

Cultural estrangement in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

This paper distinctly illustrates the theme of man's restlessness in modern life and his futile attempt to escape it, is concerned with the crisis of contemporary civilization in the upper class Indian society. The isolation of Arun Joshi's Billy can be associated with that of the hero of V.S.Naipaul's *A House of Mr. Biswas*. There is, however, an indispensable variance in the treatment of alienation of the two Biswases. Naipaul himself is rootless, whereas Joshi has the inherent baking of a rich cultural tradition. It is because of this reason that the latter's delineation of alienated figures like Sindi and Billy in such realistic terms appears to be so excruciating.

KEYWORDS: Cultural, Society, Class, Isolation

Man's alienation from his fellow beings is another important aspect of alienation analyzed by Fromm. According to him, in the initial stages of selfhood, there is no point of alienation because man thinks that he is related to others and this response is emotional and there is relatedness. But souring and severing of relationships is the starting point of alienation. In the present world, man for various reasons refuses to share his feelings with others and creates an island of isolation for and around him. This resultant situation leads to complexes, whimsical eccentricities, unsocial and egoistic nature and strange cases of unnatural deaths, etc.

Fromm is of the opinion that man becomes a stranger to almost everything around him and consequently the character of an exile. Rapid strides in the fields of science and technology are constantly impinging on the sensibility and sensitivity of the modern man. Consequently, in the future, society may become more complicated and may give birth to new types of alienation. But of all kinds of alienation, Fromm feels that 'self – alienation' is significant as it pertains to 'feelings'. He observes in *The Sane Society* that 'self – alienated' person in due course gets necessarily alienated from the society as well.

The furthestmost of the Indian English novelists, specifically in the post-Independence period, are excruciatingly conscious of the crisis of the loss of identity and the prerequisite to bring to limelight through their creative writings. Arun Joshi, a class by itself, is exceedingly sensitized to the indispensable difficulties of sensitive modern mind. He locates this problem of modern mind in his estrangement, alienation and quest for identity of certain human qualities and characteristics that make life meaningful and eventful. His novels express the anguish of sensitive individuals persistently tortured by their spiritual uprootedness, clash and confusion of values generated by the materialistic, self-centred and corrupt society. The main intention behind this article is to explore the predicament of Billy Biswas who deliberately alienates himself from society – social alienation.

Arun Joshi in his second novel, augments his focus on the aloofness that subsists between New York and Delhi, in other words the 'civilized' and the 'primitive'. The phrase 'strange case' in the title of the novel itself displays that the

protagonist records an existential remonstrance against the superficialities of materialistic civilization. He nods for the simple mode of life of a primitive society. It is the only novel by Arun Joshi that has an eponymous hero, Billy Biswas; and the narrator delves deep into the psychological problem of the crisis of Billy's identity. Billy, by forsaking his past, his family and the everyday world, goes in pursuit of the world of meaningful relatedness. However, the meaningful life which he has been probing finds neither in America society nor in the upper class of Indian culture. By way of his frustrated longing for unsophisticated primitivism keeps stimulating him, Billy goes into the *saal* forests of Maikala Hills to lead the life of the tribal with an outlook to carving for his soul an inner shrine of tranquillity. In spite of immense search by the police team, the search parties fail to locate him, it is presumed that a tiger prowling in the area has killed Billy.

The novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is a study in the complete estrangement of its protagonist, Billy Biswas from the upper crust of Indian society with its blind imitation of western culture, spiritual superficiality and material concerns in their impertinence of its traditional values and beliefs. K.R.S.Iyengar's remark is apt here: "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-champers of self-forged misery" (514).

In spite that he has conventional roots, he feels alienated for the fact that Billy is extremely sensitive. Billy after leading a life of his own inherent nature finally meets his tragic end, which symbolizes the end of his quest. In spite of his devotion to his family, Billy does not feel integrated with its members. He feels himself alone, isolated-stranger and alienated like Camus's *Outsider*. He writes to Tuula Lindgren:

It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. 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 (97).

Billy does not discard the civilized Indian society, but the psychologically dissolute westernized upper class Indian society. Billy's flight implies a total rejection of modernity and all that involves. Arun Joshi, in an interview by Banerji, says "it is the post Independence Pseudo Western values that he rejects" ("A Winner's Secrets, An interview with Purabi Banerji," *The Sunday Statesman*, Feb.27.1983). It is the same sort of renunciation of family and society as one finds in R.K.Narayan's *The Guide*, *The Vendor of Sweets* or *The Bachelor of Arts*. At the same time it is not that of the outworn mode of renunciation illustrated by Raja Rao in *The Serpent and the Rope*, Sudhin Ghose in *The Flame of the Forest* Billy's withdrawal is mainly for healing his truncated self and for the realization of his identity. Thus Tapan Kumar Ghosh says, "It is for him a movement from feeling of alienation from civilized society to a sense of communion with primitive life" (75). Like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Billy forsakes civilized human society, adapts himself to the primitive. It is a transition from disorder to order.

Billy's tragic death becomes more tragic when he blasted the modern society. When Billy is shot dead, he opens his fast-glazing eyes for a moment, looking at Romi and says, "You bastards" (233). They are apparently a direct abuse, an

expression of anger at the betrayal of modern society, a right verdict on civilization, which is not natural but bastardly. Billy echoes the 'horror, horror' words of Kurtz in *The Heart of Darkness*. What reaches the civilized world is not his message for which he had sacrificed himself but a handful of ash. He pays his life for not conforming to the norms of the urban civilization. As the novelist concludes, "*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* had ... been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers" (240). While the civilized world destroys him, the tribal world seeks to perpetuate the memory of the man-god by offering him a shrine. The death of Billy "should not be taken as the death of an isolationist but as the triumph of his ideals and principles. (Dwivedi A.N, 313)

The novel, which very distinctly illustrates the theme of man's restlessness in modern life and his futile attempt to escape it, is concerned with the crisis of contemporary civilization in the upper class Indian society. It has been remarked that Billy's strange case represents the "universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization". (Mathu O.P and G.Rai, 35).

The isolation of Arun Joshi's Billy can be associated with that of the hero of V.S.Naipaul's *A House of Mr.Biswas*. There is, however, an indispensable variance in the treatment of alienation of the two Biswases. Naipaul himself is rootless, whereas Joshi has the inherent baking of a rich cultural tradition. It is because of this reason that the latter's delineation of alienated figures like Sindi and Billy in such realistic terms appears to be so excruciating.

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