Cross-Culture and Theme of Alienation in Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

Vinod Kumar Vaishya  
(Research Scholar)  
Department of English & Modern European Languages  
University of Allahabad

Arun Joshi (1939-93), novelist of the post-independence India, has been classed with Indian English fiction writer such as Nayantara Sahgal and Anita Desai. His novels reflect the dilemma of human loneliness which has various manifestations in the form of powerlessness, meaninglessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self-estrangement. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, a well-known novel, shows the dissatisfaction of modern man from the civilized, cultured and sophisticated society. The novel is designated respectively as the civilized world, the primitive world and the encroachment of the civilized in the primitive world. The protagonist of the novel is Billy Biswas, one who has the feeling of alienation from the well set-up of this modern society. Throughout the novel he suffers with the problem of identity crisis, alienation. Thus the purpose of the present paper is to make an exhaustive study of the above mention novel and to bring out the various characteristics which have made it rather obscure and difficult to understand.

Arun Joshi (1939-93) is an Indian English novelist who has attempted to wrestle with the predicament of modern man. He has written five well known novels which are full of existential philosophy. In this contemporary era man is living the materialistic life. He has no time to feel someone’s emotions and feelings and that is why he feels alienated and is unable to judge his ideas. The ideology of modern man has become materialistic; he is searching for his own identity particularly in the capitalist society. People are suffering from the psychological problem, slowly and slowly they are losing their emotion, love, affection, and real happiness. So in this modern era most of the authors are focusing on these problems in their works. Among them it is Arun Joshi who made these problems the theme of his novels. Joshi exposes these problems in his novels in a very subtle and minute way.

So the present paper exposes the present scenario of the contemporary society in which peace, security and safety have vanished. Here there is no importance of human existence therefore Sartre considers society as a hell. Arun Joshi delineates the materialistic way of living of the modern society which is psychologically ill. He tries to portray alienation, loneliness and culture of various countries in his novels. All the major characters of his novels are materialistic but they are unsatisfied with themselves. They have different cultural experiences that clash in their mind. They are unable to cope with this materialistic society and also haunted by their inner consciousness that does not allow them to live according to their own satisfaction. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner*, Bimal Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and Som Bhasker in *The Last Labyrinth* are the characters full of alienated, unsatisfactory, rootless, and deeply sensitive from the point of heart. All of them are eager to know their inner feeling and consciousness. The present paper will examine how Billy Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, leaves the present sophisticated society to realize his inner feeling, satisfaction and getting real happiness. The
paper will also depict the conflicts of various cultures in the character of Billy Biswas and also the individual personality of Sartre’s philosophy of existentialism.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Joshi’s second novel, came in 1973, is a powerful record of sordid modern culture and an eloquent assertion of the primitive way of life. The narrator of the novel is Romi, who is a friend of the protagonist, Bimal Biswas is known as Billy, follows the flash back technique. He has been with Billy in the USA and as such he knew everything of his life and deeds in America and India. The novel is divided into two parts; 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. Arun Joshi has created Billy Biswas as a hero who longs intensively to locate his real life not in the matrix of Westernized culture but in the most innocent, most native even anthropological past of Indian culture. Joshi has created Billy in a very strange way, which totally ignores the modern sophisticated, civilized society and takes shelter in the lap of nature.

Bimal Biswas, the hero and the protagonist of the novel, suffers from the psychological problems and dissatisfaction with the well set up and so called modern society. Romi, Billy’s friend is a first person narrator, the novel, very consistently deals the cultural conflicts in the mind of Bimal Biswas. As the novel comprises two parts, the first part having six chapters and the second one having nine chapters, Arun Joshi seems to mediate between New Delhi and the Satpura hills, both the geographical locations representing sophisticated and the primitive world respectively. In this novel, Joshi explores the upper crust of Indian society turning to be materialistic with spiritual shallowness and imitating Western culture blindly forgetting its traditional values and belief. “The novel is an indictment of the meaningless existence, mechanization, urbanization, discontent, changing values and spiritual up rootedness of the society on the modern civilization.”(3) Joshi seems to present *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as a study of the conflict between the norms of the civilized and the primitive life.

