

Patrick White's *Voss* and Arun Joshi's  
*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas:*  
A Metaphysical Journey into the Self

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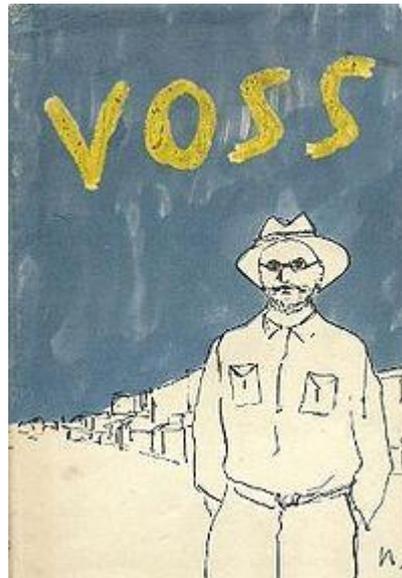
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### Abstract

Patrick White's *Voss* and Arun Joshi's *The Strange case of Billy Biswas*, though set in entirely different places, (Australia and India respectively) have many similarities and they provide an interesting area of investigation for a comparative study. Both the novels belong to the genre of quest literature where journey is the controlling pattern. The basic emphasis of both the novels is on spiritual awakening and reintegration with the 'self'. The paper will try to explore how the protagonists of the two novels have achieved the spiritual and metaphysical transformation in the course of their adventurous journey into the wilderness.

**Key words:** metaphysical, journey, wilderness, obsession, soul, exploration, identity

### 1. Introduction

The two novels, though written in different backgrounds and environments, in fact, deny all the boundaries and coastline. The landscape across which the journey takes place is, in fact, the interior landscape which transcends all local, regional, nationalistic or cultural concerns. That is why the two novels involve a journey which is also extended into a metaphor of the mind. It is also an exploration of the past in order that the present should be potential enough to have a future. Eventually, in both the novels, the metaphor adds

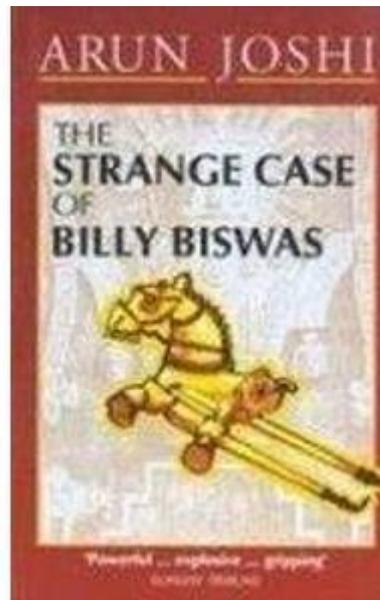
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Patrick White's *Voss* and Arun Joshi's Abraham Panaveli

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significance as it becomes one of self-discovery. Thus, both the novels deal with metaphysical questions like: "Where do I belong?" (*Voss*, 364) or "Who was I? Where did I come from? Where was I going?" (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 122)



The following two parallel quotations suggest how Patrick White and Arun Joshi present their respective hero's journey into the interior regions of the soul and mind.

Patrick White about Voss:

His soul must experience first, as by some spiritual *droit de seigneur* the excruciating passage into its interior. Nobody here, he suspected, looking round had explored his mind to the extent that would enable him to bear such experience. (*Voss*: 137)

Arun Joshi about Billy Biswas

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its cell. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: 8)

The expeditions undertaken by Voss and Biswas are an exploration of not only the outer space but also the inner space, not only the vastness and variety of the landscape but also the 'human space'. Such very different fictions as *Voss* and *Billy Biswas* have interesting similarities as metaphysical fictions

## 2.1. The Story

Voss is a German explorer who has come to Australia because he envisages the country as a land in which one can explore and expand one's soul. He is financed by the Bonner family into whose care the orphaned Laura has been sent as a baby from England. The party he leads finally mutinies, the one half which turns back composed of Ralph Angus, a grazer, Turner, uncouth and a drunkard, and Judd, who is their leader, an ex-convict, the other half which consists of Le Mesurier, a poet, Harry Roberts, a young simpleton and Voss. Both parties- the "gentlemen's", contains Voss's own choices for the expedition, and that of the "others", who were chosen for him- die in the desert, except Judd, who after twenty years of being lost, returns to civilization. Voss himself is betrayed and killed by one of his aboriginal guide who has gone back to his tribe.

In Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the protagonist Billy Biswas is fascinated by the tribal life and during one of his anthropological explorations, he disappears. He goes to the 'Saal forest' of the Maikala Hills and lives in communion with the primitive world. He even marries the tribal girl Bilasia and has two sons. Among Bhils, the tribal, he feels released, free and finds a certain sense of identity and divinity. But, the so-called civilized world will not leave him alone. In an encounter with the search party, Billy is killed.

## **2.2. Isolation as a human condition**

Both the novels share epic aspirations though expressed in different images. They are about human experiences conceived as dangerous exploration, particularly that profoundest part of it, in which the will grapples with the world outside itself and consider isolation as an ineradicable human condition which the two writers describe in similar ways:

White: The keenest torment or exhilaration was, in fact, the most private (*Voss*, 9).

Joshi: The search for truth is a lonely business (*The Strange case of Billy Biswas*, 178).

## **2.3. An obsession with travel**

The presence of Voss and Billy Biswas, the particular mark of their personality, their strangeness and obsession for travel are at once felt from the beginning. Voss is depicted as a kind of 'foreign man', a "German", an 'explorer'. Billy is also regarded as a foreigner who was sent to study Engineering in America, but ended up doing his Ph.D. in anthropology. His only wish in life is to return to India, travel through the wilderness and find out about the aboriginals. "Travel, travel. A little bit here and there, but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India" (*The Strange case of Billy Biswas*, 14). It is also clear from the beginning that both Voss and Billy Biswas had an inner compulsion, 'a primitive force,' an 'obsession' to undertake the exploration, as though both experience the wilderness before they ever reach there. The narrator says about Voss, "He is obsessed by this country" (*Voss*, 28). Billy Biswas is also described as 'a man of such extraordinary obsession. Billy confesses:

I was obsessed with a latent quest just as someone else might have an uncontrollable urge towards music or painting or the abstract sciences (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 178).

Thus, from the outset itself, the reader is prepared to face Voss and Biswas who will above all things be outside and beyond the ordinary run of humankind.

#### **2.4. Intricate web of relationships**

In both the novels, the richly creative imagination of White and Joshi elaborates an intricate web of relationships. In *Voss* there are those relationships between Voss and Bonners, between Voss and Laura, between Laura and Rose, between the Bonners and Laura and Rose, between Sydney society and the expedition itself and increasingly between Voss and the members of the expedition. In *Billy Biswas* also a series of relationships are marked- the relationship between the narrator Romesh Sahe and Biswas, between Biswas and Tuula, between Billy and his parents. Billy and his wife Meena, between Billy and Dhunia, between Billy and the aboriginal girl Bilasia whom he marries later, between Romesh Sahai and his wife Situ and between Biswas and the wilderness itself.

#### **2.5. Inner compulsion and direction**

But, all these relationships are subordinate to, or expressions of the fundamental nature of Voss and Biswas and the basic theme of the two novels. The impulse of Voss' and Biswas's actions and the inaugurating concept of the novels is not any general belief or ideas but the pure shape of an obsession which has no content, but only direction. The compulsion which Voss and Biswas feel comes from the desire to fulfill their own nature or from the force of their own obsession. But the difference is that while for Voss, the expedition is a personal wrestling with the continent, for Biswas it is a sort of communion with the wilderness. 'Deserts prefer to resist history and develop their own lives'. They have an intrinsic hostility to submission and they are therefore the proper target of Voss's will:

