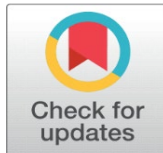
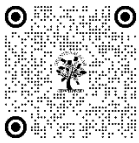


EXPLORING THE DIVIDE: MODERNITY AND PRIMITIVISM IN ARUN JOSHI'S 'THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS'

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the thematic tension between modernity and primitivism in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, focusing on the protagonist's quest for self-discovery and spiritual regeneration. The novel criticizes post-independence Indian society's moral and cultural decay, juxtaposing the superficial materialism of urban elites with the spiritual authenticity of tribal life. Billy Biswas, disillusioned with modern civilization, abandons its artificiality in favor of a primitive existence that restores his sense of purpose and connection with nature. The story vividly depicts his transformation, revealing both the hollowness of modernity and the redemptive power of primal values. Joshi's juxtaposition of the civilized world with tribal innocence serves as a profound meditation on identity, existential alienation, and the search for authenticity in a mechanized world.

Keywords: Modernity, Primitivism, Identity, Arun Joshi, the Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Alienation, Tribal Values, Spiritual Regeneration, Urban Materialism, Existential Crisis

1. INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi's literary oeuvre effectively portrays the crisis of self and a quest for cultural roots. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the protagonist's search for cultural identity unfolds against a clash between the materialistic Indian upper class and the earthy, spiritual values of tribal societies. Billy Biswas's journey into the Maikala Hills reflects his profound disenchantment with the artificiality of urban life, culminating in his spiritual regeneration amidst primitive surroundings. This paper explores the contrast between modernity and primitivism in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, highlighting the novel's critique of post-independence Indian society.

Joshi's narrative consistently underscores the futility and hollowness of civilized society. Billy's disdain for the urban elite's superficiality is palpable. As Rao aptly notes, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a "satire on the upper-class people" (1994:202). Billy's disillusionment stems not only from the materialistic culture of New Delhi but also from the pretentiousness of American society. His futile marriage to Meena, a sophisticated Bengali woman, further accentuates his alienation. Despite her efforts, Meena fails to comprehend Billy's spiritual torment. Billy's lamentation, "the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me ... the more resentful she became" (115), underscores his isolation.

Billy's return to India has a reason. He wants to live in a society in which he wants to live with peace and happiness. But he is unable to find it in the flossy, indifferent and morally degraded society in Delhi. He leaves Delhi for the Satpura Hills. As a matter of fact, he finds the latter even worse than the former. He tells Romi about the so – called civilized society in Delhi and says:

*I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed
Up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry and dust. Intellectually,
They could do no better than mechanically, month ideas that the
West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go
and see an American movie or go to one of those wretched restaurants
and dance with their wives to a thirty-year old tune....so was poetry.
All that was left was loud mouthed women and men in three piece suits
dreaming their little adulteries."(128)*

Billy Biswas is a pagan, a primitive man and a tribal personality by taste and temperament and an urbanized individual only in his outward appearance. He receives his education from America but he dislikes the corrupt modern civilization. Billy Biswas does not like artificial mode which is prevalent in America, as a matter of fact, he is a stranger to the civilized world. In Billy's view, modern civilization is a monster and it certainly degrades human co-existence and weakens man's moral fiber. He boldly asserts:

*"I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than
the making and spending of money. What else the civilized man do?
And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending- the
so called thinkers and philosophers and men like that they are merely
hired to find solution, throw light, as they say, on complications caused
by this making and spending money."(97)*

In this novel, the narrator is Romi (Romesh Sahai), who is both an observer and a friend to Billy, whom he meets as a student in New York while looking for housing. Billy offers to let Romi share his apartment, which is located in one of New York City's worst slums. Romi is surprised to find the upper-class Billy living in Harlem, a black ghetto in white America that is "much too civilized for him." (9).

