Biswas gets a teaching assignment at the Department of Anthropology of Delhi University, but the restive soul of Billy Biswas never allows him any inner rest. Billy does not confine his studies to the books alone but also mixes with the tribals to explore their lives. It is in course of such an expedition that Billy disappears into the wilderness of the Maikala hills. On his last expedition he goes to a tribal village to fetch ropes from the house of the headman of the village, Dhunia, who had become his Maha Prasad (an intimate friend). Billy had saved the life of his niece by giving her antibiotics on his earlier visit. He meets his niece Bilasia who had now grown into an untamed village beauty. When he leaves for his camp, Dhunia invites him to come next day to watch their dance. He feels that the whole hilly tract calls him to its primitive fold.

With the passage of time, the misunderstandings between husband and wife get the form of the crisis of character. Billy Biswas escapes from the civilized world to the tribal shelter. Billy watches the dance of the tribals and participates in it as well. He finally decides to abjure the civilized world to join the tribes for ever to find out not only his roots but his identity also. Billy feels himself at ease in the primitive. It is this friendly, simple and pure atmosphere that opened new vistas of knowledge after the union of Billy and Bilasia. The flame of Chandtola (a peak) had glowed during moonlit nights when the tribal King and the Queen happily lived. It was extinguished when the old King while trying to make the idol of God was poisoned by his relatives. The revival of Chandtola leads the primitive people to think that Billy is the reincarnation of their King who was poisoned thousand years ago. Billy is recognized not only as their King, but is treated as endowed with magical and supernatural powers also. He also had brought back Dhunia's grandson to life who had been dead for two hours.

In Bilasia, Billy finds the right woman who can enliven his soul. Meena deadens his senses, Rima corrupts him and the materialistic civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who caused explosion of senses - the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and its symbols in Meena and Rima. His switching over from Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not mere trifling in his life; it is a development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. Bilasia is the essence of the primitive force. Now Billy's fascination for primitivism becomes an experience, a realization. Now he knows what he has been waiting for and what he has realized. Bilasia, freed from the strange hold of money-minded

civilization, knows how to experience joy from communion with Nature, from naked primeval passions and the rhythm of integrated and harmonized souls. Money has no place. Billy tells Romi that they enjoy living at the sustenance level. He admits,

What kept us happy, I suppose were the same thing that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the Mahua, and occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love making, and, more than anything else, no ambition none at all(The Strange Case, 107)

They have conquered wants and do not fear death. Even when they suffer from a severe drought, they do not forget to sing, dance and love. They are not nourished by food and water but by enlivening their inner being by song, dance and love-making. Billy now knows his destination. He knows that he is a pilgrim. Primitivism will lead him to his goal. Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. So, Billy is like those saints of India who want to realize unity with the divine through awakening of their senses. For him Bilasia is Prakriti (nature) and he is Purush (male) and the cosmic whole can be experienced in their union.

Billy nurses his preference for jazz music which is symbolic of his tribal aspiration for freedom and liberation from shackling tendencies imposed by the civilized society. He has always been critical of the so-called civilized society for possessing the social order difficult to redesign.. Romi, the narrator and friend of Billy Biswas is scared by the prospect of Billy who is trying to see into the nature of things. He could only conclude with incredulity that there were many things that he did not see which Billy saw and which, step by step led him to the only end that awaits those who see too much. Romi is to quantify further Billy's powerful vision "I discovered that Billy had almost inhumanly sharp eyes". Billy chooses not to be doing things others-oriented but oriented inwardly towards the individual.

Billy realizes, that he is in a world that "conspires towards a philosophy of meaninglessness boredom, and the absurd". But he wants to be a butterfly in search of the nectar of experience in the garden of life. To people like Billy, the world is not one monolithic entity where everybody wants to be like everybody else in shameless acquiescence to the general order. Only the butterfly in Billy makes him realize that the world is not, as a given, homogenous and satisfactory entity. The marital relationship between Billy and Meena is doomed to fail for the reason that the individual's freedom is infringed upon by the spouse. Meena occupies a world that is not risk taking. It is a world which insists on social positions and respectability to be maintained at all costs. He finds his wife to be less involved with his life. He realizes that Meena has very little to offer him any succor in his search for meaning. Billy is made of a different-temper. The heroic individual is convinced that the constructions of society cannot sustain his search for the meaning of Existence. The society refuses to understand the individual. The individual has the force of his convictions telling him that his being different is a way of setting for the society a model for the future whether it is acceptable or not. Thus the hero emerges as a prophet figure who goes beyond his time and place on the strength of his convictions. Billy records his contempt for civilization whose only aim is spending of money. In this dispensation, he is to feel that he is "swiftly losing grip on life".

