CHAPTER III

THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS:

CHOICE AS AFFIRMATION
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The story of Billy Biswas is aptly described by the only character, Romesh Sahai who has known him almost intimately besides Tuula Lindgren Sahai says in a very revealing passage that defines the thematic complexity of the novel:

If life's meaning lies not in the gloss surfaces of over presensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that langwish 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 call. In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trail of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake.  

This aspect of Billy finds a further amplification when Joshi cites Arnold and makes the citation an apigraph for the novel - "It irk'd him to be here, he could not rest" - Matthew Arnold.

1Arun Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (Delhi Orient Pocket books, 1971), p. 9. The subsequent citations are from this edition.
Billy could not rest till he saw and experienced existence in its primordial womb that completely turned away from the sordid realities of a civilization. The song of the bhils of Satpura Hills precisely says the same thing and this seem to apply to Billy completely.

"I came a thousand miles to see your face, O Mountain. A thousand miles did I come to see your face."²

Journey through a notional distance is a man's struggle to make sense of existence and the "Mountain" signifies the primordial nature of existence not ravaged by the sophistries of civilization. Billy himself tells Sahai, "before the eye of each one of us, sooner or later, at one time of life or another, a Phantom appears. Some awed, pray for it to withdraw. Others, ostrich like, bury their heads in sand. There are those, however, who can do naught but grapple with such faceless Tempters and chase them to the very ends of the Earth."³ Billy does exactly the same and his extraordinary obsessions drive him to the most terrible perils that confront a man.

²The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p.7.
³Ibid., p. 10.
The narrator hints at the choice that Billy makes in the course of his life in the beginning itself. When Sahai goes to Billy's place for the first time to stay there, Billy enquires Sahai whether he has seen a Broadway play called 'Avocambo'. The Narrator himself describes it as an odd novel where 'a chap from Newyork, quite educated, goes down to the congo, and is so incensed by the heat and the light and the primitive music that he just goes out with his shot gun and starts killing everybody."\(^4\)

When Sahai asks Billy why he was interested in Anthropology, Billy replies, "All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginal men of the world."\(^5\)

This is indeed an extraordinary obsession for a young man coming from an Upper class Indian family in the heart of New Delhi's smart society. Billy, to a question from Sahai replies that he would like to travel throughout India to find out the exotic societies that exist there.

\(^{4}\) The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 10.

\(^{5}\) Ibid., p. 14.
There is a thematic significance in Billy taking up Anthropology in the United States when his father is under the impression that Billy is studying for a degree in Engineering. It is better to recall what Tuu la tells of Billy to Romi, "You are too young also, just like Billy, Billy feels something inside him, but he is not yet sure. Sometimes he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it. What does he feel?" Romi asked, "A great force, 'Urkraft' a primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it. But it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode any time."

From this passage we understand that Billy's choice to study Anthropology is made at the level of the self whose calling Billy was vaguely aware of after the Bhubaneswar incident. By elucidating Billy's choice of Anthropology as a student the narrator prepares us for his ultimate disappearance from the environs of contemporary civilization.

Sahai could think of analysing only in retrospect the peculiar (strange) life of Billy Biswas. Even at the

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University he found Billy surrounded by a heap of newspapers. When Sahai gets curious about them he says, I read about bizarre happenings. About expeditions, and archaeological expeditions, about crime, I like to read about crimes. What we find in Billy is that he believes in an existence that is different from the one in which he has been brought up and made to accept. The issue is an existential dilemma and a very difficult exercise in choosing between two different modes of existence. A certain amount of reluctance, hesitation is present in Billy. He is all the time aware of the pressure that his environment is exerting on his self. He is also aware that it is very difficult to penetrate the maze that his 'self' finds itself in. His marriage to Meena after a lot of vacillation tells us that his 'self' is subdued while the choice is being made. Romi himself is surprised when Billy asks him for his views. Romi says, "I was surprised, not so much by the question as by the fact that Billy had sought my views or anybody's views for that matter. Billy was not a person to set much store by other people's advice." When Romi

7 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 15.

reels off the usual reasons and facts relating to marriage, Billy is almost impatient and appears unconvinced. Somehow he knows that there should be an alternative reason, which he is not able to recognise. This he does only when he marries Bilasia overcoming a member of obstacles in the primitive world of Makala Hills. We can see Billy's plain dissatisfaction at Romi's humdrum attitude towards marriage. He says, 'I just wanted to make sure you really believed that you see, everyone else is saying the same thing, and I am never quite sure how much of it they really believe.'

It won't be out of context to mention that the narrator employs 'Moon' as an image to describe the context between two types of existence. For him the moon symbolises the primitive force that is making attempts always to prise out the 'self' from the civilized cocoon. The following passage amply demonstrates the point:

> It was one of those nights when the moon almost immediately follows the setting sun, rushing in at its heels so to speak. It emerged now from behind the hump of a distant

9The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 41.
hill. It was strangely rust coloured. We watched it stence making way through the bank of Fleecy clouds, edging gently upwards until it seemed to hang like an enormous flower in the ink space.  

After the sudden and chance meeting with Romi, Billy tells him of what had come over him and why he has decided to disappear. Billy recalls that a visit to Bhubaneswar when he was a young boy made him realize the existence of another world— which he calls his own identity. Billy says:

> It was more or less the same with me except that I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity, who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going? I can say this much, though: There was something about Bhubaneswar.

Later Billy's driver takes him to a tribal dance. Commenting on that experience, he says, 'The Chauffeur

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10 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 122.