Bimal (Billy) is first seen in New York, a mid Western university for a summer course of Columbia. He is introduced to the friends by an engineer but he has also interest in Anthropology. Although he is Indian by birth and comes from the upper class Indian society yet lives with Indians and Negroes in second rated place. He completed his school education in England and has a British accent. He is the son of ex-Indian Ambassador to the European countries but his roots are in the wild culture and his association with the Negroes in America. He has very good ancestral background. His family had originally come from Bengal. Even his grandfather had been the Chief Minister in Orissa and his father practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. When he was in America, his father was a judge of the Supreme Court of India. So Billy has good knowledge of both Indian and American society and culture.

Romi, the witness narrator, goes back in the past and recalls the strange case of his friend Billy Biswas. Actually, the novel is an account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder of the Twentieth Century society, and in the heart of Delhi’s smart society. Romi starts narrating from New York where he first meets Billy at the house of a friend of his own, who invites him for dinner. The host introduces Billy as an “engineer, anthropologist, anarchist… and crazy, vain by Indian standard.”(8) When Billy comes to know that Romi is in search of some accommodation, he offers him to come and stay with him at his apartment near Harlem, a slum-area in New York. Romi is surprised that Billy, who belongs to upper crust of Indian society has selected slums to
live in. To calm down Romi’s curiosity he tells him that he has chosen Harlem because that he was the most human place he could find, while America was much too civilized for him. Billy’s father sends him America for studying engineering, but is interested and fascinated to Anthropology. Billy has a “passionate involvement with his subject a thing that (is) by no means common among the rest of us.”(15) He has full command over his subject. After completing his education he chooses teaching as his profession but before that he wants to travel particularly India. He longs for going deep into the human life of the uncultured society, vituperated by the modern civilization. He comes from a civilized society an aristocratic family, yet his soul aching to come out of this artificial surrounding, even he finds himself misfit to this modernized society.

When Romi’s father dies, he has to return India, here he gets selected for the Indian Administrative Services, after completing PhD, Billy also returns to Delhi where he joins Delhi University as a lecturer in Anthropology. Even in India he marks no difference between the social atmospheres which he has left in America. He gets Indians society devoided from spirituality and emotions as materialistic America. Being a highly educated person even from American Universities, he believes in such things as magic and the other world. This is clear from a discussion with his father on the Krishna murder case, in which it has been thought that a middle aged clerk, who receives a command from a Goddess in dream, sacrifices a child to cure his dying son. He says:

“All I am saying is there are world at the periphery of this one, above it and Below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them ....Something happens, something and sudden like the clerk’s dream or Something very gradual and you are catapulted into them. For a while you May not even know that you have changed your tracks” (26)

After coming to Delhi, Billy marries a Bengali girl named Meena Chatterjee, who is already “quite usually pretty in a Westernized sort of way”(20) He married just to pacify himself but within one year he realizes that he has committed a blunder. Infact nothing goes wrong with the marriage, but Meena, his wife represents the hollowness and superficiality of the modern phony society, is unable to pacify his inner tension. It is her lack of empathy and sufficient ideas of human suffering that lead to a conflict in their marital life. She is unable to understand Billy; who turns towards Rima Kaul, a girl in Bombay. He makes a close relationship with Rima and even seduces her one day. It is Rima’s seduction which leads Billy to alienate not only from his family and society but also from his true self. His soul pinches him to fly away from the civilized world which is responsible for his degeneration. So during one of his anthropological trip with students he vanishes into the Saal forests of Maikale Hills in Central India. After that various types of stories relating to his disappearance float in the air and the one ultimately adopted is that he might have been eaten up by a wild animal in the forest. Infact, he does not reject civilization, but condemns the upper-class Indian society.

