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**LIBERATION THROUGH WISDOM: EXISTENTIAL CONFLICT IN
ARUN JOSHI'S: "THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS"**

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ABSTRACT

Generally, Wisdom is the key factor in any experience of true liberation. It is the ultimate result of mindfulness. Various philosophers belong to different schools of thought defined wisdom, liberation, mindfulness and other philosophical terms in accordance to their ideology. Ultimate result of their argument is that wisdom is a spectrum of experience that begins with insight into empty nature of all phenomena including the self. It finds its realization in the liberation of mind that direct knowing of unconditioned and transcendent wisdom. When the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom are joined together, they can be taken to indicate two aspects of eligible deliverance. Liberation of mind signifies the release of his mind from craving and its associated defilements where as liberation by wisdom is the liberty from ignorance. Keeping this in the mind, this article throws light on the Joshi's novel and how the characters, situations and attitudes are released from the liberation of mind and liberation by wisdom. The first one is the attainment of eligibility by leaving sensual desires and realization of ignorance and the later one is the attainment of liberation through wisdom.

Introduction

Arun Joshi's second novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) revolves around the crisis of self, the resultant agony and man's quest for a meaningful life in a snobbish and phoney materialistic society. Though it bears some similarities with The Foreigner, it is another version of man's quest for understanding his self by shunning the material world (Maya) for knowledge (Jnana). Deeply influenced by the concept of sanyasa (renunciation), the novel attempts to

explore "that mysterious under world which is the human soul" (Mathai: 8) which has its own angularities and dimensions. The despondency of its protagonist Billy Biswas is the result of his estrangement in modern society which forces him to take refuge in the habitat of tribal.

Billy is a man of intellect, profound sensibility and unusual obsessions. Though Billy could very well afford to live in some other posh areas like Manhattan as he comes from "the upper crust of Indian society" (Joshi, 1971: 5), he has chosen to live in Harlema it is the only place where he may nurture his sense of belonging. Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady of thirty years finds him an extraordinary person having a strange force in his self. The Bhubaneswar episode presents Billy's personality still more mysterious. He recounts to Romi how at the age of fourteen he had received the intimations of his primitive self: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake" (120). It had seemed to him that the sculptures of konark can give him a solution to his question about his anguish: "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where I was going? (20). Even after the completion of his doctoral degree in Anthropology and his return to India, he does not feel at ease. A sense of nothingness pervades him. He suffers from a sense of loss in a society where people are simply busy in making money. His antipathy to the city of Delhi and its life is reflected in his letters to Tuula: I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other... (92).

...the so called thinkers and philosophers and men like that ... are hired to find solutions, throw light on complication caused by this making and spending of money (pp.92-3).

These observations show his social alienation at its best. His marriage with Meena Biswas turns out to be a failure because he finds Meena to be a prototype of materialistic men. Meena craves for money but she never tries to establish a rapport with him. Such domestic life increases Billy's alienation and he loses his temper at minor issues quarreling "all the time", "snapping at everybody", remaining in a "dark mood" (70), not touching his wife for six months. On his last expedition to Maikala hills, after being unable to resist the call of inner self, Billy joins the tribes as the ultimate attempt to live a meaningful life and rejects the hollowness of Delhi where he feels "pinned down... like a dead butterfly" (p.47). He prefers to live with Dhunia, Bilasia and others because he finds an altogether different atmosphere there, "Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that" (p.111). While living among simple people one can look through their hearts. No ambition corrupts them. When nearly three years Romi meets Billy, he finds Billy finished, "snuffed out like candle left in the rain", (p.66) and he concludes that the society of Delhi has begun to get on his nerves. Billy's rejection highlights the meaninglessness of our prosperity which alienates individuals from his own self and society. His rejection is akin to renunciation which "has always been an Indian ideal of life" (Mukherjee: 97). In this regard he is similar to the sages in the past who had renounced riches for primitive life as a means to realize the truth of existence. The path chosen by Billy is obviously the way of Jnanayoga (The Way of Knowledge), an effort to free him from all desires, longings and ego which are pre-requisites for attaining peace.

The aim of the presentation in the novel is a viable alternative to the futile cry of the sensitive individual in the modern world and accounting for the behavior of people like Billy. Bimal Biswas or Billy is a man of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary

obsessions. He is introduced as an "engineer, anthropologist, and anarchist" a man of an extraordinary obsession, is born and brought up in comfort and affluence. He is son of a Supreme Court Judge, who is educated in Britain and America. He is a person who is deeply aware of deeper layers of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life. The ordered, systemized, civilized life which fascinates common man intensifies Billy's problems of identity that is in search of a "human world of emotional fullness-a world of meaningful relatedness." Unable to seek inner-peace, self-recognition, and salvation in the so-called civilized world, he searches for a place where he would not feel an outcast, culturally uprooted, socially isolated, and self-estranged. But his quest leaves behind a trail of shattered hearts.

