



CRISIS OF SELF, THE PROBLEMS OF IDENTITY AND THE QUEST FOR FULFILLMENT DEPICTED BY ARUN JOSHI IN HIS NOVEL *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT



In this novel, Arun Joshi offers a dramatic presentation of the complex character of Billy who in the first part of the novel finds himself rootless and alienated from individuals, society and civilization as such. In the latter part, he takes refuge in the world of tribals only when there is no option left.

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In one of his interviews Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore "that mysterious underworld, which is the human soul".¹ He wrote for expressing his own understanding of the world and his own true self as he replied to M.R. Dua in an interview:

"My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself".² In another interview with Purabi

Banerji he admitted that he has been influenced by the existentialists like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard.³

Like the existentialist writers, Joshi is mainly concerned with man's feeling of anxiety and alienation at great length. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than the treatment meted out in his



first novel, *The Foreigner*. He is born and brought up in a fairly comfortable background. He comes "from the upper crust of Indian society" (P.9). His family has "all claims of aristocracy"(P.12). His grandfather had been the Prime Minister of a famous Princely State in Orissa. His father, after completing his law studies at the Inner Temple, had practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. He had also been the Indian ambassador to a European country. Billy has had his education in Britain and America. At the time when he is in America, his father is a judge of India's Supreme Court. He joined as lecturer at Delhi University, after having completed his Ph.D. in Anthropology. He has a friend like Romi who is so affectionate to him. Yet Billy, it so appears, has little interest in the phoney, hot-shot and sordid modern civilization. The external attractions of the so-called civilized set-up of society do not matter at all for him. He is more interested in the exploration of his inner being. Romi rightly remarks:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its cell. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, not matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake(P.8).

He is not in harmony with his family members. Although he lives with them, he is all alone, isolated and alienated, a stranger in the real sense of the term. He writes to Tuula Lindgren:

"It seems, my dear Tuula, that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? 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" (P.97).

Billy's awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist being, estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life. He is the predicament of an alienated personality who never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society. He is in desire to find out viable alternatives for "the most futile cry of man... in... smart society" (P.7). Romi [Romesh Sahai], the narrator, conveys the same at the opening of the novel:

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 probably even more futile. If in spite 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 unrelieved sense of wonder that the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions(P.7).

Romi rightly describes Billy as "a man of extraordinary obsessions" and "that extraordinary sensitivity to the world that used to be the essence of Billy"(P.70). He is "an unusual person of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsessions".⁵ In all respects he is "rare", "extraordinary" and "distinguished". He is "one of



those rare men who have poise without pose" (P.11). One is bound to notice "the strong, rather British accent of his speech", "that soft cultivated voice", and "the words (having) a cadence, a compulsive quality that engaged you in spite of yourself" (P.11). Romi has much affection for Billy, and discovers: "Billy had almost inhumanly sharp eyes" (P.43). He is almost "distracted" by "the look on his face. His expression was a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament"(PP.43-44). Billy always carries a "singular air" and has a "peculiar intensity of concentration"(44). Later, Romi says: "I had neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilections of Billy Biswas" (P.52). He is extraordinarily sensitive. Unlike Sindi, he listens to the voice of his soul. He chooses to live in Harlem, the black ghetto of America, being "one of the worse slums of New York City"(P.9). It is "the most human place he could find"(P.9). In search for accommodation, Romi meets Billy, who offers him to share with him his apartment which he gladly accepts. The partnership develops into an unusual friendship which lasts till the end.

Though born and brought up in an aristocratic family, he is filled with virulent hatred for the systematized civilized life which aggravates his problem of identity instead of resolving it. He acquires "a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I am going?"(P.122) An evidence of his dislike for the so-called civilized world can be traced in his active preparation for his Ph.D. in Anthropology, while his father does not know about it and is thinking that he is doing engineering in America (P.11).He likes to learn and "find out about the originalness of the world"(P.14). Romi rightly sums up his impression of

Billy: "it was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized"(P.14).

Billy's predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality—split between "primitive" and "civilized". His strange case becomes "a universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization".⁵ Billy finds modern civilization fast degenerating, as well as normless and meaningless. He himself describes: got me wast. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am, of course, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes. I didn't really get to know the others. I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud-mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries"(PP.178-79).

