



The strange case of Billy Biswas: A study of dichotomic cultures

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Abstract

The present paper is an attempt to study the dichotomic cultures: rural and urban present in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The analysis of the entire corpus of Arun Joshi's novels shows that he has consistently used a specific pattern for his works. The innate urge to determine life's meaning in positive terms leads Joshi's protagonists to wage an incessant war against challenging situations. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents the story of its protagonist who leaves the rural society and moves to the urban part of the world with certain aspirations but soon feels nostalgic for his home town. The whole of the novel shows a conflict between rural and urban part of India with their cultures. This dichotomy of culture is responsible for his psychological torture as well as his constant conflict with his identity.

Keywords: dichotomy, culture, identity, psychology

Introduction

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a study of the total alienation of its protagonist Billy Biswas from the modern bourgeois society of India. Arun Joshi's novel is meant to be the reader's novel in every sense of the term. In this novel Arun Joshi seems to be mediating between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, between the two distinct cultures – the sophisticated and the primitive. The protagonist, Billy Biswas is a rich and educated Indian who leaves the native place in search of happiness and moves to the urban part of the country. It is the journey of life whether happy or sad makes or breaks a human. As William Walsh says: "Suffering is the universal experience of extremity which unites all men... (Walsh, 30). Very soon his move proves to be wrong one and he starts living his life in disillusionment and feels alienated from the modern bourgeois society of India. In this novel, Arun Joshi depicts how the process of individualization destroys a man of extraordinary sensibilities. He terribly repents for his turning away from the traditional values, ethics and culture of India. Ultimately after his death his ashes are brought to his village and though in the form of his ashes he meets the traditional values left by him. The central character of the novel, Billy develops the symptoms of split personality as he is unable to relate himself to the world and fails to reconcile himself with his own self. As he has moved himself from country life to the urban but soon starts oscillating between primitive and the modern. The modern civilized society which is absolutely imperfect is contrasted with the primitive society which is shown as perfect.

It is a kind of mysterious power of Bilasia that has brought Billy close to the nature where he feels free to express himself. We are reminded of Buddha at Billy's decision of leaving his family and moving to the forest in Central India. It is his nostalgia for the simple mode of life that brings him to the jungles of Central India. After moving to the materialistic society of urban area he feels regretted at his decision of

leaving the traditional values as well as ethics and culture of India and very soon feels fed up with the modern society. In fact, he is an educated Ph. D. holder from America and a lecturer at University of Delhi and lived a good part of his life in so called civilized society and yet feels unsuitable in such society and becomes interested in exploring the inner part of his life. He feels estranged and alienated the moment he starts exploring the real inner being and starts struggling with his identity. His stay with civilized people always keeps him haunting and making him realize that he is not at all a part of the society and craves for the real destination. Despite of his high education he had keen interest in the aboriginals and their life style and confesses,

"All I want to do in the life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginals of the world" (Joshi, *The Strange Case* 14).

This shows that Billy is very much fond of the primitive world and his attachment with this primitive world can be seen in his conversation with Romi about the play *Avocambo*, which shows his personality with the split between modern and primitive. He starts considering everybody as degenerated and self-centered, and also feels that he is not at all made for such society and at the same time feels that the society too is not made for him. This stage feeling in him makes him to set for the search for the place where he could feel at home. This search for the appropriate place for the residence brings him to Harlem.

It was right from his childhood that Billy had a keen interest in nature, landscape and the rural part of India. He was greatly fascinated by the beautiful land of Bhubaneswar and the sculpture art at Konark when he visited these places at the age of fourteen. These were the visits which bring out the complete change in his life and prove to be the turning point

in the life of Billy Biswas. During one of the visits he is hypnotized by the folk music and the unknowingly gets involved in dancing at the erotic tune of that music. This music and the sight of rural part of India is deeply imprinted in his mind and keeps haunting his mind even his future life.

After getting his education in America and living there for a good span of life Billy finds the elite society of America inappropriate to his quest and returns to India. But to his utter surprise he finds the hybrid society of Delhi alienated and deserted not only spiritually but also emotionally. This makes him to come to the opinion that all high class societies are superficial. He comes to Delhi to share his knowledge of Anthropology in the University of Delhi but his spectre of identity keeps him haunting. When his life becomes terribly disturbed at the hallucinations he decides to get married to get out of the situation. He marries Meena Chatterjee, a sensuous, gorgeous and good looking lady, but very soon Billy realizes that the marriage instead of proving to be the solution to his problem proves to be a catastrophe. The couple proves to be the two points of the universe in their choices and interests. Billy married Meena as he got fed up with the materialistic life and worldly pleasures but on the contrary his wife is very much fond of money, materialism and fascinated by the elite society. The marriage fiasco has negative impact upon the physis and personality of Billy. His health fails and his intellectual understanding starts declining. With every passing day, the degree of alienation between Meena and the protagonist goes on increasing and proves to be a complete fiasco.

