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Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: An Analysis by the Lenses of Fictional Devices

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Abstract:

The present paper focuses on an analysis of Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* through the lenses of fictional devices. As we know, Novel is a powerful genre of literature that can both enlighten and entertain us. One useful way to approach a novel or story involves paying close attention to the individual techniques that tell the story. Even though we generally want to focus upon the meaning of the text, or its effect upon us, those tasks become a lot easier if we know how the text works. Use of the fictional devices helps us to become a better reader and to better understand the text. Every story worth telling has the following fictional devices: characterization, plot, setting, point of view, style, irony, symbolism, theme, tone etc. So the present study aims at analyzing this novel by the lenses of these fictional- devices. This analysis is supposed to aid the readers in getting better understanding of the text through its elements.

Keywords: Characterization, Plot, Setting, Point of view, Style, Irony, Symbolism, Theme, Tone, Arun Joshi.

INTRODUCTION

Any written material that has the purpose of telling a story or entertaining comes under the term of novel or fiction. It offers aesthetic pleasure as well as political, cultural, and economical messages or beliefs. Novels are usually designed to entertain the readers. In the same way that a painter uses shape, color, perspective, and other aspects of visual art to create a painting, a fiction writer uses character, plot, setting, point of view, theme and various kinds of symbolism and language to create artistic effect in fiction. These aspects of fiction are known as the formal elements. An understanding of these formal elements will enhance the reader's appreciations of any piece of fiction, as well as his or her ability to share perceptions with others. How does the implementation of fictional devices take place in Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, is the subject matter of the present study? In this way, the present analysis will attempt to broaden the critical perspectives that will allow a fuller understanding of Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*.

In his second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), Joshi deals with the theme of self- realization. If Sindhi, in the first novel is searching for the meaning of his existence in this material world, Billy, the protagonist of the second novel, is searching for his identity in the mystical world. He looks for self-realization in the primitive world of tribes like ancient saints. In the present novel, Joshi has explored man's journey from physical life to the mysterious

underworld which is the human soul. In brief, the present novel is a compellingly thought provoking novel. A novel in which the normal and the abnormal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, illusion and reality, resignation and desire rub shoulders.

ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Reading of a novel requires a different approach than reading other text books. In novel, the meaning is not often stated directly, but is implied. Every novelist must create a world out of his own imagination. He must form and fill it, invent it with an intrinsic causation, and infuse it with meaning and purpose. To fulfill these aspects, a work of imaginative fiction has some fictional elements: it has characters, who are the workers in the story; plot, which is the work of the story; a setting, the world of story; a theme, which is the wisdom of the story; a style, which is the words of the story; and so on. These are the elements, which build the edifice of a novel. So the present analysis of Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* will run as such.

CHARACTERIZATION

Characterization is an essential element of a novel. The author unveils the personality of the characters through characterization. In direct characterization, the author straightforwardly lets us know about the identity of the characters. He can make use of different descriptive words to expose the disposition of the characters. In indirect characterization, he employs multiple techniques to bring out the personality of the characters. He uses his behavior, speech, action, and appearance to reveal the personality of a character. There are two types of characters: Flat Characters and Round Characters. Flat Characters are those characters, who do not change throughout the story, while Round Characters are those characters, who change throughout the story. Round Characters are of immense importance in any sort of novel. They are the one, who advance the story ahead.

Joshi's good use of characterization leads the readers to relate better to the events taking place in the story. Utilizing the techniques of physical description, Joshi portrays Billy in lion clothes and long beard which suits for primitive life. The portrait of Bilasia reminds us the pious and virtue of flower. Billy's behavior is very strange and uncommon towards his wife Meena and very cooperative towards his better half Bilasia. Billy's inner thoughts and feelings reveals peculiar things about his character, which help the readers to understand his actions. According to Tuula Billy has a great dormant force which he suppressed and it can explode at any moment. Billy's behavior and action have a great effect on other characters for that they feel scared, happy or confused. Billy is all praises for Tuula who has a "total disregarded of money" (177), treats money for a "whole lot of paper" (176) and hates the world that hangs "on this peg of money" (97). His wife Meena represents the superficiality of the modern phony society. For Meena, "Billy is getting stranger and stranger with a very passing day" (33). Thus, what the Joshi's characters say provides great deal of insight to the readers. Here Joshi uses his behavior, speech, action, and appearance to reveal the personality of Billy. He is the protagonist of the

story around which all the characters interwoven the fabrics of the story. Billy, Meena, and Bilasia can be grouped as Round characters while Romi, Reema, Tuula, and others as Flat characters.