He finds himself misfit in a world like this and is in search of a place where he may not feel self-estranged, socially isolated and culturally uprooted. His deep love for primitivism is an inborn propensity. This is why he chooses in New York to live in Harlem, a place where the Negroes live, although he could very well afford to stay in good hotels in some other area like Manhattan. But his quest for self-realization summons him to live in Harlem which is "the most human place he could find"(P.9) where he may feel a



sense of belonging in the real sense of belonging in the real sense of the term.

Since then, Billy feels restless as Som Bhaskar does in *The Last Labyrinth* after his experience in a cave. Whenever he listens to folk music or drum-beating, he feels altogether transported to the world of the primitive which is different from that of the so-called civilized society. Like Sindi, he does not feel at ease in American society: "White America, he said, was much too civilized for him". (P.9) He chooses to live in Harlem, which is "one of the worse slums of New York .Tuula informs Romi that Billy is "an exceptional person" (P.22) and "feels something inside him ... A great force, urkraft, a—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" (P.23). She finds him "obsessed with a latent quest" (P.178). Romi also feels "a mesmeric pull" that holds the audience "by its sheer vitality"(P.2) while Billy plays on a drum. It awakens dormant primitive impulse in the audience. Consequently, a little Negro girl is drawn towards him: "Soon after Billy had finished, the little negro girl moved next to him. She sat very close to him so that their knees nearly touched. They stayed like that for the rest of the night. I think she had been greatly moved—sexually I mean—by the drumming" (PP.21-22). During long walks with Billy, Romi finds his talks "revealing not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us"(P.26). Afterwards, he comes to know from Billy how he often had hallucinations, "the same odd feeling of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people"(P.180)

and that "It would be like a great blinding flash during which I would be totally unaware of anything else. And invariably it left me with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with my life. I wasn't where I belonged" (P.181). Billy frequently discusses with Tuula who tells him "in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in everyone—all art in a way flowed out of them", but she advises him that "I should not encourage them too much"(P.181).

Out of these hallucinations he comes out "very depressed and really shaken up" (P.181). He describes his condition thus: "I was so shaken up that the first thing I wanted to do was to get back home" (P.181). He comes back to India and is appointed Professor in Anthropology at the Delhi University. His mother introduces him to Meena, a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant. Verily speaking, he is much upset by these hallucinations: "I had grown terribly afraid of myself, some part of me. I thought terrible things might happen unless I did something drastic. What with being an Indian and having been brought up in a close-knit family, the only thing I could think of was to get married. It was like taking out an insurance on my normalcy"(P.182). So, he marries Meena Chatterji to avert hallucinations, and it is, as he thinks, like taking out "an insurance" on "his normalcy". He wishes to behave like a normal man. He wants to develop a sense of harmony with the surrounding, a sense of belonging. But this he does not get even after his marriage with Meena Chatterji. Meena fails to engage his soul, to satisfy his inner urge. Although she is "quite unusually pretty in a westernized sort of way", "never short of words" and talks "almost entirely in English in that unique, rather flat, accent that is to be found among your ladies taught in convents"(P.37), she is not able at all



to give peace and satisfaction that Billy badly needs. On the other hand, what he comes to receive from Meena and her kith and kin is disillusionment and "depression". Billy himself records it thus: "And the first thing I hear on entering Meena's house is some ten-year-old American pop record braying like an ass fit to burst, and two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wriggling their hips as if that was the greatest music in the world. That certainly was not the India that I had come back for" (P.60). Billy "feels" and gets annoyed at the core of his heart. Once in a picnic party arranged by Meena, he almost goes mad when he hears one of the boys passing remarks that "all banjaras were thieves and their women no better than whores"(P.60).

He feels terribly sick of the so-called upper-class "shallow"(P.179) city society of Delhi. He tells Romi: "I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago" (P.179). In one of his letters, he writes to Tuula: "When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of the forest. The curious feeling trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round" (96). He develops an intense hatred for the so-called civilized people: "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" (P.96). The imagery of dogs with large teeth and furred paws shows Billy's utter dislike for the elite class whim-

whams and its character. To him, modern civilization seems to be telling upon the health and hygiene of the contemporary man. It is monster like, devouring all the human qualities of head and heart. Billy is seen reflecting: "I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of 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" (PP.96-97).

