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The Strange Case of Billy Biswas: a *Paradigm Shift from the Flamboyant Urban Culture to attain Spiritual Fulfilment in the Lap of Nature*

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Abstract

Spirituality comes naturally to us .Someday or the other we are drawn to look deeper, to seek the unanswered answers, to explore the unknown and to delve into the undiscovered and unfathomable mysteries of life. But there are very few in whom the spiritual urge is so strong that they can willingly brave the odd circumstances to give new dimension to their otherwise spiritually shallow life ,thus discovering the other side of their psyche, the real self.The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas stands as a compellingly thought- provoking novel offering us an intriguing account of the striking juxtaposition between the material world wrapped in alluring artificiality and the tribal world characterized by the sheer originality. Consumed by a groundswell of discontent with the stilted civilization, the protagonist, Billy Biswas, seeks permanent refuge in the tribal heartland abounding in natural beauty untouched by the canon of westernization. The entire novel documents the thrilling quest to achieve spiritual consciousness in dark mossy labyrinths of forests as opposed to the glossy urban exterior. The present paper aims to bring to light how the perfect union with nature

becomes agateway to lead spiritually meaningful life filled with the coveted contentment.

Keywords: Stilted Civilization, Tribal World, Westernization, Nature, Spiritual Consciousness.

Introduction:

In "The strange case of Billy Biswas ", the novelist Arun Joshi has brilliantly recorded nature as a pivotal force that causes Billy Biswas to undergo metamorphosis so as to make him feel rooted to his roots, help him learn the essence of his existence and provide him with the freedom from all the worldly expectations, rules , principles and conventional practices that demand human beings to be within the restricted zones, sometimes forcing their lives to acquire the desired shapes to suit the tastes of others at the expense of their likes, dislikes, choices, preferences, just to name a few.

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Joshi has also highlighted the way nature offers solutions to the multi-dimensional problems expediting the growth of unrest in Billy's life. The turning point of Billy's life is when he breaks his umbilical chord to modernity in favor of primitivism permeating the green tribal land, by choosing to live in her company not as a pleasure seeker but a permanent inhabitant in quest of eco-spirituality and spiritual tranquility. This perfect harmony brings him the feelings of self-fulfillment in particular.

To Billy, Nature eventually becomes the means to reach the pinnacle of permanent happiness which he gets in exchange for leaving the hearts of expectations (his family's expectations) shattered ,his family forsaken and the other phony pleasures defining the material world aside.

Though scholars have analyzed The Strange Case Of Billy Biswas in several important contexts. Nonetheless, it's interesting to note that all the scholars almost unanimously appear to have agreed about the profound impact nature has had on the extremely surprising developments in Billy's life. Some of them have meticulously studied Joshi's Billy Biswas through the lens of nature, environment and eco-spirituality (*Nawale, 2012; Abraham, 2013; Vanitha, 2014*). Billy Biswas' complete journey into the exploration of the real-self can be fragmented into different segments encompassing the key roles

played by the environment in different lights.

Nature as a primitive force, a great tempter:

The first half of the novel reinforces the widely observed, known and acknowledged fact -"Materially man achieves all the worldly pleasures he toils and dreams for , but in his bargain he seems to have lost both heavenly pleasures and his real-self in the labyrinth of life to the extent that makes him question his existence and his existing state of happiness , and consequently he gets in dilemma as to what has to be preferred between the two-the short-lived happiness in "money-centric " world or eternal happiness in world of hills and forests Billy is sent to America by his parents for studying engineering, but he , without his family's knowledge, decides to pursue Ph.D in Anthropology. Romi , the narrator of the novel, meets Billy in Harlem amongst the Blacks. Romi is immediately taken by surprise to see Billy's state of life in New York ,for he knows that Billy ,being the only son of a judge of India's Supreme court, can afford luxurious life.According to Romi ,

" White America, Billy says , is too much civilized for him . "

Billy is chiefly interested in diverse issues. It's to be noted that his collection of books

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include National Geographic magazines other than a diverse range of books. The presence of Geographic magazines denotes Billy's bent of mind towards nature that declares Billy's passionate love for nature is not "borrowed" but is "inborn".

Coming back to India from New York, Billy marries Meena Chatterjee and takes to teaching Anthropology in Delhi University. Billy, despite being blessed with prosperity, finds himself lonely, lost and rootless. His indifference to the worldly things labels him as "a misfit in mainstream societal things" and reduces him to "an enigmatic character" for all and sundry. With his physical attachment and mental detachment, his idiosyncratic personality becomes less intelligible and more difficult to be adjusted with the others.

