

**A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's  
*The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas***

**Prof. Manminder Singh Anand**

=====

**Abstract**

Existential quest and coming to terms with reality have been the ruling passions of protagonists in Arun Joshi's novels, starting with Sindi Oberoi in 'The Foreigner'. Arun Joshi's second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is "yet another variation on the paradigmatic pattern of the doomed existential quest for values in a mad, bad, absurd world" (Guruprasad 161). The theme of anxiety, frustration and resultant alienation, which first appeared in *The Foreigner*, is further developed here, though with different orientations—through the "experience that boarded on the traumatic" (123) of its protagonist Bimal Biswas affectionately referred to as Billy by his friend Romesh Sahai, the witness narrator of the story. This study is intended to explore further the depths of alienation and anxiety and to see how, in Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi comes up with a protagonist who tries to harmonise the existential dilemma with the Indian ethos of acceptance.

**Keywords:** Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi, existential, angst, anxiety, foreigner

**Introduction**

The novel '*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*' by Arun Joshi has in it many echoes of *The Foreigner*, though the two novels differ in their major themes, and their locales and techniques. Both the novels are single-character based, and are mainly preoccupied with the sensibilities, beliefs, quests and the destinies of their heroes. To begin with, Sindi Oberoi and Billy Biswas both feel alienated from the environment in which they have been brought up. But whereas Sindi seems to be more or less a foreigner and an alien till the end, Billy is at least able to find a meager amount of fulfillment in his escape to primitivism. Hence, it may be said that the writer's vision in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is not so bleak, dark, pessimistic and cynical as to make his hero feel alien to his world. Billy at least feels a sense of belongingness in the tribal and primitive way of life. But even here the vision cannot be regarded as quite optimistic, for the writer is considerably bitter about the civilized world.

Billy has to pay a heavy price for giving up his so-called cultured life. The book ends with the hero realizing the insensitivity of the civilized world towards a gesture of conscientious dissent. And yet there are affiliations that show unmistakable family connections between the two books. For one thing, the central characters in both the novels have one foot in India and the other outside India. Both are, for another thing, first an alien to their native sensibility and then get absorbed and directed by the native, Indian, ethos.

### **Clash of Cultures**

The clash of cultures in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is something different from that of *The Foreigner*. Sindi and the Billy are two different poles with Billy's quest deeper than the quest Sindi Oberoi had undertaken. Moreover, Billy's concern is not intellectual like that of Sindi's. It is grounded in his deep roots in family traditions and a fixed set of values. He has a standing and that is the position of an Indian saint who is less concerned with external world than the internal self realization in life.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a movement from the almost contemplative world of Sindi to the dynamic, vital and active world of Billy Biswas. Like *The Foreigner*, this novel explores the “mysterious underworld of the human soul. Arun Joshi appears in full control of his material. The novel grips the reader from start to finish as Joshi is in full command of his material lending a new dimension to the history of Indian fiction in English. The novel, to D.R. Sharma, shows the “insensitivity of the civilized world towards a gesture of conscientious dissent” (104). Meenakshi Mukerjee had very early found it as “a compelling novel about a strange quest, drawing upon myth and folk-lore to reiterate its elemental concerns”. In both *The Foreigner* and *Billy Biswas*, Mukerjee says, “renunciation is a dominant theme and... make[s] the reader disturbingly aware of the many levels of reality” (203).

The strange case of Billy, writes O.P. Mathur, may be taken as “an allegory of the realization of one's true self, the final resolution of one's life, the meaning of which lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun” (31). This contrast between the superficial and the real informs the whole work. The necessity of leading an authentic life is often theoretically admitted. But only rare sensitive souls like Billy are attuned to its calls.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 73

### **Valley beyond the Hills: Hills beyond the Valley**

Billy has a very good ancestral background seeded in Bengal. His grandfather had been the Prime Minister in Orissa and his father practised law at Allahabad and Delhi. When Billy was in America his father was a Judge of Supreme Court in India. But even when he was abroad Billy had gained a sound knowledge of Indian society and culture. The primitive people interested him very much. The conversation between two sophisticated and cultured minds, Billy Biswas and Tuula Lindgren, is significant. Tuula had come to America for advance training in Psychiatric social work and was going to work in a mental hospital in Topeka. Billy wanted her close contact as a tutor in Anthropology. Tuula asks his choice for a job. He puts it as follows:

The other side. You know what I mean, don't you? 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 (18-19).