The following excerpts are a scathing attack on westernized Indian upper-crust society and its materialistic value system. Billy's use of animal imagery to describe "civilized" people reflects his deep hatred for society. He writes:

*"I see a room full of firely dressed men and women seated on
downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose,
they turned in a kennel of dogs yawning their large
teeth showing or snuggling against each other or
holding whisky glasses in their furred paws."(69)*

In the Bhubaneswar episode, Billy expresses his dissatisfaction with the urbanized, materialistic lifestyle, which he views as hypocritical and hollow. Even at the tender age of fourteen, he has a strong desire to live as a primitive man in a primitive world. He described the experience "as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake." (122) Joshi's novel attempts to demonstrate that the original innocence and spirituality of human existence have been lost in the mundane life of a materialistic society, which has been largely corrupted by mechanization and uncontrolled westernization. Billy's experiments show that reverting to primitive ways of life can restore innocence and spirituality, which have been largely unaffected by technology.

While explaining to Romi the reason of his disappearance, Billy says, "I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay." (136) Obsessed with primitive beauty and aboriginal innocence, Billy chooses to respond to Bilasia's call as she embodies "the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year." (103) When Billy first beholds Bilasia, he cannot help gazing at such a youthful figure and he feels fascination for this tribal girl. First time he realized "that something unusual is happening to (him)the

he is not behaving quite normally." (43) On returning to his tents, he is lost in thinking of Bilasia. He feels an irresistible pull to the primitive world. He seems to forget his identity. He feels:

*It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia,
the only son of supreme court judge, husband of Meena Biswas,
and father of handsome child. It was as though – I were
not all this but first man on earth facing the earth's first night. (44)*

There is a conflict between his present identity in the civilized world and his soul's craving for identity in the primitive world. All the phenomena of nature 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. We have waited for
you.....come, come, come, come. Why do you
want to go back? This is all there is on earth.
This end the woman 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 missed. Come now, come.
take us until you have had you fill. It is we
who are the inheritors of the cosmic night. (45)*

D. Premapati has this to say: "The sharp contrast between the sophisticated Meena and primitive Bilasia reinforces the central vision of the strange case." (17), and the vision, which is slightly elaborated, refers to what Billy lost in the company of highly educated Meena, a symbol of "that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization." Joshi's fictional Bilasia episode emphasizes the significance of socio-cultural and spiritual regeneration for humanity (102). Here, the writer depicts a conflict between two forces--modern and primitive--that occurs in Billy's mind and ends with the primitive force's ultimate victory. When Billy decides to visit the village and attend the dance. Billy unconsciously adopts tribal behavior when interacting with primitive people. Romi observes:

*"Earlier, he had waited, for lectures, for money, for
security, for the middle class marriage, for the welfare
of his child for preserving the dignity of his family,
for being just, for being well-dressed, and for being
normal and all those things, that civilized men count as
their duty or the foundations of their happiness or both." (52)*

Billy goes to primitive world at the call of his soul in order to regain his primitive identity and spiritual regeneration. Bilasia and after his absorption in the tribal surroundings, he is completely transformed into a tribal. Billy's primitivism is so complete that he is, in the process, blessed with all the gifts that an original primitive is endowed with. He brings Dhunia's grandson back to life, sends the tiger away and above all cures even Romi's wife, Situ, of her migraine. Dhunis and all his tribals take him to be magician and priest who is quite charismatic and can do wonders. In Dhunia's words he looks after them all:

*"He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on wounds. these hills
haven't seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away." (115)*

Billy's death is metaphorical. It all started when Billy made contact with civilization after ten years of being missing. The final act of curing Situ signals to civilized society that Billy is alive in the forest. "The humdrum society is afraid of Billy Biswas who hold up before it a mirror on which it sees its distorted image." (18) The witch-hunt to bring Billy back to the fold leads to an encounter between Billy's world and the organized society's instruments. Billy, who had discovered his

true roots and spiritual identity, is killed. In this novel, Joshi explores the chaotic state of the human mind in the modern world. He presents the conflict between the norms of the civilized and primitive life through primitive passions:

"The Strange Case is a study in the total alienation of its protagonist Billy Biswas from the modern bourgeois society of India.....an apocalyptic light spreads over the novel. The promised land gets lost in the promised end."(97)

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a profound meditation on the spiritual consequences of modernity. Joshi's journey criticizes urban society's moral decay while celebrating the regenerative power of primitive values. The novel's exploration of identity and self-discovery emphasizes the ongoing tension between modernity and primitivism, implying that true peace and fulfillment exist outside of materialistic civilization.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

None.

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