Billy's dispassionate involvement with and wavering focus on his familial and social life draws the following remark from his wife, Meena:

God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger with every passing day. The novelist projects Billy against uni-linear and single world view. Whereas people around him consistently appeared to have imposed their own mainstream world views and perceptions to attract him to materialistic values. In turn, Billy rains on their parade with his inclination to discover 'the missing part of his soul', to put in his words - "The Valley

beyond the Hills ; The hills beyond the Valley. This emphasizes his sense of belongingness to the other world connected to mother nature. It is crystal clear that Billy is governed by some mysterious forces which is validated by his statement with reference to his preference to Anthropology instead of Engineering. He thinks the man is governed by only engineering and law and nothing else, rather a disgraceful point of view for a justice, don't you think ?

The elements of wilderness and naturalness rooted in Billy pull him to the age-old primitive tribal society, making him struggle to come out of a cocoon of calm and comfort offered by the world he is born and brought up in. Throwing light on the mighty force taking over the terrain of his psyche, Tuula tells Romi, A great force, urkraft, a...a primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it...But it's very strong in him, much stronger than in you and me. It can explode any time.

It is these instances that set forth the very idea of nature working as a primitive force on him, sending subliminal messages and simultaneously tempting Billy to join the world at the periphery of his present world.

Nature as a torchbearer:

Billy's movement from New York to Delhi further intensifies his internal turmoil. He finds Delhi as a mere extension of the American material world and develops an

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aversion to *CONCRETE JUNGLE* (the fast growing modern-state) that bears testimony to his affinity, sympathy and appreciation for the tribal world boasting the bountiful and myriad resources of nature. Nevertheless, he wavers between the state-led urban mainstream society and tribal world and finds himself being pulled by diametrically opposed forces in different directions. However, the constant dilemma of Billy in deciding between his accumulating life and primitive life is resolved soon afterwards his anthropological excursions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh Vexed with the modern society and having realized his fulfillment with the tribal world , he is seized by a phantom and on the second day of his expedition he disappears from the face of earth, simply vanishes into the sail forests of the Maikala Hills, renouncing the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy, his wife, his only child , his aged parents in addition to filial expectations and societal obligations...(Dhawan, 1992).

Billy's submission to tribal society is a landmark in the development of the novel and the reasons for his acception of life of noble savageness is grounded in the account of an unusual experience he writes to his Swedish friend, Tuula. In one of his letters, Billy writes ,“When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of forest. The

curious feeling trails me everywhere, that I'm a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round .”

Nature acts as a torchbearer leading Billy to the simple life of forest from his dazzling world in Delhi. It is only nature that causes the explosion of his senses, introducing the world wherein he can become one with 'the cosmos' and 'the divine' .The nature's calls to Billy can be rightly understood in this extract :

"The wind cried in the leaves, the little insects in the under-bush; the water trickled over the rocks , and they all said, "Come, Come, Come...Why do you want to go back ...This is all there is on earth . You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken and misled you have been! Come now, come. Take us until you've had your fill. It's we who are the inheritors of cosmic night”. This call helps Billy transport him to tranquility from restlessness.

Nature, a bridge connecting one to one's real self:

In superficially glamorous world, Billy's mind is crammed with the following questions:

Why else this constant blurring of reality?
Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife?
My child?

The vacuum created by his lost self is filled with his escape into tribal community. This

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escape into the heart of nature is not an escape from the realities rather an escape into real life to fathom the depth of the profoundest secrets of his soul. His longing for integration with reality(spiritual fulfillment)brings him with nature (spiritual companion) which here is not in the physical sense alone , but something at the level of which man's very being is seen in it's quintessential Billy uses the word 'ambition' to differentiate between the modern society and tribal society .It's ambition and the urge to perform that drives the consumerism-ridden world .On the contrary, the tribal society has no sense of ambition and lives in tandem with Nature which greatly appeals to Billy (Bimal) Biswas.Describing his sublime moments of life amidst tribal people , Billy says ,

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 .

All that the protagonist wants is there, across the little patch of jungle. To quote Billy, All I want is this stinking brew, this forest and these hills, these filthy men, and one of these women. He tells Romi ,

“None of the tribal people is interested in money matters like the prices of foodgrains or new seeds, nor do they have discussion

on roads or elections and stuff like that .We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, animals, dance and singing.