...Yes, answered Voss without hesitation. I will cross the continent from one end to the other. I have every intention to know it with my heart. Why I am pursued by this necessity, it is no more possible for me to tell than it is for you (*Voss*, 33)

Billy Biswas also faces the same predicament. He also cannot tell the reason for his obsession. However, Voss's exploration is deliberate and well- planned, but Biswas's is spontaneous which has no resistance and it is also without any prior planning:

In the second day of the expedition Billy Biswas disappeared ---simply vanished into saal forest of the Maikala hills. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 83)

He has undergone a sudden transformation into an aboriginal. According to Biswas,

It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and father of a handsome child. It was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth's first night. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 120)

He did not find it difficult to identify him with the tribal culture, as though he was meant for it. The narrator says:

He wore a loin cloth and nothing else. The impression he gave, however, was one of vitality. His skin had darkened because of constant exposure to sun. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 102)

Unlike Voss, Biswas never tried to establish any link with the civilized world, but once there in contact with the civilized world through the narrator Romesh Sahai, it led to his catastrophic death. The civilized world did not realize that Billy Biswas is "a refugee from civilization set in the shadow of a saal tree, a thousand miles away from home" (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 140). He has already assimilated with the aboriginal culture. The jungle had wrought in him such magical changes (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 222).

## **2.6- Fugitives from 'self' and finding an identity**

Both Voss and Billy Biswas are passionately concerned with themselves, alone with their own nature and the realization of their driving force. They are fugitives from 'self' who have left their respective family and place. The aborigines become their chosen people. Voss says:

Black fellow, white man friend together- I am a friend of the black fellow- This is the sign of friendship... The white man took the boy's hot black, right hand in both his and was pressing. (*Voss*, 365)

Eventually, Voss is killed by one of the aboriginals. But as Judd says: "They talk about him to this day. He is still there... that is the honest opinion of many of them- he is there in the country and always will be" (*Voss*, 443).

In the case of Billy Biswas, it is the civilized world that wanted to take him away and in the process he was killed. But as Voss is remembered, Biswas is also remembered by the aboriginals of Maikala hills. A shrine was built in the name of Billy Biswas. They have elevated him to the status of a God. For the aboriginals, "he is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound" (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 156-60).

In *Voss*, Judd explains this situation rightly, "If you live and suffer long enough in a place, you do not leave it altogether. Your spirit is still there" (*Voss*, 443).

## 2.7. The world of the civilized and the world of the aboriginals juxtaposed

What White and Joshi depict so accurately and profoundly in their novels about the blacks and the aboriginals is the other worldliness of their existence. They live in another world. They survive by becoming part of the earth. The world of the so called civilized people and the world of the aboriginals are juxtaposed and between them the latter seems to be happier as their life is more attuned to Nature. To quote Billy Biswas:

What kept us happy were the same things that have kept all the primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbow, the liquor from the 'mahua' an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love making, and more than anything else no ambition, none at all. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 148)

## 2.8. Journey as a metaphor

As pointed out earlier, in both the novels, journey is more nearly the essential form, because it represents in physical terms an approximation of their theme. The persistent resolve to make a fresh start in life functions as the silent centre of these books. It can also be marked that both the novels steadily move towards the discovery of the self. There is in both White and Joshi, an almost Wordsworthian sense, both of the physical quality of a landscape and its spiritual suggestiveness. It is one of the unifying elements in both the novels.

The exploration of Voss and Biswas is also a symbol of general human condition. Both the writers use the psychology of the explorer as a metaphor of man. The two explorers, Voss and Biswas, live at extremes. They are constantly pushing back the frontiers of suffering. As William Walsh says: "Suffering is the universal experience of extremity which unites all men (Walsh: 30).

The aboriginals are not different so far as this aspect of life is concerned. As Billy Biswas says about his life with the aboriginals: "it is amazing how unhappy everyone really is, even here (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 191). And Voss says, "All human obligations are painful" (*Voss*, 187).

