



Arun Joshi's the strange case of Billy Biswas: Escaping of hero from bourgeois stratum and finding his roots in primitive world

Ravindra Kumar¹, Amarjeet Singh²

¹ Professor, Department of English Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

² Research Scholar, Chaudhary Charan Singh University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Abstract

The present paper is about the escaping of the protagonist from his bourgeois society and finding his roots in primitive world. The novel *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* was published in 1971, it is an account of protagonist's life who wanted to escape from the bourgeois and money minded society to a primitive life where he may heal or console his burning inner self. The protagonist of the novel is an educated man who completed his Ph.D. programme in anthropology from a famous university of New York, the United States and he returned to India, his motherland, after taking degree. In New York, he saw dehydrated society; money minded people and their hollowness and his soul didn't find any peace. After coming in India he found the same scenario as he left in the United States. For him it was only a change of theatres but the drama was same. So he decided to leave his family and disappear in the forests of Maikala Hills during his one of expeditions. In the act of escaping from the woods, he was killed by the representatives of bourgeois society.

Keywords: Dehydrated society, existential dilemma, spiritual hollowness, sense of irrelevance, disinterestedness, primitive world, and bourgeois filth

Introduction

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) came to limelight with the publication of his fourth novel *The Last Labyrinth* (1982), his *magnum opus*, for which he was crowned the Sahitya Academy Award, the greatest Indian literary award, in 1983. Joshi was a versatile Indian English novelist of the second half of the twentieth century who had attempted to grapple with the predicament of modern man in his society. He had been influenced by the Western existential philosophers like Soren Kierkegaard, Jean Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Like the works of his influencers', his works also present the man's baffling existence in the modern society.

The purpose of present paper is to deal with Escaping of Hero from Bourgeois Stratum and Finding His Roots in Primitive World in *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* (1971).

[1] Written from the point of view of first person narrator, the present novel is an account of its hero's life journey from the bourgeois and money minded society to a primitive life where he may heal or console his burning inner self. Billy alias Bimal Biswas is the central character of the novel who, like Sindi Oberai, his predecessor, the protagonist of *The Foreigner* (1968), moves from one place to another to find solace in the time of great distress and he left New Delhi for Maikala Hills in Madhya Pradesh.

The entire novel is divided into two parts where in the first part Billy's life in New York, New Delhi and his disappearance in Maikala Hills and in the second part his reappearance after ten years in the same location were narrated by witness narrator, Romesh Sahai alias Romi, who was the bosom friend of Billy and was appointed a district Collector in the same state.

Romi started narrating the story of Billy who met him in New York at his friend's apartment and Billy was

introduced by host as an "Engineer, Anthropologist, anarchist... and thoroughly crazy, even by Indian standards." (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 8) Romi was facing the accommodation problem in the city. After knowing the situation Billy offered the narrator his apartment to live in. Romi lived with him in his apartment which was located in Herlam, the slum of the city. Billy belonged to the upper stratum of the society as his grandfather was the Prime Minister of a famous Princely State of Orissa while his father served as an Indian ambassador to a European country and was currently working as a reputed judge of Supreme Court of India. His father sent him to United States to take up an engineering course but he started doing Doctorate in anthropology, his first love and did not reveal this secret to his father. It was very strange for Romi that a man who got a silver-spoon upbringing was living in worst slum area of world's very famous city i.e. New York. Billy clarifies that he has selected the area to live in because "That was the most human place he could find, and White America was much too civilized for him." (9) We came to know his strange obsessions as well as strange personality of Billy through Romi. He observed that "he was one of those rare men who have poise without pose." (10). Billy was the master of extraordinary sensibility. Tuula Lindgren was a Swedish girl who was very close to Billy. She was the second person around him, besides Romi, who examined the strange personality of Billy because she was a student of advance psychiatry. It is observed that Billy's keen interest was laying in anthropology and he was influenced by the marvellous career of Van Gogh. Romi always saw him studying Anthropology in library and two of the stacks of his bookshelf were filled with the books based on anthropology. It was observed that he has a "passionate

involvement with his subject, a thing that was by no means common among the rest of us.” (13). When Romi asked Billy about his interest, He explained him: “I don't really know I, am afraid. What I do know is that this is what I have always wanted to read (he waved towards the stocks of books). 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).

After completing his education he wanted to be a lecturer but before receiving any appointment he wanted to travel in his own country where he was born because it was the land of many surprising societies. He told Romi, “Travel, travel, travel. A little bit here and there, but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India.” (12) As anthropology was his first love, has a strong temptation for primitive world. According to Romi, “It was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized.” (12).

Infatuated by the human life of the uncivilized society which was untouched by the modern society, he had a strong desire to know about it. In the words of Harish Raizada, “Billy had always felt drawn towards tribal life which he thought held the answer to his quest for the purpose of his life.” (Raizada, *Indian English Novelists: Some Points of View*, 159) It was in his subconscious mind and under the influence of this undercurrent; he acted strangely and played on a pair of bongo drums at midnight at one of his friend's apartment. Besides Romi, Tuula also remarked; “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 and me. It can explode any time.” (18) There was a very strong attraction for the primitive in his bosoms.