Billy belongs to a well-to-do family and that is why he has to face many difficulties. He is unable to fulfil his wishes because he does not want to tie up the secret of his wish fulfilment. He feels something within and has no courage to divulge it. He is afraid of it. Meena Chatterjee, who belongs to a Bengali family, comes in contact with Billy and gives her identification entirely in English accent. Talkative to a fault, she gives a lengthy philosophy on horse riding and later on goes on to talk about horsemen and sportsmen.

On the marriage proposal with Meena, Billy does not have self-confidence. He does not know about Indian social life. He wants to take advice of his friend, an I.A.S. Officer getting training at Simla. His friend knows enough of the world and is aware of the men who want to impart confidence but for Billy his general ideas are outweighed. As a matter of fact there is a great change in the atmosphere. The friend discourses to Billy about the importance of a wife's necessity, socially, sexually and for a future life. According to Hindu mythology a man's duty is to marry and beget children. He analyses the needs for marriage in this way:

I offered him the usual amalgam of Western pragmatism, a wife is so necessary socially, sexually, for a fuller life and Hindu dharma.

Man's duty to marry and reproduce; there is a time for everything

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 74

that is the conventional wisdom of the Indian middle class (42).

The irrepressible call of "a great force, *urkraft*, a primitive force" makes him lose his identity (23). He says: "Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight" (121). Not sure whether he belongs to "the wilderness" or to "the marts of the Big City" (96) he feels that his soul had all along been clamouring for that other thing, "something like" God (189). After finally becoming one with wilderness, he is assumed to have attained magical powers which also point towards the necessity of some sort of faith in this rationalistic and mechanistic society which has changed men into robots. Incidentally, the name Bimal Biswas means 'pure faith.'

### **Mental Turmoil of Billy**

Billy is not satisfied with his wife Meena because, he dislikes commercial people like her and his parents. He wants permanent peace but is unable to find it in the surroundings in which he lives. He shows annoyance with Meena. He wants to be in a company far from these people with whom he has nothing to adjust but when he shares this inclination with Meena, she gets into a mood fluttering like a crushed butterfly:

‘Oh, God! I wish I were dead. If I even open my mouth I bore you. If I speak what is in my mind, I am being silly. Why did you marry such a boring silly girl?’ (80)

A large envelope is handed over to Mr. Old Chap by Dr. Kundt of Swedish Embassy in Delhi. It contains letters written by Billy to Tuula that were written about a year after his return to India and the last nearly six months before his disappearance. These letters make an investigative approach and also show the mental abnormality of Billy arising out of cultural clashes in his mind. He is struggling with himself and wants to go to a peaceful world of imagination where he could be capable of realizing the real meaning of life. He hates those "cultured" men who are busy earning and spending money and remind of the women in the "Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" talking of Michelangelo. Some remarkable extracts of his letters are sure to throw light on his views about the people:

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than making and spending of money. What else the civilized men do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending the so-called

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 75

thinkers and philosophers and men like that--they are merely hired to find solutions, throw light, as they say, of complications caused by this making and spending money. What need would there be of psychiatrists, research foundations, learned societies, great scholars, scientists, ministerial adviser, ambassadors, generals, had the world not initially been hung on this peg of money (96-97).

Billy finds peace and happiness in the woods and with the tribals. The sounds and smells of a lonely forest life echo in his ears even when he comes back to the city life:

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 (96).

He likes to live with the tribal people on Maikala Hills and wants to be a primitive pilgrim, a wanderer in the woods, a self seeker with the tribal folk. He describes his strange journey and expresses his thoughts towards tribal people, their appearance, their living and their management.

