

## ARUN JOSHI'S THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS- A JOURNEY TO ONE'S INNER SELF

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**Abstract:** *Billy is consumed by a growing restlessness. He desperately searches for true identity. Detestation for civilization and love for the tribal way of life, blurring of reality. He has to pay the final penalty by not conforming to norms. It is essential to strike a chord and resolve discontent through identification with Nature.*

**Key Words:-** *Roots,insulate, inner self, identity, primitive, oneness*

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Arun Joshi is one of those novelists who have given a vivid portrayal of the problems afflicting man. The modern man is suffering from the problem of severance from his roots. He has lost his identity. He is in search of his true self. Arun Joshi has successfully presented the problem of modern man in all his novels. His heroes often wallow in confusion, unable to find their place in the modern upper-class society. Jasbir Jain rightly points about them that his heroes, "are men engaged in search for a meaning of life. They are lonely and ill at ease in the world in which they have to live.... they all experience the claims of love and hatred and learn to meet the demands of their inner selves by out-stripping the narrow confines of the self" (pg.52). They desperately search for an identity, and in the process, isolate themselves from their true self and suffer in the modern society.

The present paper deals with the journey of self - exploration in Arun Joshi's novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. In this novel Arun Joshi attempts to focus on the way in which the self tries to assess its separation from the family and society. He succeeds in portraying the character of Billy who is overpowered by conflicting urges within him. Billy (Bimal) Biswas, the protagonist of the novel, is trying to search for the meaning of his life. The story is narrated by Billy's friend, Romi Sahai from his own observations. Romi meets Billy while searching for accommodation in New York. Billy offers to share his apartment in Harlem. The sharing of the flat develops into an extraordinary comradeship between them which lasts till the end.

Billy is a man of brilliant intellect, of profound sensibility and of extraordinary obsession. He belongs to the upper-upper crust of Indian society. He studies deeply the tribal attitudes and customs. He earns his Ph.D. in Anthropology. He feels deeply interested in the places described in the books. He tells Romi that he wants to visit the places described in the books, meet the people who live there and trace their origins in the world. In fact his whole life is organized around his interest in the primitive man. He is aware of the deeper layers of his personality. This awareness makes him something like a detached person who is in search

of his true self. He develops a bitter hatred for the so-called civilized world and a strong passion for the tribal world.

Romi observes Billy's restlessness many times. His talk of Avocambo- an odd play, his behaviour at a music party in George's apartment and during their long walks, Billy reveals the dark, unknowable layers of his personality. Romi learns from Billy how he often has hallucinations. He is totally unaware of his hallucinations. He does not analyze them. In fact those hallucinations are the call of his inner self.

Billy's Swedish friend, Tuula Lindgren is the second person who knows Billy's predicament. She knows what is going on in his dark, inscrutable, and unsmiling eyes. She understands Billy's interest in the primitive. She finds him obsessed with a latent quest, a quest for self. Billy discusses his hallucinations with her. She tells her that in everyone such hallucinations occur in a very mild form. She also advises him not to encourage them too much.

After returning to India Billy joins Delhi University as a Professor in Anthropology. However, in India, he feels like a fish out of water. He feels restlessness and sees no other way out than to insulate himself and flee from the civilized, sophisticated modern society as his interest in Anthropology continues. He undertakes numerous expeditions for investigations among primitive communities in hills and forests. In order to cure his obsession for the primitive and to settle down in life, Billy decides to get married. He marries Meena Chatterjee, a sophisticated and most beautiful girl of his own Bengali community. But he remains forlorn even after his marriage.

Billy often shares his thoughts with Tuula Lindgren. His aversion to the people and civilization is reflected in his letters written to Tuula at different times. He writes, "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 and yawning (their large teeth showing) or. ... the so-called thinkers and philosophers and men like that .... are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip of life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child?" (p.p. 92-93). These letters show his concern for civilization, society, individuals and also himself. The question of his identity comes in his mind. He thinks that he is living a wrong life. His self is lost in the world around him. He finds himself spending wastefully the priceless treasure of his life in the civilized society.

Billy's marriage with Meena turns into a miserable failure. They are not made for each other. Meena is worldly wise. She wants nothing but money and glamour which Billy consciously avoids. She is just the opposite of Billy's temperament. In spite of Meena, Billy is haunted by the vision of a woman. He is drawn towards Rima Kaul who has been in love with him. She loves him intensely and passionately. They develop a rapport. But when he possesses Rima, he realizes that mere sympathy cannot satisfy his soul. Rima's body and sentiments fail to reveal his identity. He comes to the realization that his relationship with Rima cannot fulfill his desire. It is a corruption of his being. He deems his affair with Rima as filth that has gripped his being.

