

## An Eco-Critical Perspective of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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### Abstract :

Arun Joshi's brilliant novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is significant for its theme man's obsession with nature. The titular hero Billy Biswas is indeed a strange man because he is fed-up with the so called 'civilized society' and does not fit into the accepted norms. Billy Biswas is determined to break free from the restrictions of the elite class and embrace a world that is completely primitive. Through Billy's journey, Arun Joshi explores the inner struggles and psychic crisis of protagonist. Billy's transformation from a civilized urban man to a member of a tribal community reflects his deep attraction to the simplicity, harmony, and authenticity of tribal culture. For Billy, this change is not an escape from reality but a movement toward a more meaningful and genuine way of life, away from the emptiness of the so-called civilized society. Thus, the novel serves as a metaphor, contrasting the superficiality and absurdity of modern civilization with the innocence, simplicity, and richness of tribal life.

**KeyWords** - civilized society, primitive, elite class, psychic crisis, reality, emptiness, absurdity, modern civilization, etc.

Literature, society, and culture are deeply interconnected, making it difficult to separate one from the others. Literature emerges from the social and cultural environment in which people live, communicate, and share a common language. It reflects the experiences, beliefs, values, and interactions of individuals within a society. Contemporary literature, in particular, is regarded as a representation of the diverse and evolving realities of modern life, capturing aspects of human experience that were previously unexplored. The history of Indian fiction in English illustrates a gradual transformation in both its themes and narrative forms. During different phases of its development, it focused on historical romance, social and political realism, and psychological exploration. However, after 1980, Indian fiction in English underwent a significant shift, adopting new themes, perspectives, and narrative techniques that called for fresh critical approaches to its study.

Eco-criticism is the interdisciplinary study of literature and the environment, analyzing how natural settings, non-human entities, and ecological concerns are represented in cultural texts. It adopts an earth-centered approach, examining the relationship between human civilization and nature, often highlighting the impacts of the environmental crisis. Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* significantly advocates the struggle between the civilized and uncivilized

life and their exploitation at the hands of government machinery and elite people. Joshi's novel argues the torments of life of Billy Biswas, the protagonist. His shift from the civilized life to the tribal marks the strong desire and attraction to the world of tribal culture and beauty. To Billy, it is not an escape from the realities of life but an escape into real life from the meaningless existence in the so-called civilized world. To the readers, it is a drift from restlessness to tranquility. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, a compelling one about a strange quest shows the tension between the invitation held out to the rational individual and the resistance to any rational quest for answers to the phenomenon of existence.

Human being is a part of the natural world. Scientifically speaking, he is made of various elements: carbon, water, cellular material- therefore, we are all elements found in nature therefore we are part of a nature. In a natural world, everything is interconnected: cycles influence other cycles. Our culture influences the way we see nature, which influences nature itself. It is easy to see how parts of our culture have influenced the world in which we live. Humans have always been intimately linked with rivers, lakes and wetlands for water, food fiber, medicines and places for habitation. But over- exploitation now means that many of world's fresh water have been radically altered and their ecosystems greatly impoverished.

Arun Joshi, a seminal mind in Indo-Anglian literature examines in his novels Indian vision of life. His novels unfailingly record the novelist's perception, evaluation, determination and declarations about life. He makes mental exploration into the philosophical questions which engage the thinking man. The novelist makes journeys into the interior of the protagonists so as to achieve an understanding of the self. Billy forsakes civilized human society, adapts himself to the primitive world, and even has a native mistress. Billy finds his fulfillment and essence of human existence in the primitive tribal life. Among the Tribal Bhils, he feels himself free. Here, he feels a certain sense of divinity in human life, it being so natural. The effort to bring Billy back to civilization by arresting him, only leads to the final tragedy.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the only novel of Arun Joshi which creates an aesthetic sign of the mythical morality of a tribal world against the sterility of contemporary technological mechanics of human values. Billy (Bimal) Biswas is 'strange' because he does not fit into the accepted norm of the 'civilized' society and Billy finds himself motivated enough to rebel and break its shackles to join a world that is far removed from the everyday reality of his former world. In fact, Billy has been strange from his very childhood. He is extremely sensitive and his is a case of 'explosion of senses'. When he was only fourteen, he went to Bhubaneswar and visited Konark. Along with his uncle's chauffeur, he went to the tribal people. The chauffeur wanted to enjoy life, but Billy sat there and saw the tribe dance, drink, sing and make love.