The conflict of cultures arises in his mind. The complexity of his thoughts compels him to think a lot for his being in that very society where he is disappointed to reach his goal. Billy is satisfied with the tribe's culture. He is happy because he is far from the world that hangs on the peg of money. Here he is found talking about the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, ruin, dust storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing and a lot about women and sex. Bilasia consoles his despair and makes him happy:

I told my Sajan: sing to me all night. Life was meant to be sung and we were meant to be singers. But my Sajan went away. O, my Sajan went away (117).

Billy, now, is going to be attached with the hills, forests, tribal people and each and every object of Nature. He has a quest for self-realisation with the missing part of his soul.

This interest of Billy in primitivism is not an interest he had 'borrowed' one but is

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015  
Prof. Manminder Singh Anand  
A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 76

inborn, Once, when he was in New York, he had chosen to live in the places where the negroes lived. He had been sent to read Engineering but he had chosen Anthropology. It appears from his choice that he has a dislike for an organised life or the life of a cultured man. His standard of living in Harlem apartment also shows his dislike for an organised life. He does not display dexterity in any of the indoor games.

As he had done in *The Foreigner*, Joshi probes the depths of human psyche in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* too. But the narration here takes place through the mouth of the Collector, the bosom friend of Billy.

Billy tries to impress Romi that he is in a trance and gets inspiration from the sources unknown to him. She is very close to Tuula because she has primitive force in her and is far from the tinsel life of modern civilization. In her company he feels plenty of happiness. He proposes to study the mental working of deranged people because he finds more meaning in their reactions than in those cultured men. His study of Anthropology brings him closer to the life he likes to lead. Earlier, he needed stimulus like alcohol or dance or folk song or drum beating to transport him to the life he dreams of but now he has clear visions without any stimulus. He narrates his vision in the following lines:

It would be like a great blinding flash during which I would be totally unaware of anything else. And invariably it left me with the old depressing feeling that something has gone wrong with my life. I was not where I belonged (181).

Sometimes Billy complains of hypocrisy and dishonesty and fears that he has been ignoring his soul in favour of material joys and pleasures but he does not tolerate the remarks of his friend made in a picnic party that “the banjaras are thieves and their wives are whores.” (121). That remark of his friend shakes his faith and he gets ready to marry Meena.

Since he is a stranger to the civilized society Billy has an intense hatred for city people. To him civilization is a monster, a degradation of the human soul. Simply earning money and spending it is not culture. Our thinkers, philosophers and spiritualists can only complicate the culture. His dislike for money is intense. The reason why he was attracted to Tuula was that she too does not hanker after money. This was also the case with Bilasia.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 77

It is due to these pulls and pressures that marriage with Meena does not unite his body or soul. Meena fails to satisfy his thirst. Romi finds him a changed man, and discovers bitter secret in his transformation, when she feels, “he had either turned banal, ..... or... he was turned upon some obscure segment of himself, fretting out a bitter, secret, settling an old score (70).

Billy's vision is stronger than the sense of harmony in his surrounding, family life and the life with his wife, Meena. He gets introverted, retires within himself, and opts for the life of a pilgrim. He feels a gap of communication between his wife and himself. Since sex cannot satisfy him to release his tension he leaves Meena's company for many months – for she too is a product of modern civilization. Billy needs some one who can share his thought and apply himself to inject a new lease of life in him. He is now attracted to Rima Kaul, who loves him passionately.

He is fed up with strangers, with unresponsive people, with statues like Meena and with corruption of soul in which Rima Kaul is living. While he gets a glimpse of Bilasia in Dhunia's hut, her glimpses give him a powerful pull. Her charm being sensual gives him thrill and also overpowers him. He finds in her the right woman, one who can quench his thirst, enlighten his senses, and save him from corruption and material civilization. He can now renounce all—Meena, Rima and the civilized world. This transformation of Billy is not the transformation of sex, or sympathy or sublimation but is a mixing of self. Bilasia fulfils his choice of life. Her enormous eyes, “only a little foggier with drink, poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them” (141).

Thus, Billy meets Bilasia and is unified with her and her culture. He finds his real self in her and gets liberation from his own corrupt culture. He proves himself the saviour God of the tribals. To this aspect of his changes Dhunia tells Romi: “He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away” (159-60).

