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Scrutiny of Self in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

An Outstanding novelist of human predicament, Arun Joshi is ranked with the great masters of contemporary Indian fiction in English. He believes that reality lies within the consciousness of isolated individuals. As he is the great writer of psychological perception, he envisions the inner crisis of the modern man in his five novels. In particular, his second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the apple of his eye. It portrays the story of the protagonist who is dragged by the mysterious world of the tribal society. The protagonist, Billy's strange quest leads him to leave his position as the sole inheritor of a wealthy family and lead to live a natural life. There is no comfort in his American life as well as in his marital life too. Further, the story visualises Billy's quest for individualism and self-identity at the cost of leaving materialistic world. This paper focuses on the clashes between the civilised world and the primitive one as well as it looks at the root of the protagonist Billy's quest for the self.

Keywords: Civilization, Self-identity, Individualism, Primitive

Generally, every human being has to face different experiences involving his mental, physical, emotional and social activities during his sojourn on earth. He has to go through these experiences in different stages of his growth from his state of infancy to his state of adulthood. During his growth, culture, society, values, morals, ethics and genetics determine his behaviour. Tendency to behave according to likes and dislikes has become an inherent quality in him. There must be decency and courtesy in human behaviour and attitudes. It does not mean that only those who are very decent and courteous are the best people in their behaviour.

However children learn by imitating the speeches, actions and behaviour of the elders very innocently because they are easily impressionable. As they grow, they stick to what they have learnt by imitation knowingly. Parents should be good examples for their sons and daughters to emulate because what they do or say will reflect in the behaviour of their grown up children. If they respect the feelings of their children, recognize their merits, encourage them, show their real love and affection towards them, and care for their welfare, their children when they grow up will be blessed with all these positive attitudes of their parents and behave accordingly towards their parents.

Moreover everyone is responsible for the consequences of his actions and behaviours. He must realize that his every action will bear fruit good as well as bad. His good attitudes and manners produce good results whereas his negative attitudes bring out from bad qualities. Environment, the society and its tradition and the expectation of civilized behaviour and attitudes in the society in which man is born and brought up are mainly responsible for his strange behaviour in and attitude to life. What Albert Einstein has said about such influences on him is worth citing here to strengthen this line of argument. According to him:

The personality that finally emerges is largely formed by the environment in which man happens to find himself during his development, by the structure of the society in which he grows up, by the tradition of that society, and by its appraisal of particular types of behavior. (27)

Precisely, Literature in English in India is truly a continuation of the creative spirit which is manifesting itself in diverse idioms in other Indian languages. Its rich thematic and stylistic catalog, its unique invocation of the distinctive Indian sensibility, its blending of the western and the native aesthetics blend invisibly to make Indian English literature evocative of both Indian English in particular and English literature in general. While the old established novelists have a historical relevance, it is the writing of the late novelists by shifting the focus from external world to the exploration of individual's interior world. They explore the limitless depths of the mind and the hidden contours of the human psyche. Under the impact of new pressures of the scientific and technological advancements, the world around shows signs of disintegration of the individual. Prominently, Arun Joshi's writings are the best instances for this.

Usually the human psyche is undoubtedly the largest concern of Joshi and his interest is justified by the insight he had into the hyper active psyches of individuals. He depicts artistically the hopes, aspirations, despairs and failures which turn the human mind into unpredictable directions. At the vital points of Joshi's psychological exposure of the self are the emotions of attachment and detachment, which are given rise to by the inner configuration. The exploration of conflicting attitudes of the self for an acceptable self-esteem is the most prominent theme in the novels of Arun Joshi. His novels ultimately are suggestive of the questing spirit in man which, dissatisfied with life's obliqueness, is even yearning to find better alternatives and a meaningful excursion through the world. Mostly the exploration of the self in an attempt to find the true self and salvation is symbolized by the many outward journeys undertaken by the character.

Commonly Joshi's protagonists suffer a stranger hunger and analyses the acute mental conflict experienced by them. They lead an agonising sense of isolation and indulge in investigations trying to trace the cause of their unusual mental trauma. However they also try to find solutions to their problems as well as most of his characters are based on real life rather than on a utopian wistful thinking. Further, man fails to perceive today the very purpose behind life and the relevance of his existence in a hostile world. Nevertheless extraordinary scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, the contemporary man is destined to find himself in a tragic mess.

In fact, man turns into shining gold coming out of the fire of hardships. He lives not for himself but for the social service. Related to the above mentioned point, an outstanding concept of self is preliminary here. By and large, "Self" is a word one encounters frequently especially treatise concerning religion, philosophy, literature and such other disciplines dealing with basic human concerns. According to the psychologist, the self is the most significant construct of the theory of personality. Thus the self refers to the conscious reflective personality of an individual. In his novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Joshi pictures the contemporary man's inner crisis of being isolated from the society upholding our glorious cultural ethos.