In this novel, Arun Joshi has highlighted, Billy Bimal Biswas, the protagonist's restlessness in this complacent modern society from which he has come. Billy never feels at home in the sophisticated world. The ways of the upper class sophisticated society seem to Billy in no way different from those of kennel full of dogs. He feels awfully discontented with his life in this stilted civilization, because it is full of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. The protagonist Billy is in the U.S.A studying anthropology and not engineering as his well-to-do

father had intended in sending him abroad. His studies help in the crystallization of his vague simmering of discontent against the superficially glamorous civilization and after his return to India he leaves his family and joins a tribal community in which, he is made the king.

In that primitive society, with a tribal wife and child, Billy attains contentment and peace. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, a novel of self-identity and existential dynamism of life, shows Arun Joshi's extraordinary skill of handling plethora of characters with their distinctness situated in the world materialism which stands for civilized life and the world of tribal people which stands for uncivilized but ignored and unattended by the common standards. The journey of Billy Biswas which starts with materialistic life of lived experience in India and America and ends with a lived experience of remote life of tribal world.

The character of Billy Biswas connects the path for the readers to observe the two worlds which are diametrically opposite but simultaneously giving sense to the readers to understand the tribal life, their myths and legends, their worshipping gods and goddesses and their belief in the super power. A confused but confessed psyche of the protagonist marks the meaning of life as he feels fulfilled when he renounces the materialistic world and becomes a tribal. In this novel, the socio-economic-cultural life of Bhil tribe, inhabited in the hills of Satpura, in the deep forest of Maikala hills which is central part of India near Jabalpur, finds reference in his search of identity in the tribal world. It proves and advocates that life lived by the tribal are not trivial, nor is it uncivilized.

It is individual perception or collective consciousness which determine the codes of standards and the question of 'I' and 'You' or 'We' and 'They'. For this question, the life of Billy Biswas is itself an answer for such dilemma and binary. Arun Joshi tries to justify in the novel that "life is not what others understand, but it is a call from self what 'I' mean to understand as life is my worth and my potential." Billy, after his education received in USA, gets bored with the life of money-making world, so called modern and civilized and finds all his ways to get peace of mind in the company of the tribal people, a dream which he has cherished since his childhood. The pursuit of Billy is more in the manner of the ancient ascetics of India where men have experimented with different philosophical schools of thought

and different cultural practices. He resembles a Yogi whose pursuit to arrive at a clearer understanding of life is disciplined by the attitude about work and actions.

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* faces the problem of the barren, modern sophisticated society and hanker after the inner peace to be found in harmony with the Nature. In this sense, the novel is a record of a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life - the kind Rousseau, Thoreau, Gandhi and Wordsworth talked about. This research paper discusses how the novelist expresses his distaste for the money-mindedness of the civilized people leading to the degradation of their souls. The longing for natural mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs, the fulfillment of which (although in different form) is pre condition of our survival. In this state one can remain pure, sensitive and mystically linked with the Nature, its authentic humanity and instinctive spontaneity. Rousseau, too, considered

everyman as innately good and pacific in his 'natural state', but when he entered into contact with society he was bound to become impure, materialistic in attitude, corrupted codes and conventions and incapable to understand the real meaning of life.