The important point to note, nonetheless, is neither Billy's scholarship nor a tendency to only skim the surface world but a passion to penetrate the human psyche.



Both by training and natural aptitude, Billy is an anthropologist. The subject of studying man is the greatest passion for him. He is an engineer who has the intelligence to construct. He is also an anarchist. Surely man needs to pull down the moth-eaten structures when he is convinced to effect radical overhauling of existing structures. He is in possession of right faculties and abilities to undertake the examination of his existential situation. He makes a number of conscious choices of his situation. A person with extraordinary abilities, one who does not conform to the general norms, he likes to map his own world. To the majority, he is exasperatingly unorthodox, he fights with every other person and sees the general response as unheroic even though it is the majority's attitude. He finds Harlem, the home of the Black Americans to be an oasis of humanity in the desert of civilization of white American society, and prefers to be "human", by which he suggests the need to live life at a more subcutaneous level. His identification with Harlem symbolizes his courage and conviction in choosing to be isolated from the common run of humanity of the civilized society, where, as Tillich says, "man is drawn into the world of objects and is lost or is continuously losing" (154). Billy's preference for jazz music is symbolic of tribal aspiration for freedom and liberation from shackling tendencies imposed by the civilized society. He has always been critical of the so-called civilized society for possessing "the social order difficult to redesign" (Sharma 1977, 3). Romi is scared by the prospect of his ability to see into the nature of things. He could only conclude with incredulity "There were many things that I did not see which Billy saw and which, step by step, led him to the only end that awaits those who see too much" (39). Billy chooses not to be others-oriented. His pursuit is more in the manner of the ancient ascetics of India who 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. He shows courage to bear the demands of such an intellectual examination of his existential position, and realizes that he is in a world that "conspires towards a philosophy of meaninglessness, boredom, and the absurd" (Ghosh 1996, 5). He would rather be a butterfly in search of the nectar of experience in the garden of life. To people like him, the world is not one monolithic entity where everybody wants to be like everybody else in a shameless acquiescence to the general order.

### **Billy, The Existential Struggle**

The butterfly in Billy makes him realize that the world is not a given homogenous and

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015  
Prof. Manminder Singh Anand  
A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 79



satisfactory entity. With greater commitment to unravelling the meaning and coherence of existence he would understand “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” (54). His marriage with Meena is doomed for the reason that the individual's freedom is infringed upon by the spouse. She occupies a world that is not risk taking. It is a world which insists on social positions and respectability at all costs. He finds her to be less involved with him and realizes that she does little to offer him any succour in his search for meaning. Made of a different temper, he is convinced that the constructions of society cannot sustain his search for the meaning of life. Societies, however, refuse to understand such individuals, nevertheless, such a hero emerges as a prophet figure, one who goes beyond his time and place on the strength of his convictions. Billy records his contempt for civilization whose *raison d'etre* is making and spending of money. In this dispensation, he feels that he is “swiftly losing grip on life” (98). Deep in the forests, life for Billy is without the affectation of order, false sophistication and bogus decorum. The tribals are people who live a life where there is no schism between the precepts and the practices of life. The forest which is the antithesis of civilization has its own order, its own essence, and a purpose, and symbolizes for him his destination, where he will make his tryst with destiny. His wait for Bilasia, who stands for “a dark unresisting energy” is an epiphanic moment when he is able to see clearly the synthesis emerging out of the intellectual evaluation of the civilized society and the tribal society” (Chingre 156). When he meets Bilasia and becomes the possessor of “the essence of life [which] can be communicated only in the language of visions” (142), his metamorphosis gets complete.

One of the most important dialectical opposition in the novel is the one between the “civilized” city and the “uncivilized” jungle. What such a dialectical argument foregrounds towards the end of the novel is the subject of fertility. Regeneration, perpetuation of the generation, and the transmission of vital elements through a continuous flow of life are defining aspects of life in the jungle. The savage jungle privileges fertility over the functional convenience of the city. Billy, as the city-dweller, is experiencing the first intimations of real fertility through his contact with the forest, of which Bilasia is an essential representative and the element itself.