Romi heard the news of the untimely demise of his father. He packed his luggage and reached at airport named City Terminal of Pan America. At that juncture Billy told him he will also return very soon to India because in the materialistic society of America he felt suffocated and wants to live a simple life in his country. Few months later he was awarded the degree of Doctorate and returned to India. On his arrival he joined one of the colleges of Delhi University in the capacity of lecturer of anthropology. But here also his soul remained restless in the bourgeois society of Delhi. It was not only in New York that he was unable to cope up with the situation but also in India he found the same social atmosphere which he left in America. It was only a shift of theatres but the drama was same. He was haunted by discontent, a sense of irrelevance of life and a true-blue blurring of reality.

Billy was completely disappointed from the atmosphere of money minded society where people were busy in making and spending money. He found that the present society was not worth living for him and he was alienated from his inner self and from nature. He thought of the other world and on his theory of other world, he told his father: “All I am saying is that there are worlds at the periphery of this one, above it and below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them.” (40) He examined that the men were emotionally dead. He found that Indian society was artistically and intellectually barren. He was unhappy with his present life and things kept haunting him. In short, he was completely misfit in this bourgeois stratum of Indian society and he was searching a worth living place to live in. His inner self missed its way in the labyrinth of life.

Finally, to bring relief to his burning soul, Billy decided to get married with Meena Chatterjee who was a young Bengali girl and belonged to an aristocratic family. About his traumatic condition Billy remarked; “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.” (130) After getting married he wanted to live a life of love, peace and harmony but the things begun to fall apart. After one year of he realised that he committed blunder by dragging another person into mass. He thought so because his was also a representative of the money minded bourgeois society and unable to understand his notions he remarked; “I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she become.” (133) Despite, understanding the mental agony of his husband she raised a finger on his character when she asked Romi; “Tell me, Romi, do you think he is having an ... an affair?” (56) It was the ignoring behaviour of Meena which lead to marital fiasco and Billy established a close relation with Rima Kaul.

Romi came to know that Billy was not living with his family. He met Billy and asked him about the responsibility towards his family then Billy remarked; “I had greater responsibility towards my soul.” (133) After few days he disappeared during the second day of his anthropological expedition into the *saal* forests of Maikala Hills. Many theories were developed about his death but C.B.I. closed the case by making its own theory that he was eaten by the man eater in the forest and the Biswas absorbed his demise. With the passage of time Tuula came to know about the sudden disappearance of Billy. She produced Billy's letters through Swedish Embassy to Romi which were written after his arrival in India and showed his disinterestedness in the present hollow bourgeois society as he remarked; “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” (70) He was completely frustrated by the money-minded society and his was craving for a solace or consolation in the bourgeois surrounding.

It was after ten years when Billy was reappeared before Romi when he was appointed as a District Collector in Central India. Romi recognised Billy and noticed that he has transformed into an *adivasi*. Romi told Billy about the death of his mother and by listening this news he gave a cold response even he did not show his interest in the disorder of the country. As the narrative Billy tells his spiritual wandering of escaping from the bourgeois and artificial society into the primitive society where his burning soul finds a place to live in. He narrates that during the last anthropological expedition in the Central India where he went with his disciples in a tribal area and at the time of fixing the tent he came to know that one of his disciples has left the ropes at a railway station. He went to a village in order to collect ropes and met Dhunia, the village headman. He was completely familiar to the village because he visited in it twice earlier. Billy befriended with Dhunia because once he saved the life of Bilasia, Dhunia's niece, by treating her illness. Billy told Dhunia about missing the ropes and sought help from Dhunia. Dhunia gave him assurance of

help and asked him to wait for Bilasia's return from the jungle. While waiting for Bilasia's return Billy listened the old people of the jungle who were talking about sex, love-making and of marrying. He narrated; "I wonder sometimes what my life would have been if that boy had not lost that package or Dhunia had some ropes available with him right then. I wonder if all this would have happened if I had not waited in for Bilasia to return home 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).

This incident was a turning point in the life of Billy. He was completely attracted by seeing the beauty of Bilasia. He could not ignore her presence and felt something unusual. After that he felt a pull towards primitive world and was forgetting his bourgeois existence. He remarked; "It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of 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" (88) and further he added about his first encounter with Bilasia; "It was I who had changed. Or rather, quite suddenly and accountably I had ceased to resist what was real me...I knew that I was very near the brink. Very, very near" (85)

Billy was completely frustrated by the bourgeois filth and had a call from flora and fauna as if they were waiting for him. He narrated; "Come to our primitive world that will 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 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." (88) Telling his students about the place he showed great excitement and added; "I felt as though I was a tribal myself, that I was one of the primitives to be investigated and not one of the investigators. I felt that I lived across the river in that hut by the hill and I had crossed the river to meet these strangers who were interested in my people." (94) He, being invited by Dhunia, went to see the tribal dance and behaved like *adivasi*.