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The novel is a severe condemnation of the spiritual uprootedness of the post-Independence Westernized Indian Society. Billy is totally fed up with the superficialities of a grossly materialistic and sterile Indian society. He finds himself trapped like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, a travelling salesman brought to disaster by accepting the false values of the contemporary society. To escape this disaster Billy decides to flee from the phony society.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* reflects the two worlds of living – a world of tribal living in the forest, at the hills and mountains and a world of non-tribal based on materialistic progress and civilized notions of life. The Bhil tribe inhabits in the deep forest of Maikal hills. Billy Biswas becomes a tribal and marries Bilasia, a tribal beautiful woman. He is respected by all the tribal people for his knowledge of the magic and he is considered their king. His shift into tribal world represents the tribal culture, the myths and mythology, their dances and festivals, their religious life of supernatural powers and black magic. Meena, a wife of Billy Biswas from the civilized world and Bilasia, a wife from uncivilized world contrast the two worlds with their aspirations and feature, but their commonality to capture their husband. But Billy's end offers no chance to all for their respective relationship.

Bilasia and Billy tie their nuptial knot and continue their life of tribal engagement. But after three months, Billy wants to leave the place and go back to Delhi. Bilasia got angry as she has loved him more. They have a fight with each other with such debates and arguments. Finally, she complains to the panchayat and he is sentenced to sponsor a four-day feast for the village. Later, he changes his mind and wants to live with Bilasia. Billy has left home, society and culture: "Billy comes to live among the tribes identifying himself totally with them and their way of life and marries Bilasia who symbolizes for him the elemental in nature and who understands his need for "being left alone". Their union exemplifies that of anima and animas in the Jungian connotation or that of 'Prakriti' (Bilasia) and 'Purusha'." (Naik 60)

Here, the character of Bilasia is noteworthy. Her love for him compels her to be possessive for him. The way she takes the help of the panchayat for her dispute, points out her womanly pursuit and leadership of a tribal woman. Though she is aggrieved with the panchayat's decision, she accepts the same keeping her sorrow aside. When Romi goes with Rele to trace Billy, he meets Bilasia and whatever he had heard about her and her beauty, the

same he sees in her- a spark of appearance, a radiant look of a confident woman of fixed eyes, with a doubt of distrust. He is reminded of the passage Billy had written to Tuula, an American anthropologist and Billy's friend, in a letter to her: "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." (*SCBB* 164)

The second part of the novel narrates the life of Billy Biswas with the tribal people in the deep forest of Maikala hills, a tribal belt shown in the state of Madhya Pradesh by the writer. Ten years after his disappearance, he is found by Romi, the collector, his best friend, while surveying the drought hit region of the tribal people. The life of tribal people is very pathetic and terrible as government help and policies do not reach to them appropriately and in time. When the region was terribly hit by the drought, it is clearly seen how the tribal people are deprived of the help and services.

The conversation between the collector and his driver shows the same: "How are the people?" "In the plains they have begun to pass away. You must get help." (*SCBB* 74) That is what I had been trying to do with a desperation that I had never before known in life. I sent frantic telegrams everyday but the wheels of ageing, well-fed people are not the easiest things to move. Such help as was received would not have sufficed for a district one- tenth its size. One morning twenty tanker lorries arrived from the military cantonment at Jabalpur. Twenty tankers for an area of 5,000 sq. miles! (*SCBB* 74)

He further cites terribly:

On one of my visits I saw in a village a dog and an old man two skeletons that managed barely to crawl, licking at the water trickling from the spout of an empty tanker. The old man, his eyes closed with exhaustion, was obviously too weak to push the dog away. I hoped never again to have to witness a sight such as that (*SCBB* 74).

During such calamities, the tribal life is very miserable and beyond imagination of our normal existence. They depended on roots and mud water for their survival. Hungry men, women and children all suffered there. The condition of children was worst among them as "they crawled about naked, their bellies distended, eyes bleary with infections" (*SCBB* 74) and "the women, their hair matted and clothes reduced to rags, tried, nonetheless, to preserve their modesty and stayed in the back." (*SCBB* 74) .