In the second part of the novel Billy’s reappearance before Romi after ten years, shocks him when he is on the post of a District Collector in central India. During his official visit to the drought hit areas of the district, where he sees Billy and finds him completely changed into a tribesman wearing only a loin-cloth. It is only Romi to whom Billy narrates the whole conditions that compel him to leave this civilized and sophisticated society. He tells how he leaves that society in the final visit with his students to the tribal area in central India; he comes to know that one of the students has left the rope at the station. So he goes to collect the rope to a nearby
village where he meets Dhunia, the village headman, who asks him to wait for Bilasia’s return from the forest. These two points prove to be turning point in his life. There he meets Bilasia a tribal and most attractive girl. After his first meeting with Bilasia he falls in love with her and is lost thinking of her. Even he seems to forget his identity. He feels that she is calling him to come in her world. Here he first time realizes and recalls his childhood that something odd working within him. He becomes aware of his identity “who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” (17) He watches their dance manner, living style, festival celebration and feels that this is where he belongs. He leaves his parents, wife, a child and the society. Even the forest when he hears the drum sound his imagination starts running wild. He feels himself with them and feeling of sorrow comes over him. Thereafter he decides to go to this village to attend the dance for which he has been invited by Dhunia. In his contact with Bilasia he gets a kind of frantic spirituality.

Joshi explores the contrast between reactions of the same in the two distinct worlds. When he was in the so-called civilized world, he used to think about worldly things, now while the same man in the tribal world waits for the natural phenomenon. While seeing Bilasia’s dance he is infatuated by her natural beauty. He comes very close to her and makes physical relations with her. He says, “If the forest and the hill (have) beckoned (him) from a distance, Bilasia (is) now leading (him) by the hand.’’ (62) After that he finally settles down with her, in her society he follows her culture, manner, civilization, and way of living. Now he feels satisfaction with himself and the society of tribal’s. According to Arun Joshi, The Foreigner and The Strange of Billy Biswas are primarily concerned with religious issues-the problems of an essentially Hindu mind.” (65) After becoming the member of tribal society, he is supposed to have attained the magical powers. He is regarded as a magician, a priest, a savior, a caretaker in tribal society. In the conversation with Romi, Dhunia tells him.

“He is a magician ….we came to know of his powers only when he sent the Tiger away ….He brought my grandson back to life… He is our priest… He looks after us”(67)

Once Romi had observed in America that Billy had almost in humanly sharp eyes. It has also made the concept by the villagers that Billy is the incarnation of their legendary sculptor king, ruling thousands of years ago. Bilasia represents the primitive energy the power of nature, in whose arms Billy feels himself free of any kind of materialistic concern of the civilized world. He is able to develop his latent natural power with which he is able to make these so-called miracles.

After reaching desired land, and never wanting to go back to the phoney society of the so-called civilized people, Billy asks Romi not to disclose the fact of his being alive from the world lying outside the forest. In case the secret is disclosed, it will hurt him deeply. He is afraid that if his family get to know about his being alive and his; whereabouts, they will not leave him alone. After coming to the primitive world of the Maikale Hills Billy has settled down here with Dhunia’s niece Bilasia. He has been leading a happy life with no ambition in this new world and with his new family, but fate has decided something else for him, something horrible and undesirable. His present happy life crosses the boundary and reaches the world of civilized society. During one of his visits to Romi, he comes to know that, Romi’s wife has been suffering from a severe migraine so, by the virtue of his having some knowledge of herbal medicines and with his miraculous healing touch he is able to cure Situ of her tearing pain. After having recovered she shows the curiosity to know about who has cured her, but Romi does not tell her.
When she compels him, he tells that it was Billy Biswas. She is shocked and later she informs Meena, Billy’s wife. After that they reach there and asked Romi to take back Billy out of the forest, but he refuses and warns them the consequences of this. Then Billy’s father Mr. Biswas, with the help of police force under the command of S.P. Rele by the order of chief secretary reach the forest. Till the end Romi warns that the result will be very harsh, so he also goes with them to manage the situation. There Romi says the police to stay outside of the village and enters the village alone. He asks the villagers to tell him where Billy is? But no one tells him. The fate of star was neither in the favour of Billy nor with Romi, at that time Billy was out of the village. In the mean time police sees a man coming to the village, they follow him but one of the overzealous constable fires a bullet that kills Billy on the spot. The last words that he utters are “you Bastards” (87) This is his ultimate assumption about the people of the civilized world. In this way the sophisticated society could not leave Billy to live from the out of the society. Romi reaches that place very late. The constable is suspended and later killed by Dhunia.