Billy now intensely feels that no woman's body can satisfy him. It is not a hunger for sensual satisfaction. At this time, he merely feels that the material society corrupts him. He feels that it will degrade and estrange him from his own soul. Hence he is in quest of a surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. While sitting outside his tent, he is haunted by a sense of corruption. He feels that his soul responds to the voices of the hills, forests, untamed Nature and the tribal people. They seem to be calling him. Billy has now two clear choices - either to follow his call of primitive life or to live the life of this sophisticated, meaningless modern world. He decides to go in for the first option.

Billy leaves the world of the civilized men. He reaches out to the world where he is not culturally uprooted and socially estranged. He departs from the avaricious world to search for his true self. It is not an escape from the realities of the life but an escape into the real life. It is in the primitive tribal life that he finds his own fulfillment and the essence of his existence. Soon after the disappearance of Billy, an enormous search is launched by the police. But they cannot discover Billy and in the end declares that he is killed by a tiger. But Romi, who is posted as a Collector in a district of the Central India, does not give up hopes of tracing him.

Ten years after Billy's disappearance, Romi finds Billy in his tour of interior villages which are afflicted by a severe drought. Billy tells him about his life after disappearance. He is, now, living by the side of a white cliff called Chandtola which is, according to him, the place of some supernatural forces. He seems to be in secret communication with the forces of Nature and knows the course of events to come. Billy has gone there in search of his identity. He has liked the tribal way of drinking, dancing and the open orgiastic love-making. He is madly in love with a widowed tribal girl, Bilasia. It is on meeting her that he suddenly discovers that bit of himself that he had been searching for all his life. Bilasia, at that moment, is the essence of that primitive force that has called him night after night, year after year. Billy discards filial and social obligations. He finds his fulfillment in the primitive tribal life. He is fascinated by the primitive atmosphere. He is fed up with strangers, unresponsive people like his wife, Meena and the unscrupulous society in which Rima Kaullives. He meets Bilasia in the forest and the primeval force unifies them. Dhunia the head man and uncle of Bilasia, and people respect him as savior God of the tribals." He 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. 159-60). His peaceful tribal life indicates a remarkable change in contrast to his earlier restlessness.

Romi does not believe in Billy's supernatural power. He is, however, surprised when a few days later Billy cures his wife Situ's agonizing chronic migraine. But this incident indirectly costs Billy his life. Though Romi promises not to disclose his whereabouts to anybody, his irritating wife forces him to tell her about Billy. When she learns from Romi that Billy has cured her, she informs Meena and Mr. Biswas of his whereabouts. Billy's father moves the higher authorities to retrieve Billy. Romi tries his best to pacify Mr. Biswas and Meena. However, they do not let the matter rest. They go to the Chief Secretary and narrate to him the matter. He threatens to punish Romi. Consequently, Rele, the Superintendent of Police and his men enter the village and mistakenly kill Billy. Though Romi tries his best to save Billy, he cannot avoid Billy's tragic death.

According to noted academicians, SashiDiwan and Dr. MadhuKamra, Billy “is consumed by a restlessness which grows steadily, forcing him to leave the materialistic aspects of so-called civilized society. Renouncing his past, his family and the everyday world, Billy goes in search of a world of meaningful relatedness which he finds in the tribal world of primitives, he settles there for the rest of his life and ultimately accepts death to sustain his new formed identity of a mythical king of tribals. Freeing ‘self’ from the restraints of the external environment, he remains subjected by the urges of his sub conscious self” (ijellh, pg.3). Thus, Billy's search for his self is conducted in a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price for it. Efforts to bring Billy back to civilization by capturing him only leads to the final tragedy. He pays with his life for not conforming to the norms of the urban civilization. Throughout the journey of life Billy has been confusedly driving towards his real self.

Mr. K. R. S. Iyengar rightly points out that, "*In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of helpless, rootless people a stage further, and has revealed ... new gas-chambers of self-forged misery" (pg.514). Arun Joshi highlights that man feels awfully discontented with his life in this stilted civilization and throws light upon the restlessness prevailing in this complacent modern society, which makes man feel uprooted. Joshi shows through his protagonist that if only man strikes a chord with nature, he can realize the complete oneness suffusing and enveloping the world.

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