

## Nature and Spirituality in Arun Joshi's "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas"

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**Abstract:** *People live unaware of our oneness with the planet Earth. The Earth has been thought of as something, to be owned, to be bought and sold. This paper aims to bring out the essentials of being in harmony with nature to grow spiritually and lead a meaningful life.*

*In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, 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 could realize the complete oneness permeating and encompassing the world. His novels goad us to view the world and all the creatures from a completely changed perspective. The author reinforces that primitivism will lead us to explain that staying in close touch with nature will feed our spiritual instincts to regain the basic and natural equipoise and peace.*

**Keywords:** *Earth, Nature, Primitivism, Spirituality, Stilted civilisation*

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The plague of westernisation and industrialisation spreaded fast among our people and shuttered their mind's eye to turn away from Nature. It is unfortunate that all good is coated with a bitter layer and viceversa. People being carried away for the so called good and happiness slowly turn their head towards nature now, for the effects of industrialisation is too severe to bear. Being a part of this stilted society has made Arun Joshi to envisage the vacuum it creates and through his work of art he tries to awake people to get back to the right track to feed their spiritual instincts by staying in harmony with nature.

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 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.

Joshi has also highlighted how Billy quits the sophisticated life in quest of spiritual tranquility. He felt being impelled by "a great force, urkraft, a... a primitive force" (SCBB 18[1]). He opts for primitive life. For him primitivism is a better means to an end, than the modern, civilized society. The tribal's dedication to the deity and their deep and overpowering love becomes the driving force and code of his activities. He finds a world where he is related to it through love and not through submission or dominance. The 'phony society' as he calls it has nothing to offer him.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* contains events which are 'strange' to the 'civilized', those whose umbilical cords to the primordial and the subconscious has been snapped by 'modernity'. 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 simmerings of discontent against the superficially glamorous civilization and after his return to India he, like Gauthama Buddha, 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.

"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 to our gaze new gas-chambers of self-forged misery" (Iyengar K.R.S 514 [2]). Though he is among family members, he doesn't feel integrated with them. He is not in harmony. He is alone, isolated, a stranger. He is not in a quest for anchor; he is interested in the exploration of his inner being.

Joshi seems to mediate between New Delhi and the Satpura Hills, both the geographic locations representing the sophisticated and the primitive world respectively. 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. "The novel is a severe indictment of the meaningless existence, mechanization, urbanization, discontent, changing values and spiritual uprootedness of the society in the modern civilization" (Vatsa and Rashmi 53 [3]).

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 tribals dance, drink, sing and make love. A strange sensation overtook him.

Billy has been sent to America to take a degree in Engineering, but he had opted for Ph.D in Anthropology. His active preparations for his Ph.D in Anthropology while his father has no inkling about it, is proof enough of his quest for his identity. As a student in America, Billy is less interested in books on 'anthropology' than in the places described in them. He would like to learn with real interest and absorption about the aboriginalness of the world. Billy once says, "All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world" (SCBB 12 [1]).

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. In America, too, at the age of twenty he had visions "of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people" (SCBB 129 [1]).

Billy considered white America to be much too civilized for him because from his childhood he had a feeling that primitive world where people are close to Nature is where he belongs and that is better than the civilized world in which people run after money and property and just lead a mechanical life. His eyes which were the dominating feature of his face never lost their deep somber look. Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish girl, doing an advance course in psychiatric social work and Romi are the two persons who understand the dilemma of Billy's life. "Thus, even before his physical disappearance, Billy ceases to belong to the civilized world" (Ghosh, Tapan kumar 82 [4]).

Tuula is a Swedish girl yet her values are centered on the vitalizing force of their life which brings her close to Billy.. She is strongly interested in India. She observes the spiritual degeneration in society objectively and knows how to encounter this utter confusion. Billy tries to come out of alienation by participating in life with Tuula and Romi. During one of the conversations with Billy, Romi observed that they were "revealing not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us" (SCBB 20 [1]). Talking about his glimpse of the other side, Billy tells Romi:

... I had my first glimpse of the other side.... Most of us are aware only of the side on which we are born, but there is always the other side, the valley beyond the hills; the hills beyond the valley. (SCBB 15 [1]) This other side concerns the primitive life in the forest untouched by the sophistication of the civilized world. He wants to penetrate deep into human life. He longs for integration with reality which may be termed as totality of nature, nature here not in the physical sense alone but something at the level of which man's very being is seen in its quaint essential, devoid of all external frills.