Billy, like Wordsworth, expresses a deep sense of sorrow at the people's sheer money-mindedness and thereby degradation of their soul :

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our
powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid
boon!⁶

He loves and admires Tuula who treats "money for what it was: a whole lot of paper" (P.177) and hates the world that hangs "on this peg of money"(97). He is like Matthew Arnold's Scholar Gipsy. He is happy living with the primitive people who live closer to the ways of nature. He is given to understand that Meena, truly speaking, cannot respond to him. A product of "phoney society" (P.185) as she is, she fails to quench his thirst, to satisfy his soul. The distance between the two grows more and more. There is a gap of communication between the two. He affirms: "Communication between us was soon reduced to zero" (186). Billy is east, Meena is west, and they cannot meet together. He does not even touch Meena for many months.



Even they fail to communicate and respond to each other. This tells upon their lives, their vitality. Naturally, highly "self-possessed" (74) Meena Biswas, "buffeted by some enormous sorrow" (P.74) is given to sobs. Billy, in his turn, loses his buoyancy everyday. Meena fails to understand "why he is always annoyed with me" (P.76), "why he is so unhappy". (P.77) she reflects thus: "God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day" (P.75). She complains that Billy has turned out a changed man. He is no more the man she had married. Romi, too, notices the change in Billy and says: "I had never felt so strange with Billy Biswas"(P.69) and that "He seemed duller than most dull men that I usually met" (P.70). Romi further remarks:

It was as though if some part of him had gone on strike. All my words simply sank upon his listless mind without so much as causing a ripple. Gone was the staggering intelligence, the spectroscopic interests, the sense of humour. He had either turned banal, something that I had seen happen often enough, or, unknown to us, he was turned upon some obscure segment of himself, ferreting out a bitter secret, settling an old score. Whatever it might have been, the Billy Biswas I had known was finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain(P.70).

Billy's turning into an introvert. He forsakes his responsibilities towards his family, his wife and his son. He cares only for his responsibilities towards his soul: "I had greater responsibilities towards my soul" (P.186). "He is a pilgrim of the spiritual worlds".⁷ He becomes self-centred. His tortured soul terribly needs application of some balm by someone who can

share his suffering. With a view to getting the right kind of solace that his injured soul needs, he meets Rima Kaul, who has been loving him passionately since the day she met him. His trips to Bombay take him closer to her. She, he is sure, has much of that "rare degree of empathy" and "sufficient idea of human suffering" which Meena lacks. Billy himself remarks: "I came to like it even more than I liked the sex part. I felt happy not when I took her but when she said, "Oh, how misunderstood you are, my poor boy. I know how you feel. Those who harass you should be put to death straightway. It was this that I was really looking for" (P.188). But here Billy is mistaken. 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 in a third-rate hotel and "like any common rogue" (P.188) he seduces her. But very soon he is given to understand that his relationship with Rima is nothing but his degradation. He remarks: "After it [seduction] was over I looked into her clear trusting eyes, and I had a first glimpse of my degradation" (P.188). He turns a hypocrite, a thoroughly corrupt being. Unfortunately, he fails to find a way out of it. He does not have "the guts to break away from this filth" (P.189). He points out :

The worst of it was that in spite of this knowledge of my degeneration, I continued to behave as before, I continued to whine and lie and sham. I found that I could not stop. I met her three or four times after that. Each time I could determine to be honest—with her, with myself—and each time I would start to play the part as soon as I got the chance. You have no idea how ridiculous and fraudulent it became. I offered to divorce Meena and marry



her even though Rima herself never even hinted at such a thing. I agreed to start living with her as soon as possible. And all the time I knew that I intended no such thing (P.188).

Thus, Billy reaches the climax of hypocrisy in his way of working. He delves deep into corruption, and affirms: "It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied for so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for" (P.189). He now rests assured that no woman of this "phoney society" can satisfy his soul.

Frequent hallucinations and visions of a woman still haunt him. He one writes to Tuula:

"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. And once I saw her, her face strangely luminous in the twilight, loading a freight train with sulphur on a siding in one of our eastern ports. Yes this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand (PP.225-226).