In other words, he's in his element in tribal land. It gives living creatures the fullest freedom and cannot be governed by the mainstream social order.The most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. For Delhites, Billy Biswas is strange and vice versa. It is in this backdrop that Billy writes to Tuula ,

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending money—the so- called thinkers and philosophers and men like that – they are merely hired to find solutions, throw light , as they say , on complications caused by this making and spending money. To emphasize his hatred , he brands the modern civilization as ‘ Kennel of dogs yawning or snuggling each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws’.

On the other hand, tribal people address him as " brother" , suggesting their love for and understanding of Billy.He therefore identifies with the tribal people and ,to one's astonishment, they regard him as reincarnation of a renowned tribal king died 1000 years ago. To Billy, it is only the adivasis who carries about their knowledge

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in silence, locked beyond their dark inscrutable faces.

Billy's return to nature earns him all what he has long been deprived of : freedom, fraternity, authenticity unconditional love and , most importantly, his recognition. The attainment of the treasure of missing ingredients of spiritual happiness ensures the realization and recognition of his "missing part", his true self . Thus, Nature justifiably works as a bridge connecting him to his other side.

Nature as a spiritual healer: A better means to an end.

Billy Biswas, a refugee from disastrous civilization, sitting in the shadow of a saal tree, a thousand miles away from home, gradually undergoes his final metamorphosis. He finds himself to be reduced to his primitive- self and to those elements with which we all begin when we are born. These tangible and intangible elements reverberate his soul with the echoes-

" It is with us that you begin and with us that you will end ." Billy Biswas, too, was waiting to explore all these elements of nature, to enjoy the earth, the moonlight, the imperishable racks, the touch and smell of the primeval night.

The first waves of erotic energy pass through the singing and dancing of the

primitive community living in complete harmony with their natural environment. It is here that Billy first encounters Bilasia whose voluptuousness, according to critics, casts spells over Billy and drives him so closer to ineffable ecstasy that he finds himself in the presence of his God. With this encounter, he suddenly discovers that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of million others. Here one must understand that Bilasia is a metaphor for " primitive life " and the ecstasy he feels is a consequence of man's reunion with God i.e *Jeevaatma* with *Parmatma*, in this context, Billy's union with nature. Hari Mohan Prasad aptly remarks:

In the retreat of Mr Billy Biswas from the modern wasteland of Delhi to the ancient Garden of Eden in Maikala Jungle that parallels the retreat 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, liberation and " *kaivalya*(the state of consciousness)

In this remark the union of " *Purush*" and " *Prakriti* " refers to the union of " *Man*" with the *Divine Power* present in nature. This reunion thus results into what is called as "Spiritual Fulfillment"

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Remarkably, the journey with nature is a spiritual journey that gives rise to an experience of spiritual rebirth, to put it simply, spiritual regeneration. The hero of the novel, Billy, is "the primitive pilgrim" and it is the life of simple primitivism that leads to his destination. In the end, he prefers dying than succumbing to "the black and deep desires" of westernized society. Joshi gives an unequivocal message that simplicity, quietness, tranquillity and spirituality of natural primitive life are the only means that lead to a more 'authentic existence'.

Conclusion:

In one of his candid conversations with Purabi Banerjee, talking about the core idea, Arun Joshi clarified that the novel is "about a mystical urge, a compulsion which uproots Billy Biswas from the very fabric of the glamorous urban civilization and therefore he, after his successful completion of Ph.D in Anthropology, abandons his family, like Gautam Buddha, to feed his spiritual instincts to regain natural equipoise and peace. Interestingly, all the heroes in Joshi's novels are questers and seekers. In a number of Indian legends and religious texts people set out for forests to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that's what Joshi is suggesting, though not consciously.

The vision that haunts Billy has haunted the seers, the mystics and the visionaries in all

ages and all countries. Like these learned men are catapulted into the utopian world they themselves create by anchoring their life to uncanny powers, benevolence and miraculous effects of nature, Billy Biswas too, in search for in-depth philosophical questions like alienation, individuality and existentialism, ends up embracing the spiritual values embedded in the primitive world with subsistence lifestyle. This earthly paradise (Natural habitat) is, for Billy, the utopian world. Billy's preference to primitive world as against the stifling system of expectations is actually the sublimation of his internal craving for realizing the true cause of his existence

Exemplifying the sayings- "All that glitters is not gold" and "Old is Gold", primitivism gains the upper hand over modernity throughout the novel. To sum up, in the context of Billy's problem-ridden world, the nature that brings him into existence finally turns out to be an effective medium impelling him to tread the path of spiritual development so as to overcome the deeply rooted spiritual crisis by entering the world based on realism, an unpretentious and uncomplicated life in forest.

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