This brings out their living conditions in the deep forest and what challenges these tribal people have to go through and how they face the same. No such help reaches to them to restore normalcy in their lives. The grave of exploitation done by the contractors is given in the novel by Billy while discussing with Romi. When their talk revolves around the economy of the area and how these poor tribal live there, Billy strongly points out that the life of tribal is based on the natural resources available in the region and they are happy with the same. They don't

want materialistic progress, nor are they ready to accept the change. This has made them happy and rich in a sense as their expectations are not beyond but within to live and eat. It has been common practices everywhere in India where tribal people live that government machinery, the contractors and people like money-lenders have exploited tribal people grabbing their lands



and destroying their culture in the name of progress. The following lines succinctly put the way it is done: "It is your contractors, old chap, who are playing havoc with the land, so don't blame us " (SCBB 80).

Due to drought the situation was very terrible; they had no food to eat and drink. For the past twenty- four hours, they seemed to have not eaten anything. Being not fulfilled their demands and not given timely help, the tribal people in the region continued their protest. They burnt the headman's home, the cooperative store, the water tanker and the local family clinic. The situation was out of control. Instead of taking steps to pacify them providing enough food and shelter, the superintendent of Police, Rele plans to open fire to control the mob. This is Inhuman and insensitive, but the tribal people have always been treated this way by the government bureaucrats. In the name of law and order, they are killed or left to die without notice.

A look at Billy's hatred toward civilized world can be had from the letters that he wrote to Tuula Lindgreen, his Swedish girlfriend. Certain excerpts from the letters are worth citing. The first excerpt is expressive of his feeling as an outsider in the civilized world:

When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smell 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 around (96).

In the God's plenty while sitting on the rock he feels as if he was undergoing a deep metamorphosis. Billy renounces the sophisticated Delhi urban society in favour of tribal life in the Maikala forest. His is not an escape from reality but an escape into reality on the lines of Prince Siddharth. Billy renounces a life of hypocrisy and deceit to take a life of noble savageness. Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Billy forsakes civilized human society and like Scholar Gipsy returned no more. Arun Joshi may have been influenced by Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but he goes beyond it as Billy's quest for identity and his search of the meaning of life make him revolt against civilized society and his mistress Bilasia unlike Kurtz's mistress plays a very significant role in his self-realization. For the sake of his longing for Return to Nature he forsakes even his life. Billy Biswas reminds us of the White lady, the protagonist in D.H. Lawrence's *The Woman Who Rode Away*, where the White lady, in the wake of her degradation and her utter confusion about spiritless life around her, decides to ride away to the primordial nature in order to escape from the disastrous civilization. It would be apt to quote Hari Mohan Prasad. He says:

The novel articulates, almost the intensity of Lawrence and Conrad, human craving for the primordial, the *éllan vital* of our anthropological heritage. In retreat of Mr. Billy Biswas from the modern wasteland of Delhi to the ancient Garden of Eden in Maikala Jungle, from the smothering clutch of Meena to the primeval possessiveness of Bilasia, Purush meets Prakriti serving the two ends of evolution, outlined by Sankhya, enjoyment

(*Bhoga*) and liberation or *Sansara* as well as *Kaivalya* (Prasad 46).

Arun Joshi's this concern for Nature as presented in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* impresses upon the readers the fact that in a conflict between the civilized and primitive ways of living, it is the later that prevails. Bilasia and Maikala Hills attract the protagonist Billy Biswas more than the artificial and sophisticated atmosphere of Delhi. Real peach, pleasure and perfection can be found in the natural and primitive atmosphere rather than in the din and bustle of big cities of Delhi. In the words of T. Koteswar Rao, "His obsession with primitive life is born out of failing that the sophisticated life is not original but only an imitation of what is artificial. The complacency of the upper classes and the artificiality of civilized world are no way better than to the simplicities of the primitive life" (Rao 1994:201). Really the novel opens a case of fictional discourse which epitomizes man's longing for 'Return to Nature' against the technological verifiable constituents of present modern society. Joshi seems to be tremendously concerned with pretentiousness, hypocrisy and snobbery of the modern civilized society and gives a message that simplicity, quietness; tranquility and spirituality of natural primitive life are the only means of achieving sublime living.