Arun Joshi has presented the protagonist of the novel as torn between two cultures the modern and the orthodox, the rural and the urban one. Being the part and parcel of this society he finds himself very much detached from the society and sets out in search of new society and new identity where he could feel attached. In one of the incidents Billy almost had started a fight with his friend when he called the banjaras thieves and their wives as whores.

“...all banjaras were thieves and their women were no better than the whores” (Joshi, *The Strange Case* 60)

Billy had started leaning towards the primitive world and considering the civilized world as spiritually bankrupt. If we try to investigate the various reasons behind his beliefs in superstitions, we come to know that he is always alienated from the civilized world; therefore, living in the company of primitive community he too starts following their habits. His father tries to distract him from the old superstitions but his deep interest in anthropology inculcates his likings for such things. The modern world of civilized people and their happy go lucky life is nothing but like animal world for Billy and he considers it as means of distracting people from the activities of brain and heart. He felt himself to be an exile in the civilized world and considers himself belonging to the other world. Had he believed in the concept of happiness and satisfaction as per the civilized world he could have settled as lecturer of Anthropology in the University of Delhi. Even Meena could have given him the happiness of married life, but on the contrary his interest in the subject of Anthropology distracted him from modern life style of civilized people. The study of his character also shows that it was not merely his interest in the subject of Anthropology that pulled him

towards the hill side but he was born with the instinct of primitive world. It was the place where all the luxury available gave him happiness of life.

Arun Joshi has blended a wonderful portrayal of Billy's character in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The dichotomic elements are present not only in Billy's changed view of lifestyle but even in his desire to enjoy the life, not as per his earlier ideology but as per the modern concept. He develops close association with Bilasia and develops the thinking that the true embodiment of human spirit can be achieved only by following the Hindu philosophy of Sankhya. According to it the completeness of human being can take place only after the union of male and female. A drastic change takes place in the personality of Billy after meeting Bilasia. She is not affected by the city life in every sense. She is away from the materialistic life of modern society and for her relations matter more than money. She is not fond of luxurious life of modern society; she sleeps on leaves of tree which associates her more to the nature than human nature. She is completely opposite to the character of Meena who is affected by the cosmopolitan life of Delhi culture. Billy finds himself bound free and closely associated with nature in the Hills of Maikal. If we analyze Billy's character we come to know that his identity is completely different from the life he is living and people he is surrounded with. This could be the major reason behind his disappearance from the urban life to the rural and primitive. When he is questioned by Romi about avoiding family responsibility by running away from it he answers very cleverly that he has more responsibility to the self and its identity--the soul than family. For him question of the soul was even more important than family and friends because it is through one's own identity that relations are born. When He gets fed up with the modern life, he disappears from there and moves to the Primitive civilization. Even though he does not find comfortable in the modern and civilized world, he never rejects it completely. What makes him to leave the civilized world is only the sterile westernization that has forgotten all the ethics of human life. Being an educated person he too believes in the development of civilization but at the same time hates the hypocrisy and deceitfulness of modernization. The second half of the novel describes Billy's life in the tribal village Dhunia. It is a place not touched by the hypocritical life of modern society and far from the dehumanized world. Since his disappearance from the civilized world nobody knows about his whereabouts, till Romi after joining the administrative services visits the Hills. By that time Billy has completely adapted the primitive lifestyle as Romi in his first meet find him clothed in lion skin. He also narrates him that after living amongst the primitive people he has understood the true meaning of life. The peaceful life of Billy gets disturbed at Romi's disclosure of his whereabouts to Situ. Billy's friends and family members insist to meet him against his will but Billy rejects to meet and go back to city life. His father tries to search him in the village but nobody tells about his whereabouts which shows their love and respect for Billy. He ultimately becomes the victim of some rumors spread by the educated people and is killed. The death of Billy itself is symbolic which shows that truth has always been crushed. His attempts to find the truth of self and quest for identity ultimately become the reason for his death.

The representation of modern and civilized people in the novel shows that the civilized people are not only money minded but even their hearts too got bankrupt. They are alienated not only from their family and society but even from their own self. Almost every human has become so selfish that each relation is developed out of profit and casually. It shows that even animal world is better than human world. Billy's death is the best example that shows that if innocent world is interfered by the civilized world then its mockery and hypocrisy kill the very soul of human essence.

Arun Joshi infers the dreams and aspirations of the next generation and interprets them adding his own imaginations and experiences. He softly minces thought with reality and tries to justify them. Billy, the hero and the subject of dissection in the novel mysteriously runs away from his house and people and is believed to have entered the forests without justification of any of his moves. In the present context each person seems to be nurturing a wish to get into the current city life and to achieve materialistic bliss. Arun Joshi introduces Billy and presents him to be different from others. He is not completely presented as an outcast from the beginning of the novel but he is very much a part of the trio team who meets and lives together in USA for their educational pursuit. The poignant vision of Billy's distancing from civilized society and his spurt into the tribal world has been exquisitely narrated by Romi that " He is interested not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark, mossy labyrinths of his soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun." (Joshi, *The Strange Case*, 04). Arun Joshi represents a consciousness that has emerged from the confrontation between tradition and modernity.

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