PLOT

As outlined by Aristotle in the Poetics, “Plot is the arrangement of incidents” (Ch. 6). The incidents are the raw material and make up the story. The way these incidents are structured into a coherent whole is known as the plot. So if the original order and arrangement of the same incidents are altered a new and different plot will result. According to Freytag (a German playwright and novelist), a dramatic plot can be divided into five parts: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement, which can be applied to short stories and novel as well.

Exposition: It is the background information that is needed to understand the story provided, such as the main character, the setting, the basic conflict and so forth. Billy’s urges to visit the ‘Odisi tribal’ and Konark during his childhood and his preference for the Negroes in Harlem to the American whites are all off- shoots of his inner urge of being a tribal. He does research in Anthropology because that is his first love. He keeps his father in dark and specializes as an Anthropologist and studies the tribal attitude and customs.

Rising action: It is a series of events that move the story to a climax. During rising action, the basic conflict is complicated by secondary conflicts, such as obstacles and challenges that frustrate the protagonist’s attempt to reach his goal. Here, we can see the rising action of the plot in the declaration of Billy as: “All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginals of the world” (12). This basic conflict is complicated by Meena as: “I don’t know what’s eating you. Meena said. I said. How are you going to be my wife if you can’t see what is eating me” (45). In the words of Matthew Arnold: “It irk’d him to be here, he could not rest”.

Climax: It is the peak of the action and the turning point in the story. After the climax everything changes. On his last expedition, one of the students had forgotten the rope and Billy goes to the nearby village, to get some rope, Dhunia, the village headman asks him to wait for Bilasia and thus these two incidents- the student’s losing the rope and Billy’s wait for Bilasia’s return prove to be the turning point in his life. He says: “I wonder sometime what my life would have been if that boy had not lost the package or Dhunia had some ropes available with him right then- I wonder if all this would have happened if I had not waited for Bilasia to return from the forest. 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” (83).

Falling action: During the falling action, the conflict unravels with the protagonist either winning or losing. It might contain a movement of final suspense, during which the final outcome of the conflict is in doubt. The second part of the novel depicts Billy’s sudden reappearance before Romi after ten years. Billy says for tribal money has no place as they have

conquered wants and when they have problem of severe drought they still do not forget to sing, dance and make love and have no ambition. Billy's quest is over when he sees his better half Bilasia. She helps him to discover, "that bit of himself that he has searched all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a millions others" (103).

Denouement: The story ends with the denouement, in which the protagonist is better off than at the beginning of the story. However, the tragedy ends with death and sadness, in which the protagonist is worse off than at the beginning of the story. Here, Billy is accepted as the king by the tribal because of his strange magical powers. Dhunia tells Romi that Bilasia is the reincarnation of the queen called Devi Mata who immolated herself on the pyre of her husband, prophesying that with the return of her husband she too would return and the "Chandtola would glow again on moonlit nights" (113). Dhunia further tells Romi: "... 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" (114). So, after reaching his final destination in the Maikala hills, Billy is unwilling "to establish any link, with the other world" (108). Thus, here we can see that the well- formed plot of the novel have a beginning, which is not necessary consequence of any previous action; a middle, which follows logically from the beginning; and an end, which follows logically from the middle and from which no further action necessarily follows.

SETTING

Setting means the location, where the events of the novel have been taken place. It generates a visual sketch in the minds of readers, which in turn, causes it to be easier for the readers to have an understanding of the environment around the characters. The novelist has got to showcase the location to the readers like a mirror reflecting an image. The more vivid the description of the setting, the more the reader will grasp the meaning of the novel. It encompasses quite a few factors like weather, geography, socio- economic status, surroundings etc. These elements have an effect on the entire atmosphere of the novel. The setting conditions give the readers an insight into the emotional conditions of the characters.

The story of the present novel mediates between New Delhi and Maikala Hills, between two identifiable cultures. The juxtaposition and also the conflict of these two cultures reveal the spiritual up-rootedness of the Indian upper crust and the utter falsehoodness of its superficial glamour and refinement. It brings into focus the spiritual decay of the westernized Indian society. Here, Joshi surpasses the geographical and socio- cultural conservatism and enters into the realms of conflicts and confrontation between the inner and the outer world. Meenakshi Mukherjee says, "It is a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore to reiterate its elemental concerns" (Mukherjee 203).