Joshi presented the discomfort of same man in two worlds bourgeois and primitive respectively and which concluded with and defeat of the former and final victory of the latter. Billy remarked; "My spirits lifted as suddenly as they had earlier fallen. It was like the feelings of a man who was hired to murder but is suddenly freed of the obligation. I had laughed at myself and that afternoon, in a world drenched in sunlight, I laughed more than ever." (95) Further Billy added that he underwent a final metamorphosis under the *saal* tree when he was given calls from the side of tribes. Many questions were raised in his mind and he questioned himself; "Why did it take him thirty years to discover this. For all his so-called courage...afraid and foolish, squandering the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization" (102) and under the influence of these calls he abandoned the so-called bourgeois society. He, being a primitive man, craved to lead a rustic life among the tribesmen. He compared the world of Meena and Bilasia. Meena was a representative of a tasteless, hypocrite, artificial and hollow world while on the

other hand Bilasia was the epitome of natural beauty i.e. primitive world. He added; "if the forest and the hills had beckoned me from a distance, Bilasia was now leading me by the hand." (103) It was at this moment he felt his identity was going to be filled and expressed his love for primitive life; "What kept us happy... all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest the rainbows, the liquor from the *mahua*, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love-making, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all." (107).

Billy's escaping from bourgeois stratum to primitive world was an escape into reality through which he tried find his lost roots. He was treated as a saint and a saviour who seemed to got magical powers from Devi Mata and an incarnation of their king, Devi Mata's hunsand, who had passed five thousand years ago. In a conversation Romi asked Dhunia; "Why did he (Billy) left us?" (115) Dhunia told him without any doubt; "When the *Kala Pahar* calls you. Collector sahib, there is nothing you can do but go...You become blind. All you see is the Big Rock. All you hear is its call. Day and night it calls you.... There is nothing you can do but go." (115) Dhunia told Romi that Billy was called by the *Kala Pahar* to help him. He further told that Romi that Billy and Bilasia are the incarnations of the king and queen respectively. According to Dr. Arvind M. Navale:

"Bilasia represents the primitive energy, the power of nature, in whose arms he feels himself free of any kind of materialistic concern of the civilized world and he is able to make these so-called miracles. He does not want to go back to the phony society of the so-called civilized people, whose main concern is the material gain with the least consideration of emotions and spirituality." (Navale, *Glorification of Primitivism*: Arun Joshi: Thematic Concerns of His Novels, 104)

Billy praised the life of villagers who do not have greed in their minds and they are more sensitive than the spiritually dead people of bourgeois society. He did not have any link with the outside world. He told Romi not to reveal his secret of being alive to his family members if it happened they will not leave him in the forest. He told Romi about the person of his bourgeois society; "What got me was the superfluity, the sense of values. I don't think all cities societies are as shallows as ours. I am, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes. Artistically, they were dry and dust. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago.... 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." (128)

Billy who was searching his lost roots among the tribesmen was living his life with love, peace and harmony but it was a transit ecstasy. His destiny was waiting for him. Once Situ, the wife of Romi, suffered from migraine and on the same day Billy reached there after two months. He cured her illness by using the smell of herbs and with the miraculous touch of a metallic rod. She tried to know about the person who cured his chronic illness in a very short time. Romi tried his level best to maintain the secrecy but failed. He told her that he was Billy who cured her migraine. She forced Romi to inform the Biswases about Billy but he refused to do so because his freedom will be threatened. Situ informed the Biswases and next day they reached at Romi's residence. They sought help from Romi but he refused to

help. Mr. Biswas, a former judge of Supreme Court of India, took the advantage of his position and Rele, the superintendent of Police, was deputed in place of Romi to search Billy. Romi knew very well that Rele was the representative of the bourgeois society and can do anything to get Billy. Armed force also deputed for the manhunt. Romi requested Rele to stop the mission but he denied by saying that he has direct orders to do so. It was the reason he in the capacity of district Collector he went in the village where Billy was. Billy left his home and hid himself on a hill. Romi tried to convince Bilasia to tell him about Billy and assured her by stating that “no harm will come to him (*ball nahin banka hoga*)” (165).

Romi tried to protect Billy from the hands of the representative of the middle class but all was of no use because the entire middle class machinery was working against a man who was helpless and was in search of his lost roots. On the other hand, the puppets of the so-called bourgeois society were incapable of doing something in his favour and ended his search of his roots. While escaping he was shot dead by a constable and made his end “so unbearably tragic” (173)

The paper described the odyssey of roots searching of Billy Biswas who belonged to the middle class where he noticed that his society has missed many things and particularly, its emotions and sensibility. People are money minded and they are the epitome of artificiality, and wickedness. His soul was craving for a real self in the filthy atmosphere of the bourgeois society. That’s why he rebelled against the rules and regulations of his society and took shelter in the forest where he found his lost roots. In his bourgeois society he was moving like a yelping dog but among the tribesmen he got affirmation for his real self.

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