Another aspect vehemently represented by Arun Joshi in the novel is that the longing for natural mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is in consonance

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015  
Prof. Manminder Singh Anand  
A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 80

with fundamental human needs, the fulfilment of which (although in different form) is the pre-condition of our survival. In this state one can remain pure, sensitive and mystically linked with Nature, its authentic humanity and instinctive spontaneity. Rousseau, too, considers man innately good and pacific in his 'natural state', but when he enters into contact with society he is bound to become impure, materialistic in attitude, corrupted by codes and conventions man is incapable to understand the real meaning of life.

### **Layers of Billy's Existential Encounter**

The novel is as a record of a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life – the kind Rousseau, Thoreau, Gandhi and Wordsworth talk about. Billy has a dislike for the elite class and its character, for to him all the people around him are “hung on this peg of money” (97) and are nothing more than a “heap of tinsel” (141). He expresses his distaste for the money-mindedness of the civilized people leading to the degradation of their souls.

The novel severely condemns the spiritual dislocation of the post-Independence westernized Indian society. Billy is totally fed up with the superficialities of the grossly materialistic and sterile Indian society. He finds himself trapped Willy Loman-like in the cobweb of money-centred relationships. To escape this disintegration, he flees from the hollow world of Delhi and enters the pristine uncorrupted tribal world of Maikala hills.

The very epigraph of the novel, taken from Arnold's "Thyrsis": "It irk'd him to be here, he could not rest", makes the thematic direction of the novel clear. Like Arnold's Scholar Gipsy, Billy too flees from the so-called civilized society and seeks shelter in the idyllic Maikala hills. In the Arnoldian vein, the novel makes a scathing attack on the materialistic civilized society and an exaltation of the past ancient culture for it is here that the panacea for the ills of the modern society lies. The situation is the same everywhere, be it India, or be it any other corner of the world. The first section of the novel had established the character of Billy and his degraded and sterile surrounding, as such his escape is convincing. His decision to leave the civilized world is not made on the spur of the moment; it is rooted in what he was and what he wanted.

## Billy's Existential Dilemma

Billy's case is a strange case as his personality is split between the primitive and the civilized. To him the modern civilization is degenerate, shallow and self-centred:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago (128).

Misfit in this plastic world, and in search of a place where he could fit in and feel at home, Billy finds himself "itching to be back" (27) in India. He returns to India but experiences only a change of scene, and, finds Delhi as spiritually dead and emotionally empty as materialistic America. If the ghost America was a *cul-de-sac*, the unholy Delhi is a dead end. To him, the people everywhere are the same, artistically dry and intellectually barren. He marries Meena Chatterjee who is "quite usually pretty in a western sort of way" (37), loquacious and hollow. But this hurried marriage, as he later realizes, is a blunder. Meena's money-centric outlook leads to the marital fiasco. With every passing day, the estrangement between the two mounts and their conjugal life turns into the "most precarious of battle-fields" (81). This leads to his total sense of alienation and isolation from his wife, family and his own self.

One of the excerpts of the letters he wrote to Tuula is a scathing attack on west-centric Indian upper-crust society and its materialistic value system. The animal-imagery used to describe the so called civilized people stands as an objective correlative of Billy's deep-seated hatred for the society. He wrote:

Returning home one evening, finding myself in a state of considerable agitation, I stopped at a temple. It was the hour of the evening *aarti*. I stood before the idols my hands folded, my head bowed, incense of *dhoop* tickling my nostrils.(97)

In order to escape from the agonies of life, he takes to anthropological expeditions to the various parts of India with his students. Once he takes his students on an anthropological expedition to the tribal areas of the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and gets enamoured of

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015  
Prof. Manminder Singh Anand  
A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 82

the idyllic surroundings and its inhabitants. “His quest for identity originates here in search of which he bids farewell to the civilization” (Saxena 77).

