The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

Like his first novel, *The Foreigner*, the second novel of Arun Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) also deals with man's predicament in the civilized society and his crisis of the 'self' or 'being' in the world. The crisis of a rootless individual has been depicted one step further; for Billy's quest is deeper than that of Sindi in *The Foreigner*. In Joshi's words, this novel is also an attempt "towards a better understanding of the world and of the self"(Bannerjee, 3). In Sindi’s case the problem was alienation, his foreignness but Billy’s despondency is the result of his disinterestedness from the civilized society and everlasting ambition to join the world of pure reality. In the search for solace of inner self, he makes himself alienated from this world.

The story is woven on the pattern of witness-narrator. The story-teller is Romesh Sahai henceforth called Romi who goes back in the past and recalls the strange case of his friend Billy Biswas because he realizes that:

The most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to understand.
The attempt to understand is even more futile. If in spite of this I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understand him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of the city, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions (Joshi, 7).

The narrator met Billy in New York when he was searching for an accommodation. He found Billy as a well-established man born and brought up in a fair and comfortable background. He hails from the “upper-upper crust of Indian society”(9) in a family having its own “claims of aristocracy”(11). He originally
belongs to Bengal. His grandfather has once been the Chief Minister of a famous Princely State of Orissa. His father has practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. He had also been the Indian ambassador to a European country. Billy has his education in Britain and America. His father, the then Supreme Court Judge, has sent him America for a degree in engineering but he chooses anthropology instead.

Billy tells his affectionate friend Romi about his likings and the goal behind his selection of the field of study. He tells him: "all I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginals of the world" (12). This reflects Billy’s prime interest who has no external affection in the worldly matters and is interested in the exploration of his right observation because for him, “life's meaning lies not in the glassy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun...."(8). Billy offers Romi to stay with him in Harlem, "one of the worse slums of New York City (9)" because for him, “it is the most humane place in the world"(9). Selection of Harlem to live shows Billy's search for a place where he feels solace and socially and culturally absorbed. His deep love for primitivism is an inborn propensity of his feelings which later on reflects into a primitive way of living. What Billy does, is the voice of his sole and it is his quest for self-realization that summons him to do all these things. He wanted to achieve a sense of belonging in real sense. In his first meet, Romi finds Billy one of those "rare men who have poise without pose"(10). Both are from the same country, same background and almost of the same age. Most of Romi's ancestors "had been bankers and were rather well off"(11) and his grandfather had given economic help to the armies of Bahadur Sah in the revolt of 1857. Gradually, Romi develops much affection with this man and gets the same in return from Billy as his ‘old chap’.
The story extends from New York to Delhi. Romi receives an urgent message of his father's death and returns to India and after putting in great efforts, he gets selection in Indian Administrative Service. On the other hand, his friend Billy also comes to India after his doctoral degree in anthropology is complete. He finds himself suffering from meaninglessness and loss of socio-cultural identity. The longing for primitive life is still in his mind and he is putting an effort to adjust himself with this civilized life. He visits a temple during the *aarati* and realizes that "the God that awaited me now was one to which no temples could be built. What awaited me now, I realized was fate" (70). In search of such a fate, he joins Delhi University as a professor in anthropology. The existential dilemma was still lingering in his mind because he:

…wonders whether this civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does 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 solutions, throw light, as they say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money. What need would be of psychiatrists, research foundations, learned societies, great scholars, scientists, ministerial advisers, ambassadors, generals, had the world not initially been hung on this peg of money (70)

These lines reflect the existential dilemma of the protagonist. He is neither the part of this civilization nor he is ‘hired’ to make a solution to the problems. The entire story develops in this dilemma. The in-between Billy is an alienated individual in the worldly sense and he never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society. His is an attempt to find out an alternate to the "most futile cry of man" (7) and for this he listens only the voice of his soul which can be seen anywhere in the
fiction. Owing to his disgust from the civilized and the hypocrite world around him, Billy becomes a split-personality between the primitive and the civilized. He finds no solace in modern civilization because it is norm-less and meaningless to him. He describes: "what got me was the superficiality, the sense of values (128)". His case becomes a universal myth of the primitive alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization.

