

**THE THREAD OF EXISTENTIALISM IN ARUN JOSHI'S  
THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS**

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The idea of alienation caused by the causes of existentialism has been brought convincingly by Arun Joshi in his novels. Life to the hero belongs to a vast and complex problematic one.

There are three types of problems for the existence of human beings. First, there is man's alienation from himself; secondly he has become estranged or alienated, from his fellow men. And finally, he experiences alienation from the world in which he lives. These three forms of alienation are interlinked and they actually represent three phases in the existential course of life. Arun Joshi has particularly emphasized the connections among the three forms of existential troubles.

The discussion on the themes of existentialism and alienation in Arun Joshi's novels focuses first with man's alienation from society which is the most powerful effect of existentialism, and the second is his alienation from his own self.

Arun Joshi's heroes are alienated beings; Sindi Oberoi in **The Foreigner** is alienated from society and Billy Biswas in **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas** is alienated from the civilized world and his own family. Besides, Ratan Rathor in **The Apprentice** reconciles himself to the world but in the process he becomes alienated from his family, and friends.

The alienation of Sindi Oberoi is from his beloved and his friend Babu, but Billy Biswas, the protagonist of **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas**, a Banaras Indian by caste, is largely alienated from society and his family. Search for self-identity through alienation continues to be the core experience in this novel.

When the novel starts, Romi, the witness-narrator, goes back to the past and reminiscences 'the strange case' of his friend Billy Biswas. Billy feels powerfully that he does not belong to the civilized world but belongs to the primitive world of the tribes. But he does not feel uprooted as Sindi. He has a family tradition and a set of values. Billy's family had originally come from Bengal. His grandfather had at one time been the Prime Minister of a famous princely state of Orissa. His father, after completing his law studies at the **Inner Temple**, had mostly practised law at Allahabad and Delhi and later became the Indian Ambassador to a European country when Billy was fifteen.

Billy studied for few years at an English public school. His father believed that he was studying for a degree in engineering. He was busy in completing his Ph.D. degree in anthropology because it was his first love.

According to Romi, the course of life which Billy moves on is inevitable because Billy believes that the meaning of life: "lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those

dark mossy labyrinths of the soul" (8). Billy hears the voice of his soul. Romi meets Billy while in search of some accommodation and he offers him to come and stay with him at his apartment near Harlem, a slum-area in New York. Romi takes it with surprise that Billy, who belongs to "the upper-upper crust of Indian Society" (9) selects slums to live in. To calm down Romi's curiosity, Billy tells him that he has chosen Harlem to live in because "that was the most human place he could find". "White America," he said, "was much too civilized for me" (9). Just like Sindi, Billy is also a foreigner. Though Billy Biswas is among his family members, "yet he does not feel united with them. He is not in harmony. He is alone.

Billy feels alienated from everyone at home. Besides Romi, there is only one person, Tuula, a Swedish girl friend of Billy, who sees this queer behaviour of Billy and has "clue to what went on the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Billy Biswas" (16). She had come to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work. Tuula lives in East Village. She works in a Mental Hospital in Topeka and Billy wants to have a close contact with her as a tutor in anthropology.

When Romi meets Billy, he is on the way to complete his research in anthropology while his father, now a judge of the Apex court in India, thinks of him studying engineering. He is interested only in and fascinated by anthropology. He has a passionate involvement with this subject and he has full command over it. Romi says that Billy has enough knowledge to entertain Tuula, who is interested in Indian tribes. Billy feels a constant call from the primitive world. Primitivism is actually a revelation of modern man's alienation from his deepest self and from nature. The theme of primitivism makes **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas** very much akin to the story line adopted in D.H. Lawrence's **The Woman Who Rode Away** and **The Plumed Serpent**. Billy Biswas also has a strong urge for reintegration and struggles sincerely to recover the lost vitality and wholeness of being.

Mathur and Rai observe that **The Strange Case of Billy Biswas** is a fictional representative of the widespread myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization" (35). Romi says that, "It was around his (Billy) interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized" (12).

Unsuccessfully, his soul is sore to come out of this artificial surrounding. He finds himself a misfit in the modernized society and so his main drive is the impulse to become a tribal. In the mean while, Romi has to come back to India after his father's sudden death. Here he gets selected for the Indian Foreign Service and is ready to leave America from India. Billy tells him that he, too, is "itching to be back" (21). In fact, he feels uneasy in the artificial environment of the so-called "cultured America". As a result, he has strange visions and he goes into a trance now and then. Whenever his subconscious takes over his personality, Billy, behaves weirdly and acts unexpectedly. He plays on "a pair of bongo drums", (16) at Georges apartment around midnight. It is an appalling scene for Romi to see Billy in such odd condition.

When Billy stops abruptly and gets normal, "his face ran with perspiration and he looked very tired as though he had returned from a long and difficult journey" (17). But Billy is totally oblivious of what he is doing. Some invisible force seems to work inside him, but he seems to

have no knowledge of it. Though Billy lives in the midst of affluence, he feels as if he were a fish out of water. His words, "I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose they turn into a ken of dogs yawning or struggling against each other holding whisky glasses in their furred paws" (96). It reveals his intense hatred for civilized men and the huge emotional gap between him and the society where he lives. He hates civilization because it suspends on the pegs of money.

Billy is highly critical and contemptuous of the ways of the civilized men. Such thoughts and alarming visions alienate Billy from his society. He thus fails to have any communion not only with the society but with family as well: "To speak, I am afraid, is to address the deaf" (98). On reaching Delhi, Billy marries a Bengali girl named Meena Chatterjee who is "quite usually pretty in a westernized sort of way" (28).

Billy takes these very significant decisions of getting married hastily because of his hallucinations, which make him, feel very depressed and really shaken up. Within a year after the marriage, Billy comprehends that he has committed a blunder. Actually nothing goes wrong with the marriage. In his own words, "It was just ill- conceived, "ill-fated" (133). His wife Meena signifies the materialistic money-minded and modern phoney society. She is unable to pacify his inner tension. She lacks that rare degree of empathy that might have empowered her to get her husband's vexed mind. It is Meena's lack of empathy and sufficient idea of human suffering that lead to the conflict in their marital life. For Meena "Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day" (54). Billy's inner restlessness and sense of isolation are enchanted by his failure to establish a meaningful contact with his wife and the society she represents. With the accumulative gap with his wife, Billy turns towards Rima Kaul, a girl in Bombay.

Billy establishes a close relationship with Rima and seduces her one day. Her faith in him receives a setback. Billy realizes his mistake. Rima's seduction leads Billy to alienation not only from his family and society but also from his true self. The disgraceful affair with Rima shows his fraudulent nature and his abysmal degradation.

His soul squeezes him to fly away from the civilized world, which is responsible for his degeneration. Only after that adultery, he realizes that his soul is taking revenge on him for having denied it the primitive life that it has been clamouring for and till then he did not hunger for sensual satisfaction. So he decides to escape from this perdition of a materialistic, filthy, corrupt and down- to-earth life. Still, Billy becomes a victim of the ruthless society and the troubles of existentialism are enigmatic to fathom.

His protagonists are unhappy people. Sindi Oberoi lives in alienation, due to his false detachment and ignorance which raise a strong wall around him. Billy Biswas, delineates the cultural alienation, who regresses into the old value system to find his identity. They struggle endlessly to liberate themselves from their labyrinthine lives.

**Works Consulted**

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