Notably, with an admirable first person narrative, Joshi manages to expose the protagonist's psychic and psychological instincts. He portrays the conflict between more basic and greater forces, namely civilization and primitive life or between nature and art. However the case of Billy is the rarest of the rare. He has the simple mode of life which has been described and discussed at length. Additionally, Billy is completely fed up with the grossly materialistic society. He worries that it had turned away from the traditional values, ethics and culture of India. Moreover he was a member of the "aristocratic heritage" (12), and he belonged to the upper crust of Indian Society. At the same time, he is the supporter of anti-materialistic way of Hindu life. Hence Hari Mohan Prasad rightly remarks,

Crisis of self and a quest for fulfillment, the fin mot of *The Foreigner*, continues to be the central experience of Arun Joshi next novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The deeper significance of the work can properly be discerned if it is explicated both as an

indictment of the phony, hot – shot, sordid modern culture and as an embodiment of *Purush – Prakriti* unification, particularly in the context of Sankhya philosophy. (Arun Joshi, 87)

Nevertheless the first section of the novel provides a contextual for understanding the psychologically tortured Billy and how he was in constant conflict with his identity. In spite of such a comfortable background, he felt himself to be a rebel in the so-called civilised society and he became involved in exploring the inwardness of life. In the opening of the novel itself, Romi rightly concludes: “If life’s meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions...then I don’t know of any man who sought it more doggedly and...Abandoned himself so recklessly to its call.” (8)

Remarkably, even when he is only fourteen and visits Bhubaneswar, he notices the landscape of the city as well as when he goes to Konark, he is captivated by the imagery of the sculpture. It is expressed that though the spirit may be very old, older than even the human existence itself, yet the knowledge of truth is embedded with the tribal behind dark inscrutable faces” (124). While visiting to the tribal village, Billy overwhelmed by erotic energy in the tone and tune of the folk music while dancing and celebrating life. It is a turning point in the life of Billy Biswas for the first time.

Nonetheless the exclusive foreign society was not affable to the quest of identity for Billy and he returns to India. But to his utter shock, he finds Delhi not different from the American society as well as he feels that Delhi is the great hybrid society is equally spiritually deserted and emotionally alienated. Henceforth, he feels that all the rich societies all over the world are superficial. Later, he marries Meena Chatterjee, a sensuous, gorgeous and good looking lady and the time passes, Billy realises that the hurried marriage was a calamity rather than a solution to his perennial problems, in contrary, they are bipolar in nature.

Furthermore on one side in Billy is non-consumerist and anti-materialistic but on the other hand Meena held is charmed of money. Billy hates the worldly pleasures, but Meena is fond of money, market and the materialism, supposedly the true identity of the elite society. Such disparate interests were bound to end in conflict and the marriage between the two is no more than a martial disaster. With every passing day, the degree of alienation between Meena and the protagonist mounts, their conjugal life turns into the “most precarious of battlefields.” (81) However the psychological reason is the main for the separation between Meena and Billy, it can be safely concluded that the way Billy modified to start his new identity was a complete failure.

Consequently Joshi effectively embodies that his protagonist was not an abnormal person. Moderately he was very much a part of the human society and had the wish and longing to give a new identity and meaning to life by establishing a family. At the same time he depicts that Billy is destined by his very nature for some other person and places hence this brings out the character of Billy is really the character of destiny. Mukteshwar Pandey writes in his book, *Arun Joshi: The Existentialist Element in His Novels*,

Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is often described as existentialist in certain aspects. It is concerned with the crisis of self, the problem of identity and the quest for fulfillment. In one of his interview, Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore, that mysterious under world, which is the human soul. (53)

Accordingly the death of Billy was unfortunate in many ways. The search of truth has always been crushed. But none wonders about the fact that a person who takes birth in the upper crust of society has the will to find the truth, the truth of the self, the quest for the identity and the identity which gives meaning to life. Mainly, the civilised people have gone bankrupt not only in their hearts but mentally too, they are all alone and alienated. In addition to this, they just live and live anyway and hence there is no use of living like anyway. Accordingly, the so-called civilised world should learn a lesson from the death of Billy that every society and civilisation has its independent way of living and that they should interfere in its workings.

Finally, a human being is gifted with rationality which seeks to establish the causal relationship between everything that takes place in human life, but none cares it. In fact, the human beings have become the most irrational creatures in the civilized world. So the quest for identity was the prime motive of Mr. Billy Biswas as well as his death prevents the endeavour which was to enlighten the civilised world. To put it in a nutshell, the life of Billy Biswas from childhood was filled with the imagination of the world reality. He continuously struggles with the conflict of identity everywhere. Thus Arun Joshi exposes his quest for the 'Self' in a perfect manner throughout this novel.

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