Billy's awareness about his own self makes him an existential individual who exists in the world with his consciousness of existence. This dilemma is understood only by two persons in the world, first, his friend Romi and second Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady with "extraordinary intuition "(127) who has come to United States for advance training in psychiatric course. Joshi writes: “It was Tuula Lindgren that Billy had spent all those summer evenings and she was the second person who had any clue to what went on in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas (15). Billy writes Tula: “we are swiftly loosing what is known as one’s grip on life. Why this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? (70). Tuula confirms Romi about the exceptional personality of Billy. She feels something inside him: “…a great force, urkraft, a ...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” (18) . She finds Billy obsessed with a latent quest. Billy explains his real problem to Tuula: “you know what I mean, don't you? Most of us are aware only of the side on which we are born, but there is always the other side, the valley beyond the hills, the hills beyond the valley”. (15)

Both Romi and Tuula are aware of this concern of Billy but they do not try to encourage him. They know from Billy how often he had ‘hallucinations’ out of which he comes out as very depressed and ‘really shaken up’ man. Romi notes this urge at a music party at George's apartments and identifies it as “a mesmeric pull
that held us by its sheer vitality."(17). Billy’s music awakes primitive yearn in the audience. Both, Romi and Tuula give their own observations about Billy but both are unable to find an adequate explanation of his behavior. Romi finds his talks "... revealing not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us"(20). Later on, he finds that Billy has no interest in anything synthetic in his life and he wants to live according to the laws of nature. He believes in the principle of *natura naturans* and therefore, has disgust with a systematized way of civilized life which aggravated his problem of identity instead of realizing it. Everywhere in the course of study of the fiction, we find this disgust again and again. It was around this interest that his whole life has been organized.

All these happenings are not a sudden appearance in the life of Billy but he experiences this from his very childhood. He tells Romi how at his early age of fourteen, he felt summon for the primitive world when he was on his way to Bhubaneswar. He had “something much more insubstantial about the place (90)”. The sculptures of Konark, he believed, were capable of giving him a solution to his question about the problem of identity. He tells:

…what appealed to me were the shades of the same spirit that I spoke of although I knew then, as I know now, that the spirit was a much older force, older than the time when the man first learned to build the temples. (90)

He felt the same sensation while he had a chance to go to the world of the tribes with his uncle's chauffeur where he had a deep interest in watching their dance, drink and music. He records:

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 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. That is what I have always dreamt of (91).

In order to save him from the terrible things that might happen, the only option to develop a sense of harmony with this society was to get married. His mother introduces him to Meena Chattarjee, a girl of Indian Civil Service officer from Bengal. Billy marries Meena Chattarjee to avert his hallucinations. Again and again he wishes to behave like an ordinary man, but he fails. Marriage of these two ‘uneven minds’ does not succeed. Meena fails not only to engage his soul into marital affairs but also to satisfy his inner urge. Billy tells: "the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair as to speak, the more resentful she became" (54). This is because she is another aspect of the civilized society and is "quiet unusually pretty in a westernized sort of way"(28). On the other hand, Billy finds only disillusion and depression from the part of Meena and his relatives. Billy finds nothing Indian (in primitive sense) at Meena's house. He records:

And the first thing I hear on entering Meena's house is some ten-year-old American pop record braying like an ass fit to burst, and two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wiggling their hips as if that was the greatest music in the world. That certainly wasn't the India that I had come back for. (44)

The domestic strife annoys Billy at the core of his heart and instills his mind with alienation and made him fretful ‘snapping at everybody’ remaining in ‘dark mood’. Even after getting married with Meena, his life is meaningless, a vacuum and he cannot tolerate it. Now Billy feels that ‘the things are falling apart’. The
home atmosphere is that he "cannot imagine Meena doing something that did not make money" (79) and the society he lives in, is "initially hung on this peg of money" (70). As a result, within two years of marriage, the communication between him and his wife ‘reduced to zero’. Billy is primitive, Meena is civilized. He loses affection with her and she could not understand Billy’s mystic yearn. She reflects the whole situation as only “God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day.” (54) She complains that Billy has turned out into a changed man. Both notice change in one another. Their married life scattered. Billy remarks:

   All I wanted was that I should be left alone. What she wanted was promises, dozens of them, all directed to ensure that I would not be left alone. Every now and then we had quarelles followed by tearful reconciliation and a few days of peace ending in another flare-u (133)

   All these events turned Billy an introvert constantly seeking for self-satisfaction like Gautama Buddha renouncing the civilized world for the sake of his search for eternal truth. Like Buddha, Billy had a ‘greater responsibility towards his soul’ which was greater than his married life. Billy has lost his interest in this civilized world. He tells Romi: “I do not think I have ever met a more pompous, more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago.” (128) Here is Billy's imagery of the Western world; civilization represented by its teeth and claw, a monster like, devouring all the human qualities of head and heart. He has intense hatred for civilized people. He tells Romi:
"I see a roomful of finally dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my nose, they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (there large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws."(69)

Utterly disgusted by the eternal scenario, Billy finds that “the game I had been playing was the stupidest gamble one could think of" (130) and he is not at his proper place and is still a stranger to the civilized world. He is in strong depression and there was nobody to apply balm to his wounds and share his sufferings in this world.

Billy was constantly seeking for a goal, a purpose in life and in the meanwhile, he meets Rima Kaul during a trip to Bombay because he believed that she possessed a rare degree of empathy and sufficient idea of human sufferings which he lacked in Meena. His passions for Rima Kaul lead him astray and he seduces her like any ‘common rogue’. After the seduction, remarks Billy, he finds himself a degraded man and it was his first glimpse of degradation. He realized what a cad he had been, what a fraud he was going to be. He has no way to come out. This was the effect of this civilized world on his mind. He asserts: "the worst of it was that in spite of this knowledge of my degeneration, I continued to behave as before"(135). He further affirms that "it gradually drowned me that a tremendous corrupting force was working upon me"(135). It may be a hunger for sensual satisfaction, yet a quest of self-realization for a union with the missing part of his own soul. In the end, he had only two options: "either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cast, or be condemned to total decay"(136). Although the price of making such choices is horrible but "not making them is even more terrible" (136). Thus, an enigmatic impression of Billy's life is noticeable. He is gripped by strange hallucinations. He finds himself a wrong man at wrong place.
He tells: "...and invariably it left me with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with my life. I wasn't where I belonged "(130). He fits into the world of the tribes and primitives but on the contrary, this civilized world had prejudice about them that “all banjaras were thieves and their women, no better than whores ”(45).

Romi notices Billy's state of mind "closer to madness, the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of God "(128). He frequently had hallucinations and these hallucinations continue to haunt him everywhere, in his America sojourn and also in the Delhi University. He shares his feelings in one of his letters to Tuula : "The curious feeling trails me everywhere that I am a visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the big city and not the other way round" (69). During such an expedition, he gets a chance to visit a tribal village chaandtola when he was looking for some ropes during his camp at a nearby place. He met the village headman Dhunia who later on became his Mahaprasad (intimate friend). Billy cures his sick niece Bilasia who was suffering from fever. Soon after, he had an invitation to look their dance party and finds the essence of their natural happiness. He was very much impressed when Bilasia had her dance. Here Billy found the purpose of his life, a means to an end. He is face to face with the eternal question of his identity which has been upsetting him since the age of fourteen. He realized where he was running so far was only a mirage, an illusion. He felt a call from his inner self:

"Come," it said. "Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you......Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back ? Why do you want to go back?... You thought New York was real. You thought Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been: Mistaken and Misled. Come now, come, Take us. Take us
until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night (Emphases added) (88)

The civilized self of Billy Biswas seemed to be dissolved and the primitive force began to work rapidly and he decided not to return at all. He tells Dhunia:

I am fed up of those slimy bastards who are camped across that river, and I am fed up of the millions who surround me in the wretched city where I come from. I do not propose to go back, even if it means killing some of them" (105)