In *The Strange Case* Arun Joshi seems to be mediating between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, between the two distinct cultures that these two geographic location have come to embody not so much to dramatize the yawning gap but to make the situation plain, to reveal what has been lost and to reinforce the utter falsity of the so-called refinement of the Indian upper crust. What comes through is not a primitive celebration of the primitive Satpura life. The novel, so to say, lives through a tension between the two ends of a given civilization, between the two distinct tribes spanning the complex divide of a strange society. The cultural representation of tribal life is mainly seen in their fairs and festivals, which are full of their folk dances, folklore, traditional music, worshipping gods and goddesses, food and beautification of their bodies. Their spirit of enthusiasm features their social engagement in their gathering during harvest season and other events related to agricultural activities. Dancing and singing are the key elements of expressing their joy and cultural exuberance. Men and women have their systematic and serious steps in the accompaniment of their traditional music. All tribes have their specific musical instruments which are symbolically and culturally considered to be an inseparable part of their tribal culture.

Mandar is a traditional musical instrument used by the Bhil tribe. The villagers gather at a place beyond the village and in the moonlight, they dance and sing at the best. The drum beating sound is audible in the village. Following their tradition, they wait for the rising of moon. When they see moon, they go to the centre of the field and they have their cultural wilderness in the company of dance, song, liquor and merry-making. "The drummers had not ceased to rip out continual flourishes. Every few minutes one of them jumped into the air and there were loud huzzas all around. The grownups were already in the middle of the field." (SCBB 100).

The novel portrays a moving scene of realistic aspirations of the dominant character Billy Biswas and revolves round him for his 'so called strange' behaviour, a behaviour of search, a behaviour of fulfillment of that search, a behaviour of non-possession. He goes to

America following a wish of his parents to pursue Ph.D. degree in Engineering, but during his stay, he develops an interest in Anthropology and pursue his Ph. D. in the same subject against the wish of his parents. His passion for primitive life brings him opportunity what he has pined for a long time, since his childhood when he was fourteen. He marries a cultured and beautiful girl Meena and the couple has a charming son, but all these aspects of domestic bliss cannot divert his attention and interest in the tribal life.

Not giving his manly concern and care to his wife and family, he all the time spends his time in the library reading the books on Anthropology and thinks deeper and deeper about tribal people. He is more engaged in finding out what he wants to know about these people. His passion makes him crazy to such an extent that his relationship with his wife gets sour and always they have their quarrels and arguments for what they are not understood to each other. But he does not feel any concern or responsible for his family bonding and family reunion. His behaviour clearly signifies his plan of future involvement and existence. Billy reduces himself in the company of tribal people as his bent of mind and heart is rooted in the tribal life and not in the civilized world of material progress. He cites the reason for his study of Anthropology in the following words : "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 " (*SCBB* 12).

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. 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 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. 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. Nature brings Billy closer to the life he dreams and also to the visions which frequent him and which makes him go in a trance. In the beginning, he required a stimulus like alcohol or dance or folk song or drum-beats to transport him to his dreamland, but as he grows, his fascination for that other life has increased and visions started coming automatically without any stimulus. The modern civilization to him is monster-like, deprived of all the human qualities of head and heart.

In order to escape from the frustration and agonies of life, the protagonist takes to anthropological expeditions to the various parts of India with the students. The novelist presents the upper crust of Indian society turning to be materialistic with spiritual shallowness



and imitating the western culture blindly for getting its traditional values and believes. 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. Hence the novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a metaphoric novel which depicts so called civilized world with its hollowness against uncivilized tribal world with its simplicity.

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