POINT OF VIEW

It is the mode of narration of the author to portray the events in a novel. It is the utilization of pronouns to express the point of view of the author. Usually, there are three types of point of views: First Person, Second Person, and Third Person. In first person point of view, the narrator is normally the author himself, or any other character like hero, heroine, who tells the story. It provides credibility to the story of the author. Second person point of view is the mode of narration, whereby the author employs second person pronouns to narrate the story. It is also called objective point of view. Here, the author turns out to be a spectator. He barely watches the action of the story. Third person point of view is the mode of narration, whereby the author makes use of third person pronouns to tell the story. It gives us insight in the personality of any character. That is why, it is also called Omniscient point of view.

In his interview with Purabi Banarjee, Joshi says: “The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is about a mystical urge; a compulsion which makes Billy goes away”, “Tribals are very civilized according to mine and Billy’s understanding. It is the post independence pseudo Western values that he rejects” (Purabi 4). When the novel begins, Romi, who is the omniscient first person narrator goes back in the past and recalls the strange case of his friend Billy. He decides to narrate the story of Billy not because he has understand him, as from the very beginning Romi says that it is difficult to know the mind of Billy when he says: “As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understand, the attempt to understand is probably even more futile” (7).

THEME

Theme is the crux of the matter that the author wants to explain through the events of the novel. It is the principal idea of the novel. The entire story of the novel revolves around one main idea and the author’s purpose is almost always to make aware the reader about this main idea. Theme in fiction is rarely presented at all it is abstracted from the details of character and action that compose the story. It provides a unifying point around which the plot, characters, setting, point of view, symbols, and other literary elements of a story are organized. In brief, theme is the meaning or concept we are left with after reading a piece of novel.

Joshi’s fictional world deals generally with the theme of existentialism and so the entire story of the present novel revolves around the theme of existentialism. The theme of the present novel is quite wide and varied, and covers temporal as well as timeless issues of humanity. The protagonist, Billy is portrayed as man engaged in the meaning of life. Billy’s alienation from the civilized world leads him to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that long for an identity, the godhead of self. Through the present novel Joshi suggests that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be felt in the lap of nature and primitive atmosphere and not in the sophisticated urban area. The theme of the novel is centered at one can realize the essence of life by liberating the self from the clutches of mercenary civilization and by hearing the calls of the

inner being. In brief, the present novel is concerned with the crisis of self, the problem of identity and the quest for inner fulfillment. In one of his interview, Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore, that mysterious world, which is the human soul.

STYLE

Style varies from author to author and depends upon one's syntax, word choice, and tone. There are four basic literary styles used in writing. (1) Expository or Argumentative style is a subject oriented style. Here the focus of the writer is to tell the readers about a specific topic and in the end the author leaves out his own opinion about that topic. (2) In Descriptive style, the author focuses on describing an event, a character, or a place in detail. Usually, the description incorporates sensory details. (3) In Persuasive style, the writer tries to give reasons and justification to make the readers believe his point of view. It aims to persuade and convince the readers. (4) Narrative style is a type of writing where the writer narrates a story to. It includes short stories, novels, novellas, biographies and poetry.

Applying the argumentative style, Joshi gives a specific subject orientation to the present novel. By using this style, the protagonist of the novel develops the plot structure of the novel. For example, Romi: "But why do you want to do that?" Billy: "I have not the faintest idea, old chap. Besides, why does one want to do anything?" (12). Further, Mr. Biswas: "I do not see how a plea of temporary insanity can be made in a case like this". Billy: "Why not? For one whole week the man plans... persuades the wretched vagrant to spend the night at his home. How could it be temporary insanity?" (39). Using the descriptive style, Billy produces the issues of wild life before Romi as: "Nobody here is interested in the prices of food-grains or new seeds or roads or election and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing" (83). Applying the persuasive style, Joshi tries to give reasons for the forecast of Billy on the matter of rain as: "Watch these two sets of stars during the next four weeks. They'll move towards each other then coincide at the end of twenty- eight days. That is when it will rain" (81). Also Romi makes a flashback narrative style to tell the story of Billy as: "I first met Billy Biswas in New York where for one brief summer we roomed together" (8).

SYMBOL

Generally, it is an object representing another thing to give it an entirely different meaning that is much deeper and more significant. Sometimes, however, an action, an event, or a word spoken by someone may have a symbolic value. For instance, "smile" is a symbol of friendship. Symbols do shift their meanings depending on the context they are used in. "A chain" for example, may stand for "union" as well as "imprisonment".