11 Ibid., p. 122.
seated me in the shadows at the edge of the clearing and disappeared for several hours. I sat there watching the dancing and listening to the songs, something similar happened to me then. First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me although, mind you, there was nothing particularly exotic about the whole business except once when a boy and a girl their arm around each other, loitered past me giggling and tumbled into the bush beyond. The shock of erotic energy was followed by the same feeling of unreality or, as I said, a reality sharper than any I had ever known. It was a bit like having taken a dose of a hallucinatory drug, something I realized many years later when I was in Mexico, I remember saying to myself, even though I was only fourteen, I remember saying. 'Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I dreamt of'.

Romi after going through Billy's letters to Tuula understands Billy's difficulties in coping with the surface of the civil society. When in New York, Tuula almost tells him of what she feels to be the cause bothering Billy. As

12 *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, pp. 124-125.
the conversation was interrupted with the arrival of Billy, somehow Billy's attitude remains mysterious. Billy writes to Tuula in one of his letters, 'It seems my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life.' 13

Attending the ritual dance at Dhunia's village perhaps must have given Billy an insight into life. With the rising moon, he, being alone with Bilasia after consuming some native brew, he feels as if for the time he is overpowered by 'desire' whose intensity is beyond description and understanding. He says that "he could feel the flesh of her waist under my fingers and her supple body clung to mine. She seemed like another vision, elusive as a gust of passing wind." 14

Billy Whose quest for meaning in life takes him everywhere, bizarre and variable, finally finds himself standing before the staring meaning of life. He himself confesses that it is like an epiphany, revealed, disappeared leaving a permanent scar on his conscience. Billy tells

13 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 97.
14 Ibid., p. 142.
that night in the company of Blasia, he had a glimpse of life. He says:

But, then, the truest perception of life, for me at least have always proved to be the most elusive and the most short lived. The essence of life, it seems to me, can be communicated only in the language of visions, and what vision has lasted a period even as short as a man's life.15

He says that the perception he grasped at the instance was misconstrued by Dhunia and his villagers. They felt that Bilasia must have administered love potion to Billy and under its effect he has gone crazy. They even try to separate him from Bilasia without much success. Billy himself describes his state of mind to Romi about the 'Change' that swept him away from the thraldom of civilized life. Billy tells Romi,

"My problem was not so much warding off their attempts to rid me of Bilasia as to stabilize myself after this enormous volte face in my life."16

15 *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, p. 142.

16 Ibid., p. 147.
He goes further and says,

"I had gone through a trauma that had only left me suspended in the air. The experience had been severe enough to cut me off from the thirty years of my past but not strong or coherent enough to provide me the basis of a new one. I was afraid that after all this upheaval I may still not have found the place where I really wanted to be, what helped me more than anything else was Bilasia. Girls like Bilasia are a whole lot more independent than our own girls, you know that?

Romi says, 'I said I heard so'.

Billy continues:

Well, that is precisely what I needed. I needed a lot being left alone. We were together a lot, but then we were apart quite a lot, too. It was built into the rhythm of work. ¹⁷

Billy treasured his basis for new life so much even though he knew Romesh was around, he did not like to establish a contact as he feared that might harm him.

¹⁷ The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, pp 147-148.
Billy tells Romi, "I am sure the civilized folks in Delhi will immediately try to reclaim me once they knew I was alone and that could be dangerous." \(^{18}\)

Then Romi asks Billy why he had not bothered to contact him earlier, even after knowing his posting. Billy says that it might prove dangerous, may be "not immediately but in future." This appears a sort of a premonition which comes true. We have an insight into Billy's psyche, when he tells Romi: "But I was afraid. I did not want to establish a link, any link, with the other world." \(^{19}\) From this we gather, that Billy wanted to regress into the primitive world so as to be near his self. This is not a decision taken after much deliberation and thought. It is the kind of Hobson's choice that a man is attracted and engulfed in the swirling pools of primordial nature. It does not consist of making a choice or not. But for others it does appear as a choice. Billy himself reflects

Any choice worth its name is drastic. It is another matter that we whittle it down or gloss over it until it ceases to be drastic. At the same time it ceases to be meaningful either.

\(^{18}\) The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 150.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., p. 151.
Sometimes I think the human mind is equipped with a built in apparatus for compromises. As soon as you are faced with difficult choice this apparatus is switched on. It runs about here and there, brokering between various parts of man, rationalising this, postponing that, until what is left is the conventional expedients of the age and hardly a choice. Deep down we are afraid that the price of making such choices is terrible, not realising that the price of not making them is even more terrible. 20

From the foregoing analysis we may infer that Billy's crisis involves his self in personal and metaphysical dilemmas of existence. In Billy's opinion, the built in apparatus for compromises with which the human mind is equipped inclines towards conventional expedients of the age, thereby suggesting self's impotence to choose what is right. Billy calls this corruption of the self and adds "what could be more terrible than corruption." 21

Billy's regression can be justified of a mind which is not tainted by this corruption. Hence Billy's action provides a narrative enigma that is not easy to decipher.

20 The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, p. 190.
21 Ibid., p. 190.
Like in Sindi, here also there is an inward journey. Billy to begin with, an anthropologist moves from New York to Delhi and from there Makala hill is an inward journey. This inward journey makes explicit the theme of choice. In the case of Sindi, we find him realise in mind and body what is it that helps one to make the right kind of choice. This is what we may call explicit affirmation. But the affirmation is muted in the sense Billy sacrifices himself to validate the significance of his choice. An identical symbolic orchestration regarding the self and choice is noticed in both the novels.