This time, it is not a hunger for sensual satisfaction. "It is a quest for self-realization, for a union with the missing part of his soul".⁸ Sitting outside his tent on a particular "fateful" (190) night, he hears "two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay" (P.190), knowing that "the price of

making such choices is terrible" and that "the price of not making them is even more terrible" (P.190). Almost always "an enigmatic impression" of Billy's life (P.24), as Romi rightly remarks, is noticeable.

He is in search of a surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. He listens to the calls of the hills, the streams, the trees, the forests and the tribal people. They seem to be calling him: "They all seemed to be waiting and watching and staring at me. It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and father of a handsome child; it was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth's first night. —"Come", it said. "Come to our primitive world that would sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you.—. "Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back?— This is all there is on earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come. Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night". (PP.120-121)

Billy is so much fed up with the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, hollowness and hypocrisy and feels so much drawn towards the primitive life that he leaves his wife, his only son and his old parents. Once he gets an opportunity to take his students on an anthropological expedition to the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and gets so much fascinated by the intense beauty of the hills and their inhabitants, particularly women with graceful figures and bright eyes, that he disappears into the "saal" forests of the Maikala Hills. With the Bhils and their



leader Dhunia, he eats, drinks and waits for the rising of the moon and "he could for the first time see clearly the change entering him. While he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back" (P.137). An enormous search is launched by the police to find Billy out. When they fail to find him out, it is presumed that he has been killed by a tiger prowling in the area.

Billy's fascination for the primitive life, really speaking, is a search for his identity: "It was more or less the same with me except that I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going"? (P.122)

With a skilful weight of the details, Joshi manages to explore the protagonist's psychological instincts. Billy's "enigmatic" behavior can be understood in terms of certain psychological and anthropological facts at work with reference to Jung's theory of the collective unconscious. In addition to the immediate consciousness, which is thoroughly personal in nature and which we believe to be only an empirical psyche, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give a definite form to certain psychic contents. "But if we consider the tremendous powers that lie hidden in the mythological and religious spheres in man the aetiological significance of the archetype appears less fantastic. He only expresses something which millions of the people before him have believed.

Bilasia, Billy understands, is the right woman to satisfy his soul.

"Meena deadens his senses, Rima corrupts him and the material civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who causes explosion of senses—the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and its symbols in Meena and Rima. From Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not a mere trifling in Billy's life, it is a development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. In Bilasia the physical and the elemental meet. She is both Laurentian and Blakean. Bilasia, to use Jungian concept, is his missing self. Arun Joshi's protagonists are Pirandello's cluster of identities in search of wholeness. In terms of psycho-analysis. Billy and Bilasia are two selves of the same personality.⁸

seeking something else. I am still seeking something else'.

'What is that?'

He seemed to be thinking.

'God'? I prompted.

'There, there, old chap, that is too big a word'.

'Something like that?'

'Yes, something like that'.

This "search" (P.177) for meaning is the doomed existentialist's search that ultimately drives the protagonist to the doors of death, the final tragedy.

Like the 'sādhakās' of Tantra', Billy hankers after self-realization, the experience of identification with the divine. He gets a spiritual pleasure out of his 'sādhakās' and therefore, cannot think of going back



to "the bourgeois filth"¹¹ of the materialistic civilization.

- According to the 'Sāṅkhya' system of Indian philosophy, evolution takes place when 'Purush' and 'Prakriti' come into contact. Bilasia is 'Prakriti' and Billy is 'Purush'. Prakriti' needs 'Purush' in order to enjoy and also to obtain liberation ('apavarga'). 'Prakriti' is called 'Shakti'. Bilasia is 'Shakti' for Billy as Anuradha is for Som Bhaskar in The Last Labyrinth. Only when Billy meets Bilasia and unifies himself with her, he realizes his self and becomes whole.

Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly remarks: "Renunciation has always been an Indian ideal of life".¹² The story of Billy resembles the life of Prince Siddhartha, who, afterwards, became famous by the name of Gautam Buddha. Like Siddhartha, Billy is born and brought up in a royal family. His mother mentions an incident from Billy's boyhood of having "run away from home"(51) at the age of fourteen. He gets "stranger and stranger with every passing day"(P.75). Like Siddhartha, he sees that the life in the world is continuous suffering. Likewise, he makes a final renunciation of his wife and son in pursuit of spiritual perfection from darkness to light with a view to rising up as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. If one gets rid of 'avidya' (ignorance), one will get 'bodhi' (enlightenment).