On his return to India he is appointed lecturer in Anthropology in Delhi University. Billy doesn't find the phoney, consumerism-ridden world of Delhi much different from the American materialistic society. Billy does not enjoy his role and finds it difficult to get used to the workings of his job and place. For him, life in such an oppressive atmosphere has become a bleak business and he does not see a way out as to how he should crush the uneasiness of his mind. The people he meets here are nothing more than apes mimicking the forsaken ideas of west. Billy's interest in anthropology gives him an opportunity to look at supernatural things, social facts from a different angle and gave him a chance to stay close to nature.

Billy believed that by marrying somebody he could find a solution for his disturbance which causes frustration and all other problems, because he felt that his hallucinations and visions were the root cause of his depression and he has grown terribly afraid of his own self and believed that by marrying somebody he could establish a good understanding with her and she will pacify his inner tension.

Billy marries an aristocratic convent educated girl, Meena. Though he marries Meena Chatterjee to derive some satisfaction out of his life, he feels a corrupting force working upon him. Meena fails to understand him and they quarrel intermittently. Billy begins to lose his grip on life and turns an introvert. Since he is not in harmony with his surrounding, his family and his wife, his soul gets hurt and estranged, he retires within himself. He becomes a pilgrim of the spiritual world.

A look at Billy's psychograph can be had from the letters that he wrote to Tuula Lindgren, his friend. The first excerpt shows that he doesn't feel one with the civilized world: When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells 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 round. (SCBB 69 [1])

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, he takes to anthropological expeditions to the various parts of India with the students. Once he takes his students on an anthropological expedition to the tribal areas of

the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and is enamoured of the idyllic surrounding and its inhabitants. The change that began to sweep his entire being frightened him so much that he began to weep like a child. Billy feels the call from within becoming articulated and strident. The entire forest, the moonlit night and the multitudinous objects of nature call him to merge with the primitive world.

It is not civilization as such that Billy rejects, but the upper class Indian society which is a replica of the depraved and spiritually sterile society in the west with its straitening of human life that an exclusive preoccupation with its external condition promotes. (Ghosh, Tapan kumar 76 [4])

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 sitting outside his tent in the forest; Billy listens to the calls of the streams, the hills, the forests and the tribals.

Billy looks into future with his insight and instinct that tells him what to follow and what to avoid. It is these flushes of vision that lead him to seek suitable spiritual companion he believed: "If anyone had a clue to it [real self], it was only the adivasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, looked behind their dark inscrutable faces" (SCBB 90 [1]).

Billy responds to the call and on the second day of his anthropological expedition Billy disappeared from the face of the earth, simply vanished into the Sall forests of the Maikala Hills, Madhya Pradesh. This decision to leave the society and family is not taken at the spur of the moment or in sheer impulse. 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. Great ascetics and sadhus have renounced their life in search of enlightenment. But to Billy it is a movement from restlessness to tranquility. "He renounced this materialistic society and civilization not to be an ascetic but to fulfill all the demands of his self to a perfection of participated joy" (Bhatnagar 225 [5]).

They are not nourished by food and water but by enlivening their inner being by song, dance and indulging in conjugal pleasures. Billy now knows his destination. He knows that he is a pilgrim. So Billy gets a taste of the experience of identification with the cosmos and the divine. "Billy renounces a life of hypocrisy and decides to take a life of noble savageness" (Dhawan 203 [6]). Billy seeks something divine and 'Divine' he himself becomes- he is accepted as the king by the tribals. Billy has experienced god hood.

Arun Joshi has shown that the society has made his protagonist to pay his life for relinquishing it and opting the primitive life. But the society has paid enough now and the weight of civilization is overwhelming and so the people now slowly understand that living in harmony with nature is a great opportunity to grow and evolve as an individual, while contributing to the whole. As we work spiritually, delving into our inner depths, we realize that we also have an effect on the environment with our thoughts and feelings and vice versa. Good thoughts and feelings have a lasting beneficial effect on all around us. The spiritual force that we generate by good thoughts and feelings can reach so much beyond the work of our hands. The seed for this growth germinates if only the climate we set around us is favorable. It is found that it's paramount important to travel with nature to make our journey of life a pilgrimage.

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