Thus Billy Biswas reminds us of the ‘white lady’, the protagonist in D.H. Lawrence’s The Woman Who Rode Away, where the white lady, in the wake of her degradation and her utter confusion about spiritless life around her, decides to leave the primordial nature in order to escape from the disastrous civilization. After going through the thorny course of Billy’s life, we find that he resembles Graham Green’s hero Querry of A Burnt out Case and Samuel Beckett’s Murphy of the novel Murphy. Beckett’s Murphy also renounces the criticized world and a male nurse enters the asylum for lunatics. There is a symbolical thing that can be thought that Billy’s transformation under the Peepal tree in Gaya. Thus there can also be seen the similarity between Buddha’s life and Billy’s life.

The strange case of Billy Biswas and the drama of his life come to what has been termed as an epic end, which are both a catastrophe and the great tragedy. When Meena sees the handful of ashes of Billy, she had at last “a glimpse of the phantom that had driven Billy out of her life and now out of the world”(238) Billy’s alienation from the civilized society and adopting the tribal world shows his dissatisfaction with modern well-set up cultured society. He had the alleviations towards the tribal world from his childhood. As his tribal urge on his visit to Orisi tribal’s and the Konark during his childhood and his preference for the Negroses in Harlem to the American white are also all offshoots of his inner urge of being a tribal. Thus Billy is very critical of the organized society and its so-called measures of civilization. The conflict of culture arises in his mind. He leads a life of fuehrer. The complexity of his thoughts compels him to think a lot for his being in that very society where he is disappointed to reach his goal. He looks stranger. He writes to Tuula:

“It seems my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as One’s grip on life. Why else this corset blurring of reality? At times Look at them sitting at dinner table, and for a passing moment.”(97)

Thus in this way, Billy Biswas is such a figure that has a deep sense of his life. He has very deep love with the natural atmosphere. Being educated in the Western universities he has no sense of running behind money and materialistic life. The strange case of Billy Biswas very beautifully presents the theme of man’s restlessness in the modern materialistic life and his futile attempt to escape it. It is concerned with the crisis of contemporary civilization in the upper-class Indian society. Billy feels an irresistible pull towards the primitive world and finally he joins the tribe beyond the forest on the Maikale Hills. In this novel, Joshi deals with the chaotic state of
human mind in the modernized world. He presents the conflict between the norms of the spiritual quest; Thus Joshi explores the idea of Billy from American to Indian culture and civilization that are mixed in him which he leaves for his own self. One of the most important dialectical operations in this novel is the opposition between “civilized” city and the “uncivilized” jungle. He realizes the viciousness of the city lights which have offered him only phantoms and shadows. Thus, Billy’s treatment regarding culture and civilization of the modern world is something like a rebel, which he renounces and follows the natural atmosphere which has no artificiality and is made by God directly. Ultimately Billy gets real happiness and satisfaction in the lap of Nature where there is no artificiality and rudeness. Here it will be appropriate to say that Nature never betrays those who believe in nature and never ever demand anything from anyone. Billy gets real happiness and satisfaction in the lap of Nature that is why he takes shelter in lap of nature which the society did not allow him.

Work Cited:

Arun Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas ( New Delhi: Orient Paperback,1971) P. 3
All subsequent references from the text have been taken from the same edition.