The height of Billy's hatred towards civilized world can be seen in his use of imagery of dogs with large teeth and furred paws. The so called modern Indian upper class is like a monster devouring all qualities of head and heart. In the novel Joshi creates beautiful sound imageries for

the peaceful atmosphere as: “The hall flowed with the music of the drums, the bells, the deep sonorous voices of the singers, and, above all, the vivacious and sinuous flourishes of the ghunghrus themselves” (41), “Except for the murmurings of the wind in the trees and the occasional plop of a fish in the stream, there was no sound, not at all” (62). Also Billy experiences the image of his better half as: “A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man’s house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benares” (70). Further, Billy searches for the mystery of human relationship as: “At times I look at them, sitting at the dinner table and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of Creation has brought us together” (70).

IRONY

As a literary device, irony is a contrast or incongruity between expectations for a situation and reality. This can be a difference between the surface meaning of something that is said and the underlying meaning. It can also be a difference between what might be expected to happen and what actually occurs. There are three types of irony. (1) Verbal irony takes place when the speaker says something in sharp contrast to his or her actual meaning. (2) Dramatic irony occurs when the audience has more information than one or more characters in a work of literature. This literary device originated in Greek tragedy and often leads to tragic outcomes. (3) Situational irony consists of a situation in which the outcome is very different from what was expected. There are contradictions and contrasts present in cases of situational irony.

In the present novel Joshi uses the tool of situational irony as a literary device, where he produces a difference between what might be expected to happen and what actually occurs. For example, though eternal joy and happiness can be achieved only through self-realization and spiritual enlightenment, but unfortunately modern man under the influence of materialism forgot his culture, morality and traditional values. Also Billy’s parents send him to USA to study engineering, but he takes up Anthropology instead. On his return to India he works as a teacher in Delhi University, but here too from the subject of study, he escapes into the object of it- ‘the tribal world’. For this, he leaves his family and educated wife and marries a tribal girl Bilasia and lives in the jungles of Maikala hills. Further, the tribal leader Dhunia pleads his ignorance about Billy’s whereabouts but accidentally he meets Romi in loin cloth speaking English fluently. Also Billy takes promise from Romi for not leaking information about his presence in the forest but out of curiosity and enthusiasm his wife Situ discloses the secret to the concerned family. In the end, though he may have got an answer to the crisis of his identity, but the civilized world considers him to be a misguided man and on the request of his parents, the administration in its search for Billy put an end to his life, owing to the mistakes of a constable. Thus, in brief, Billy has everything that life has to offer him, post, power, and privilege, yet he is not only indifferent but hostile to all these.

TONE

Tone, in a written composition, is an attitude of a writer toward a subject or an audience. Tone is generally conveyed through the choice of word or the point of view of a writer on a particular subject. Every written piece comprises a central theme or subject matter. The manner in which a writer approaches this theme and subject is the tone. The tone can be formal, informal, serious, comic, sarcastic, sad, and cheerful or it may be any other existing attitudes.

Here Billy generally uses sarcastic tone in his behavior. In this manner he always tries to approach to the theme of the story- 'the strange case of his behavior'. For example, when Romi tells him that Meena is running a boutique, he says, "I can't imagine Meena doing something that did not make money" (79). Billy is, sometimes, straightforward in his view. To Romi's question, "But don't you think you had responsibilities towards her, towards your son?" (133). Billy says, "I had greater responsibilities towards my soul" (133). Meena, his wife makes a serious tone towards his behavior as: "You twist everything. What can one do when you twist everything" (58). Further, she uses a comic tone for his strangeness as: "He... he doesn't want me anymore. He hasn't touched me for six months. Not once" (57). We can see a sad tone in mother's lamentation as: "What happened to my Billy? Oh God, what, have they done to my Bimal?" (63).

CONCLUSION

Thus the present analysis concludes that by examining the fictional elements in the novel we read, and using these lenses of fictional devices to remember what we have learned, we shall better understand the novel we read and have greater success on literature appreciation. During the analysis of the present novel, we see that how the use of the fictional devices helps us to become a better reader and to better understand the text. In brief, the picture of the present analysis can be portrayed as: 'The protagonist, Billy achieves the true goal of life because he makes no compromise with the values of modern society in which morality is sacrificed for worldly pleasure which is temporary. The message of the present novel is that for hale and hearty life, a man should move on the path of true values as practiced in the lap of Makala Hills'.

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