Billy's persistent quest for individuality persuades him constantly to live at Haarlem, where he can nurture in himself a sense of belonging, a spirit of superintendence, by wholly preserving his identity, he studies anthropology and not engineering, which his parents want him to. The restlessness and chaos of Billy's soul finds a poignant expression in his desire to travel and is symbolically externalized in his extraordinary reading obsession. His sense of restlessness and his longing for primitivism is almost engrained in his personality. He receives the intimations of his primitive self from the moment he emerges from the railway station at Bhubaneswar, where he goes to spend his holidays in his childhood: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake." But at that time he is not able to analyze his feelings properly: "I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" It seems to him that the sculptures of Konark can provide a solution to his problem of identity and quest for self. Watching the tribal dance, the young Billy has these feelings: "Something had gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong; this is what I have always dreamt of." Billy is brought face to face with the futility of civilized life, which makes him terribly unhappy. And thereafter throughout he goes on making efforts to retrieve his identity, which eludes him for a long time. Tulla Lingdren, a Swedish girlfriend of Bill, who has come to America for advanced training in psychiatric social works, and has extraordinary intuition. She has mastered hypnotism, that's why she understands the dilemma of Billy's life fully. She knows what goes on in his dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes. She finds him obsessed with a latent quest.

In his desperate attempt to get away from the hallucinations and his fear for loneliness, Billy, ironically gets caught in social conventions that he so terribly abhors. In order to get rid of his obsession for the primitive and to attain emotional anchor, Billy marries Meena Chatterjee - a sophisticated and beautiful girl of his own Bengali community. This marriage however turns out to be a miserable failure, because of lack of understanding. Within a year after his marriage, he realizes that he has committed a blunder. He says, "The game I had been playing was the stupidest gamble one could think of. I was lost even before I had put up the stakes." Unable to realize his 'self' in the marriage, Billy's whole being is shattered.

Billy's marriage and its tragic aftermath lead him to the edge of despair, culminating subsequently in the seduction of Reema Kaul. Absence of any meaningful relationship and communication in marriage, coupled with his unfulfilled yearning for primitive life, Billy feels awfully discontented with his life in this stilted civilization. His obsession with primitive life is born out of the feeling that the sophisticated life is not original but only an imitation of what is artificial. So he longs to escape into the simple society of genuine emotions from the hypocrite materialistic society. In the beginning, he does not understand his fascination for the primitive life. However, soon he realizes that it is not merely a fascination, but a search

for his own self through a sensory enlivening brought in him by Bilasia. Being fascinated by the primitive surroundings, fed up with the strange, wooden Meena and corrupted by the charm of Reema Kaul, attracted by Bilasia, he disappears into the Sal forests. Billy's attraction to Bilasia is not sexual but it is the primitive element in her as she is an incarnation of the primitive force. She is the missing self of Billy and the union with her makes him whole. It is as though Bilasia is Prakriti and Billy is Purusha and the cosmic whole is experienced in their union. Billy's tragedy is the tragedy of every man who wants to know his identity, his individuality. Billy abandons the civilized world not because he is a psychic case or a criminal, but because his vision can see beyond what is actually visible. The most tragic part of the story is that none tries to understand Billy's problems even after his death. Nobody realizes that Billy was making a search for truth which is hard to come by and harder to understand.

The story of Billy has been divided into two parts very aptly as he has lived two lives in one birth- the first in an unambitious, uncivilized but contented and natural world. In the second part, that is primitive world, he experiences real mental and spiritual tranquility, solace and contentment when he comes into closer contact with primitive life. He is a refugee from civilization who has undergone the final metamorphosis under a Sal tree just as the Buddha had achieved Nirvana under the Bodhi tree. "He stood on a rock and saw in the night sky a reality that blinded him with its elemental ferocity. It was as though his life had been reduced to those elements with which we all begin when we are born." He realizes the significance of that moment which rarely comes in a man's life. He says: "Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight." Billy is now completely transformed. For him, his transformation is an inexorable movement from darkness to light. Like Siddhartha, he realizes that one could attain salvation and happiness not by rigid penance and self-mortification, but by participating in life vigorously and whole heartedly, yet without attachment. It also impresses the readers with its originality and sensibility. It has rightly been regarded as a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore. This novel is likely to remain extraordinary responsive to the successive generations of its active Indian readers as it delineates the existential quest for values and individuality in a mad, bad, absurd world.

CONCLUSION:

Arun Joshi deals with various fictional themes as alienation and involvement, east-west encounter and compromise, existentialism and individuality, and quest and complacence. In his novels, he delineates the spiritual agony of his lonely questers. This novel seems to be a sequel of his other novels in which his protagonist is lonely and misfit in that world where he has to live and face the meaninglessness of life. He is restlessly searching for his roots and trying to know the purpose of his existence on this planet. Billy Biswas is a character with greater depth than that of the general run of the western existential heroes. His alienation from the civilized world leads him to explore the dark mossy labyrinths of his soul that long for individuality. Finally Joshi suggests that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be felt in the lap of Nature and primitive atmosphere and not in the sophisticated urban area.

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