### **Bilasia: The Existential Connect**

A great change overtakes him when he reaches Dhanias hut and sees Bilasia. He gets totally ensnared by Bilasia’s sensuality. She enlivens his soul that had been deadened by Meena Biswas and Rima Kaul. Unlike Meena and Rima, Bilasia is not sophisticated and shallow. She is an integral part of the rhythmic life of Nature. She is the right woman to satisfy his soul. There is a conflict between his present identity in the civilized world and his soul’s longing for ‘Return to Nature’. All the phenomena of nature, its flora and fauna, seem to be waiting for him and calling him to join them:

Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you ... come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? . . . This is all there is on earth. This and the women 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 until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night” (88).

While sitting on the rock, ‘God’s Plenty’ he feels as if he was undergoing a deep metamorphosis. He renounces the sophisticated Delhi urban society in favour of tribal life of the Maikala forest. This is not an escape from reality but an escape *into* reality on the lines of Prince Siddharth. He renounces a life of hypocrisy and deceit to accept a life of noble savageness. Like Kurtz in *Heart of Darkness*, Billy forsakes civilized human society and like Scholar Gipsy returns no more. Arun Joshi may have been influenced by Conrad’s novella, but he goes beyond it for Billy’s quest for identity and his search of the meaning of life make him turn against civilized society. His mistress, Bilasia, unlike Kurtz’s mistress, plays a very significant role in his self-realization. For the sake of his longing to return to Nature he forsakes even his life. He reminds us of the White Lady also, 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

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 83

quote here what Hari Mohan Prasad says:

The novel articulates, almost the intensity of Lawrence and Conrad, human craving for the primordial, the *elan 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 *Kaivalvya* (46).

This concern of Joshi for Nature impresses upon the readers the fact that in a conflict between the civilized and primitive ways of living, it is the latter that prevails. Bilasia and Maikala Hills attract Billy more than the artificial and sophisticated atmosphere of Delhi. Real peace, pleasure and perfection can be found in the natural and primitive atmosphere rather than in the din and bustle of big cities Delhi. His magnificent obsession with primitive life is produced from the feeling that the outer governed life is only an imitation.

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. Tremendously concerned with pretentiousness, hypocrisy snobbery of the modern civilized society, Joshi gives a message that simplicity, quietness, tranquillity and spirituality of natural primitive life are the only means of achieving sublime living.

### **Indian Framework of the Existential Quest**

Billy's Indian sensibility and primitive streaks which are associated with it can be seen in his accommodation and humble abode at Harlem and his migration to another world after listening to the drum beats. A man of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsession, Billy is a misfit in the contemporary world, is in an environment torn between sense and sensibility. G.A. Ghanshyam rightly opines in this connection:

Arun Joshi has placed, both directly and subtly, two opposite forces in the novel. On the one hand, there is the superficial, hollow and materialistic society which represents, and is symbolic of sense and of consciousness directed by sense. On the other hand, Billy Biswas

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 NOVEMBER 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 84

represents sensibility. He is misfit in society, in the quest for self-recognition and salvation. For him, primitivism is a better "means to an end" than the modern, civilized society. It is a spiritual quest, not for God but for "something like that" (62).

His invested interest in primitivism is a straight case of Indian sensibility which lies in people of mythical gods and their rhythm. His assumption that one can find "something like that," if not God, is based on the Indian sense that is exemplified with mythical characters who find divine presence in their secluded and tranquil life away from the hum-drum of civilized world. But this, disrupts his whole being and keeps on pricking his soul till he is dead.

More importantly, the story becomes terribly fascinating and convincing because of Billy's brilliant, rational outlook and the *urkraft* that triggers off his creative energy and which prompts him to do what he does. The way he argues with his Justice father about ordinary human laws being inadequate to judge people who live and act under extraordinary and non-human circumstances as well as his letters to Tuula bear testimony to his seemingly eccentric but inwardly rich life.

The most important act of Billy in the novel, however, is his disappearance from home and the civilized world and whatever he says or does earlier is but a movement in that direction. One receives confirmation of Billy's motives in escaping into the jungle from the following extracts from Billy's letter to Tuula:

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. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benaras. And once I saw her, her face strangely luminous in the twilight, loading a freight train with sulphur on a siding in one of our eastern ports. Yes, this woman keeps causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand. (97)

Hari Mohan Prasad rightly observes that “It is Bilasia who causes explosion of senses—the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and its symbols in Meena and Rima. From Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not a mere trifling in Billy’s file; it is a development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation” (58).