## 2.9. Desert and the wilderness as images

The desert and the wilderness are two striking images or metaphors used by White and Joshi respectively and they are metaphoric environments and the setting of both the novels serve as symbolic polarities of experience. Both the desert and wilderness are remote from human society and are hospitable only to those such as the aboriginals who have found affinity with characters like Voss or Billy Biswas who would like to lead a remote life like them. Life is an unexplored desert and wilderness, living is the experience of extremes and suffering is the precondition of man's spiritual experience- this then is the metaphorical structure of both *Voss* and *Billy Biswas*.

### 3. Narrative style

Both White and Joshi have evolved a style peculiar to their particular environment. At times they use oral narration especially when the blacks and aboriginals speak. This technique is useful to convey feelings as directly as they are conveyed in a lyric and they are more natural and effective. For instance in *Voss*, the black boy says: "men gone away all dead. All over. By rock, by tree. No more men...No more nothing..." (*Voss*, 273). In *Billy Biswas*, also Joshi at times uses the Indian language Hindi to give his story more authenticity: "it was lovely that Bhagavan (God) himself divided to enter it before someone else does' (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 157), or "It is Devi Mata (Mother goddess) who has been his companion for five thousand years from "janam janamki saathi" (from one life after another). (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, 158).

In order to achieve the desired effect both White and Joshi have also employed dramatic and narrative methods. The great advantage of the dramatic method is the vividness of illusion it creates. This method also gives pleasure by putting the reader to work. There is a strange sense of immediacy that one feels as one reads these novels. A number of passages and scenes can be quoted where the narrator becomes the dramatist and quotes directly the things the character said. At certain points they use the technique of drama to enhance the effectiveness of their stories and at other points they sacrifice these to the advantages of narrative. For example, *Voss* begins like this: "There is a man here, miss, asking for your uncle" said Rose. And stood breathing. "What man?" asked the young woman (*Voss*, 2)? On the contrary, *Billy Biswas* begins with an oral narration: "There is a song among the hills of the Satpura Hills that goes somewhat like this--- (*The Strange case of Billy Biswas*, 7). Both White and Joshi have exploited the advantages of these methods for their own purposes.

### 4. Conclusion

The basic emphasis of both the novels is on spiritual awakening and reintegration with the 'self'. Both *Voss* and *Biswas* undergo a spiritual transformation. Their major concern is with their inner world, the world of the soul and its sources. They explore the 'inner world' of modern man and the way in which self tries to carve out a pattern to save itself from disintegration. The self is subjected to a groping and probing which is a great therapeutic process. G. A. Wilkes in his essay on Patrick White's *Voss* says about "the recurring concept of the dissolution of the self in the created world" (Wilkes, 159) and suggests that *Voss* has achieved the loss of self or 'transcendence', almost inadvertently. The statement is true in the case of *Billy Biswas* also. The expedition of both *Voss* and *Billy Biswas*, though different, are apt metaphors for the stresses of human life and both the protagonists become symbols of man and his struggle. Both *Voss* and *Billy Biswas* struggled and had to lose their lives eventually, but progress has been made. A material loss has resulted in a spiritual gain. Patrick White has always admired Gandhi's belief that 'progress is being measured by the amount of suffering undergone'. Happiness is also to be measured in the same way. Variations of this suggestion

run throughout the novels. Although not designed as an epic, the range of experience represented in these two novels is no less epic. The books contain different stories and different silences and different dimensions. But, both the novels show the same passage so far as the journey into the interior regions of the soul is concerned. Indirectly, both the novels are trying to restore something of the dispossessed (be it the black fellows of Australia or the aboriginals of India), so that these acts of reclamation become acts of restoration. Only through their imaginative recreation in fiction can these dispossessed people have any future at all. Undoubtedly, both White and Joshi belong to a line of novelists whose art embodies 'a concentrated and dazzling vision of man'.

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