Billy's withdrawal from the world is in the nature of a reflex-action. He withdraws in order to preserve himself from "those rapacious representatives of civilization" (P.143). "Long before his physical disappearance into the saal forests of the Maikala Hills, he had ceased to belong to the world".¹³ His is not an escape from reality but an

escape into reality on the lines of Prince Siddhartha. It is an onward movement from darkness to light. He gets self-realization when he meets the tribal girl Bilasia. "He feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others"(P.142).

To quote Joy Abraham, "It is interesting to note that the union of Billy and Bilasia can be taken as the human soul's longing for reunion with the divine as symbolized by Krishna, the union of "Jeevātmā" with Paramātmā". Billy, like Sindi, is in search of a world of meaningful relatedness which he can find neither in white America nor in the upper-class Indian society. That was the beginning of his quest to understand himself and the nature of reality, something beyond oneself. Becoming a primitive is the first step, a means to an end and in the second stage he is still seeking something 'else' ... This again is not an escape from order and form into reckless freedom, for, interestingly enough, in this second phase as a tribal we see order and form of a different kind".¹⁴ Billy renounces the world, practicing the "discipline of deliverance". Meena is already aware of "Billy's dark mood" (P.7) and senses "the resignation ('Anāsakti') in his voice". (P.81) Billy becomes, as he himself thinks, "some sort of a priest."(P.191) He comes to experience some sort of godhood. He is a kind of mangod, an "avātāra" to the tribals and a faith of this kind is in tune with the Indian tradition: "The East is trying to see God in man (hence the avatars or *incarnations*) while in the West the difference and distance between God and man is unbridgeable"¹⁵ He comes to have certain spiritual magical powers. Dhunia takes him to be the mythical sculptor king come alive with his queen Devi



Ma and a priest who looks after them. Dhunia tells Romi: "He [Billy] is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away"(PP.159-160). He is a man having great healing powers as the manifestation of Kala Pahar's will. Dhunia sees him sending a tiger away who had been roaming the jungle for a week killing their cattle and bringing back his grandson to life who "had been dead for two hours" (P.159). Billy cures Romi's wife Situ or her agonizing chronic migraine by giving her some herb to smell and touching her with a metallic rod. This incident costs Billy his life and gives the story a tragic turn. Billy warns Romi not to disclose his whereabouts to anybody but Situ comes to know the whole of the story and lets Meena and Mr. Biswas know about Billy's being alive. Much against the wishes of Romi, Mr. Biswas, a retired ambassador, sets the whole government machinery moving to trace Billy with an idea "to drag him up to Delhi by force" (P.207). Mr. Rele, the Superintendent of Police, zealously carries out the search. During one of the raids on the tribals, a constable is speared to death by Billy. This irritates Mr. Rele, who is bent upon nabbing the culprit dead or alive. Despite the Collector Romi's best efforts to avoid the tragedy, Billy is shot dead by a 'Havildar'. Romi is deeply grieved at Billy's "end so unbearably tragic"(P.241) and feelingly reflects: "Gradually it dawned upon us that what we had killed was not a man, not even the son of a "Governor", but some one for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we killed one of the numerous mangods of the primitive pantheon"(P.236). Thus ends the existentialist quest of Billy for values and meaning of life in the mad, bad, absurd world where none tries

to understand his problem even after his death. Meena, Mr. Biswas, the Chief Secretary, Rele along with his men, Situ and others are "only the representatives of a society which, in its middle-class mediocrity, bracketed men like Billy with irresponsible fools and common criminals and considered it their duty to prevent them from seeking such meagre fulfillment of their destiny as their tortured lives allowed" (PP.131-132). None of these persons could understand that Billy was making a "search for truth"(P.177).

The protagonist, ultimately, has to pay price with his life for not conforming to the norms of the so-called civilized society and for daring "to step out of its stifling confines" (P.240) and "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"(P.240).