Deep in the forests, life for Billy is more authentic without the affectation of order sophistication and decorum. The tribal are people who live a life where there is no schism between the precepts and the practice of life. The forest which is the antithesis of civilization by appearing to have its own order, an essence, and a purpose, becomes for Billy his destination where he will make his tryst with destiny. His waiting for Bilasia, a tribal girl "a dark unresisting energy" to return from the forest is an epiphanic moment when he is able to see clearly the

synthesis emerging out of the intellectual evaluation of the civilized society and the tribal society. When Billy meets Bilasia and becomes the possessor of “the essence of life which can be communicated only in the language of visions” his metamorphosis becomes complete.

Ten years after his disappearance Billy meets Romi in the jungle. Romi, the district collector of that stretch, is on a tour to the Maikala Range and is startled at Billy’s figure when he spots him. Billy is wearing a loin-cloth and is completely tribalized. He attributes his mysterious disappearance to an irresistible urge towards the primitive people. After this Billy keeps on visiting Romi again and again and in the meantime cures Romi’s wife Situ’s migraine with some herb. Billy takes the promise on the part of Romi that he will not disclose his whereabouts to anybody but Romi’s wife Situ forces him to tell her about Billy. Romi fearfully tells Situ and Situ gives out the secret. The tragedy takes place when the so called civilized world impinges upon the world of tribals which provides Billy unusual peace and serenity. In other words, the tragedy takes place when an established man is forced to uproot himself by people whom he hates. Billy dies on bullet wounds and only his ashes reach the civilized world. When Meena sees the handful of ashes of Billy, she had at last “a glimpse of the phantoms that had driven Billy out of her life and now out of the world”. Romy, the District Collector has at last to file a brief report of the case:

The death of Billy “should not be taken as the death of an isolationist but as the triumph of his ideals and principles”. Great primitive force is so very strong in him that even an expensive schooling and exposure to a highly civilized and modern Western society cannot destroy or overcome that force which possesses him. Like an internal haemorrhage it has hit upon him and he tries to suppress it. “The Strange Case” of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of. It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.

One of the most important dialectical operations in the novel is the opposition between the “civilized” city and the “uncivilized” jungle. Regeneration, perpetuation of the generation, and the transmission of vital elements through a continuous flow of life are defining aspects of life in the jungle. The Savage society of the jungle privileges fertility over the functional convenience of the city. Billy, as the City-dweller, is experiencing the first intimations of real fertility through his contact with the forest, of which Bilasia is an essential representative and the element itself. He makes an observation about seeing in the darkness. But naturally, he sees nothing. Billy realizes the viciousness of the city-lights which have offered him only phantoms and shadows. In contrast, the darkness of the forest, appearing to show nothing, lights up the vacancy of his heart. Billy comes out of the upper crust of the society and has everything that post, power and privilege can give. Yet he is not indifferent but hostile to all these. His tribal urge of his visit to the Odissi tribals and the Konark during his childhood and his preferences for the Negroes in Harlem to the American whites are all offshoots of his inner urge of being a tribal.

Billy Biswas suffers from a strange kind of crisis of identity. He has no feeling of rootlessness either in India or in U.S.A., though he has much more affinity with the tribal world than with the civilized. This may be said to be a variation of alienation and the crisis of consciousness and identity. Even in the U.S.A., he prefers living in the black ghetto of Harlem and is led into the world of ecstasy while playing musical instruments of the tribals. Back home in India he does not muster moral courage in the beginning to rebel against his parents in not marrying the girl of their choice. He does not even tell them to leave him alone or get him married to Rima Kaul, the girl of his choice. He is persuaded to marry Meena by an appeal to the

sense of pragmatism of the West and that of the life being incomplete without marriage in the Indian context.

Billy's soul is never at rest. Even as a student in America where he goes to study engineering, he switches over to Anthropology and becomes an anarchist. He is instinctively attracted towards the tribals. There does not seem to be the presence of traits in his character that could be said to constitute the element of poise in him. He is a man given over to obsessions and fixation. The outward journey performed by him is symbolic of his relentless quest for a personal salvation. Billy's tragic death becomes the more tragic when we concentrate on what he said prior to his death. He opened his fast-glazing eyes for a moment, looking at Romi, and said, "You bastards", and died. This is his final verdict on the so-called civilized society, which is 'bastardly'. What reaches the civilized world is not his message for which he had even sacrificed himself but a handful of ash in a pot. Thus, Billy's 'strange case' is "disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers"

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