## Conclusion

In his interview with Purabi Banerjee, Arun Joshi clarified that the novel is “about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away. . . . In a number of Indian legends and religious texts people go away to forests to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that’s what he is suggesting though not consciously”(3). The novel, in fact, depicts a metaphysical quest and is concerned with a deeper exploration of the human soul. The vision that haunts Billy in the novel has haunted the seers, the mystics and the visionaries in all ages and in all countries. Through his novels, Arun Joshi shares with us the doubt and despair arising out of the awareness that, notwithstanding unprecedented scientific and technological advancements, which have added immensely to his physical pleasures and comforts, contemporary man finds himself in a tragic mess. No wonder, Joshi is intrigued by acute, trying situations in human life. He has been experimenting with the medium of literature to delineate man's predicament, particularly the feelings of loneliness, and meaninglessness that have come as emotional fallout of worldly success, material prosperity and disintegration of the bonds of love and solidarity.

---

## Primary Sources

*The Apprentice*. New Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1974. Print.

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Delhi: Orient, Delhi, 1971. Print.

*The City and the River*. New Delhi: Orient, 1990. Print

*The Foreigner*. Delhi: Orient, 1968. Print.

*The Last Labyrinth*. New Delhi: Orient, 1981. Print.

---

## Works Cited

Arnold, Matthew. “Thyrsis.” *Poems*. New York: Everyman’s Library, 1966.. Print.

Asnani, Shyam M. 1978. “Exploration of the Inner World: A Study of Arun Joshi’s Fiction,”

*The Literary Half-Yearly*, XIX/2, July. Print.

**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015

Prof. Manminder Singh Anand

A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 86



- Bhatnagar, O. P. "Art and Vision of Arun Joshi." *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*. R.K. Dhawan. ed., New Delhi: Classical Publishing Company, 1986. Print.
- Bhatt Indira and Suja Alexander. *Arun Joshi's Fiction: A Critique*. New Delhi: Creative Books, 2001. Print.
- Camus, Albert. *The Outsider*. Hammondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1969. Print.
- Chingre, C. D. "Women in the Novels of Arun Joshi." *Feminism and Literature*. ed. Veena Nobel Dass. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1995. Print.
- Damodar, G. "The Outsiderist Tradition in Joshi and Desai." *Kakatiya Journal of English Studies*. 13. 1993. Print.
- Dwivedi, A. N., *Indian Writing in English*, Delhi : Amar Prakashan, 1991. Print.
- Dwivedi, Vachaspati. *The Fictional Art of Arun Joshi : An Existential Perspective*, New Delhi. Atlantic, 2001. Print.
- Ghanshyam, G. A. "The Conflict of Sense and Sensibility' in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas." *Indian English Literature*. 2002. Print.
- Ghosh, Sisir Kumar. *Modern and Otherwise*. Delhi: D K Publishing House, 1975. Print.
- Ghosh, Tapan Kumar. *Arun Joshi's Fiction : The Labyrinth of Life*. New Delhi. Prestige, 1996. Print.
- Guruprasad, Thakur. "The Lost Lonely Questers of Arun Joshi's Fiction," *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*, edited by R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi : Classical Publishing Company, 1986.
- Jain, Jasbir. "Foreigners and Strangers: Arun Joshi's Heroes." *The Journal of Indian Writing in English*. 5:1, January 1977. Print.
- Joshi, Arun. *The Foreigner*. Delhi: Orient Paperbacks, 1968. Print. All citations refer to this edition and are included in the text.
- The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. Orient Paperbacks, 1971. Print. All citations refer to this edition and are included in the text.
- Imogener Hansdak, Ivy. *Nation in Imagination : Essays on Nationalism, Sub Nationalism and Narration*, Vijayasree, C. et al. Hyderabad : Orient Longman, Hyderabad, 2007. Print.
- Koteswara, T. "The Civilized World and the Primitive Society" in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas." in *Indian Literature Today*. 1994. Print.
- Mathur, O.P. "Arun Joshi and The Gita." Pathak, *Indian English Fiction* 132-45. Print.
- and G. Rai. "The Existential Note in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