Billy's death "should not be taken as the death of an isolationist but as the triumph of his ideas and principles".¹⁶ The civilized world is all out to destroy him. Even Romi, his trusted friend and the only link from civilization that Billy keeps, ultimately betrays him. He betrays the confidence reposed in him and fails to protect Billy as things get beyond his control when his wife Situ discloses the secret to Billy's father and wife. On the other hand, the tribal world seeks to perpetuate the memory of the man-god by offering him a shrine. Billy's dying words "You bastards" (P.233), watching his close friend Romi approaching him, are significant and meaningful. "It is at the same time a direct abuse, an expression of anger at the betrayal of friendship and the meaningless assault of the civilized world on his creative privacy".¹⁷ As Billy uses the expression thrice



in the novel, it is his finally confirmed verdict on civilization which is not natural but bastardly. In *The Foreigner*, it is Sindi who infringes the society and in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* it is the society that is responsible for the tragedy of Billy.

In the title of the novel, the words "strange" and "case" have thematic significance. Billy's case is "strange" because in the materialistic world where everybody is mad after civilization and its material comforts, he, being Professor in Anthropology of the Delhi University, the America-educated anthropologist and a member of the sophisticated society of Delhi, opts for the primitive life of the tribals. His "case" is an interesting psychological case-study for psycho-analysts and psychiatrists. His predicament is psychologically concerned with the inner psyche and "those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul" (P.8). Unlike Sindi in *The Foreigner* who is assisted by others in his quest, Billy's experiences are mainly psychic and he remains all along a lonely quester.

To Meenakshi Mukherjee, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is "a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folk-lore to reiterate its elemental concerns".¹⁸ As per the oral tradition of story-telling, the novel is a great success as the narrator and the audience both share a common mythology. It is interesting to note that the union of Billy and *Bilasia* is taken as the union of "Jeevātmā" and "Parmātamā", the union of "Purush" and "Prakriti". The novel fits into the scheme of Indian classics which are nothing but the collective unconscious of the whole nation. P. Lal rightly remarks: "Without an absorption in the myths of the lands of one's fore-fathers, it isn't even possible to live meaningful life".¹⁹ In using myth as a structural

pattern, there is a mythical situation underlying the entire texture of the novel. All myths are used with a view to bringing out Billy's experience on the pattern of the 'rishis' and 'sofis' the rich Indian heritage as Joshi himself admits that "the influence of our religious thinkers is, of course, there"²⁰ in the novel which is "primarily concerned with religious issues—the problems of an essentially Hindu mind".²¹

The two stories, the story of the narrator Romi and the story of Billy Biswas, run concurrently in the novel forming an interesting structure of parallelism and contrast. Both the stories are linked together as most of the events in the life of the protagonist have a direct bearing on that of the narrator whose main purpose is "to relate Billy's story"(P.7) and to highlighten his character. Thus, both the stories add glow and glory to the figure of the protagonist in the novel and the view that he is only a shadowy figure²² without any significant place in the structure of the novel is, decidedly, far from the truth. He does have a place as significant and important as that of the narrator Romi and, at times, more dominating in the sequence of events in the novel. B.G.R. Krishnama rightly takes the novel "dominated by the complex, dynamic personality of Billy Biswas".²³

In short,It is in the tribal world that he finds his identity, his roots. There he feels "established". When certain external forces try to uproot him from there, he prefers dying than succumbing to their "black and deep desires". The so-called civilized world destroys him by all means, the tribal world "guarded him as his own" (P.241) until his reappearance from "the sanctuary of the great god of the primitive world" (P.241). Thus, the novel stands as a bitter commentary on the tyranny of the forces



of phoney civilization that crushes man's desire for self-existence and kinship with nature. To sum up with Manohar Bandopadhyay :

There are however few examples in the realm of Indian fiction where such themes have been powerfully exploited and given sustained treatment to match its world counterpart, when a new ground was broken by Arun Joshi in 1971 with his second, and so far the best novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, a censorious war had sparked off damning the author for display of escapism and defeatist alienation. Of course, the critics could not disagree for its gripping tale, absorbing study of tribal life and the moving story of male-female union in the 'final embodiment of the human spirit'. And quite recently there has been a positive renewal of opinion about the novel of which we have almost no parallel in Indo-English fiction. In this novel Joshi picked up the theme of the maladjusted hero and rather added a new dimension to his work in portraying his hero's struggle not merely for his quest of identity but also for his uncompromising search of 'self's spiritual reality'²⁴

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