- and *The Apprentice*." *Commonwealth Quarterly* 5.17 (1980) : 30-41. Print.
- Melwani, Murli Das. *Themes in Indo-Anglian Literature*. Bareilly: Prakash Book Depot, 1977. Print.
- Mukherjee, Meenakshi. "Detachment." *Quest*. 60. January-March 1969. Print.
- Mukherjee, Purabi. "A Winner's Secret" An Interview. *Sunday Statesman* (Calcutta) 27 Feb, 1983 : IV. Print.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*, New Delhi : Sahitya Akademi, 1982.
- Pandey, Birendra. *The Novels of Arun Joshi: A Critical Evaluation*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2000. Print.
- Pathak, R.S. *Indian Fiction in English : Problems & Promises*. New Delhi : Northern Book Centre, 1994. Print.
- Prasad, Hari Mohan. *Arun Joshi*. New Delhi: Arnold Heinemann, 1985. Print.
- Prasad, Madhusudan. ed. "Arun Joshi." *Indian English Novelists: An Anthology of Critical Essays*. New Delhi: Sterling, 1982. Print.
- Prempati, D. "*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas : A Serious Response to a Big Challenge*," *The Novels of Arun Joshi*, ed. R.K. Dhawan, New Delhi : Prestige Books, 1992. Print.
- Radhakrishnan, S. (ed. & tr.) *The Bhagavadgita*. New Delhi : Harper Collins Publishers, 1993; rptd. 2000. Print.
- Rangachari, S. "T.S. Eliot's Shadow on *The Foreigner*." *Scholar Critic* 4.6 (1984) : 1-8. Rpt. In Radhakrishnan, *Arun Joshi* 1-8. Print.
- Kumar, Shankar. *The Novels of Arun Joshi : A Critical Study*. New Delhi. Atlantic, 2003. Print.
- Sarkar, Kabita. Rev. of *The Foreigner*. *Times of India* Sept, 17, 1972. Print.
- Saxena, O. P. ed. *Glimpses of Indo-English Fiction*. Vol. III. New Delhi: Jainous Publications, 1985. Print.
- Sharma, D. R. "The Fictional World of Arun Joshi." *Indian P.E.N.* 43:9-10. 1977. Print.
- Sharma, G. P. *Nationalism in Indo-Anglian Literature*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1978. Print.
- Sharma, Siddhartha, *Arun Joshi's Novels : A Critical Study*. New Delhi. Atlantic, 2004. Print.
- Singh, Parmod Kumar. *Major Indo-English Novelists and Novels*. Jaipur : Sublime Publications, 1997. Print.
- Singh R.S. "Aloneness Alone : Anita Desai and Arun Joshi." Singh R.S., *Indian Novel in Language in India* [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 15:11 November 2015
- Prof. Manminder Singh Anand
- A Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas* 88

*English*, Arnold Heinemann, 1977 : 164-178. Print.

Srinath, C. N. "The Fiction of Arun Joshi." *The Literary Criterion*. 12:2-3. 1976. Print.

Tillich, Paul. *The Courage to Be New Heaven*. Yale University, 1952. Print.

Vatsa, Shivani and Rashmi Gaur. "A Study of the Corrupting Influence of the Technology :  
*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*", in M.K. Bhatnagar, ed. *The Novels of Arun Joshi :  
A Critical Study*. New Delhi. Atlantic, 2001. Print.

Verma, K. D. *The Indian Imagination; Critical Essays on Indian Writing in English*. Delhi:  
Macmillan India Ltd., 2001. Print.

=====  
Prof. Manminder Singh Anand, UGC NET  
Assistant Professor in English  
Dasmesh Khalsa College  
Zirakpur, (Mohali) 140603  
Punjab, India  
[fortune.favours@ymail.com](mailto:fortune.favours@ymail.com)