For that time this anthropologist was not investigating, but he was investigated upon. There was a natural captivation in Bilasia's eyes. Billy records:

Her enormous eyes, only a little foggier with drink, poured out a sexually that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them. Come come, come, she called, and Billy Biswas, son of a supreme court Justice, went. (102)

His restless soul finds satisfaction with Bilasia. He finds the end of his searches in her sweet tresses:

"It was that passing moment that rarely comes in a man's life, when he feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others." (103)

These lines indicate what the protagonist was searching for was not an unfulfilled desire, but it was his missing self for which desire "was too mild"(102). His union with Bilasia is the union of a split-self to realize the whole. This was what he has been dreamt of:
"A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shades of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man's house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, besides a tank in Banaras."(70)

Billy kept on thinking throughout the night on the rock beside his tent. He found the essence of his life with the primitives. From America to India, he has done so many efforts to come in terms with the civilized society around him and identifying himself with the individuals therein but all was in vain. The money-making society was unable to provide him solace and a meaning to his existence whereas in the world of primitives "nobody is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that"(83). Money has no matter in their life and they are what they are. He decided to take a final leap into primitive world for the sake of his inner-liberation because he loves a life without bondage. He asserts:

What made me unhappy, I suppose, was the awareness that all I wanted most was just there, across the little patch of jungle, screaming to be taken, and I could do nothing but sit there in the stupid chair all tied up in a knot by a stifling system of expectations which I did not yet understand but in which, I knew, I had the misfortune to be born. (92)

As a result of this call of his self, Billy left the civilized society and plunged to the primitivism. An enormous search is launched by the police to find out Billy. When they failed to their mission, they presumed that Billy was eaten by a man-eater prowling in that area.
Billy left the world for the sake of the "truest perception of life" which "always proved to be the most elusive and short lived" (103). He left Meena who, like every girl, runs after ambition and therefore a true representative of the society that Billy hates. On the other hand, Bilasia whom he accompanies later on, is the right woman to satisfy his soul. Meena deadens his sense, Rima corrupts him. It is only Bilasia where Billy knows what he had been really wanting and what he had practically realized. He knows that he is a pilgrim of primitivism and this will lead him to the destination. This is his realization of the soul, his existential quest for meaning and values in life. Like a true seer, he is on his path to self-realization and he cannot think of going back to the ‘bourgeois filth’ of the materialistic civilization. He is not ignorant, he is conscious about the meaning of life. He has no ambitions in the world. He has love for the primitives because their life is free of ambition which is perhaps, the cause of their happiness. Billy tells Romi:

What kept us happy, I suppose were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and lovemaking, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all.(107)

Billy has true realization that only ambition is the cause of all sufferings. The primitives are devoid of ambitions hence they are happy.

The tribesmen acclaim Billy as possessing some spiritual powers and they declare him an incarnation of their king who has brought happiness to their village. The union of Billy with Bilasia brings happiness to the village and causes to glow their chandtola in the moon-light. It also glowed when their king lived happily with his queen. They correlate Billy’s appearance with hearsay of their king who was poisoned by his relatives while trying to make the idol of God thousand years
ago. They also search in Billy possessing some magical and supernatural powers. They have their own logics that Billy has caused a man-eater to run away from the village and he has brought back Dhunia's grandson to life who had been dead for two hours. Due to these powers, they recognize Billy as a reincarnation of their dead king and Bilasia as "only a wife of this perishable world. It is Devi Mata who has been his companion for five thousand years, from one life to another (janam janam ki saathi). It is from Devi Mata that he gets his magic" (114)

Eventually, Romi gets posting as collector in that district. Once on a tour to the Maikala hills, he finds out Billy wearing “a loin cloth and nothing else”(120). He takes him to his Bungalow and spends the whole day and night listening to his story after his disappearance. Romi is surprised to see that Billy is thoroughly dwelled into tribal life and manners. He has adopted the tribal habits of dancing, eating and love making. Billy tells Romi about the essence of happiness he traced among the tribes. Romi interestingly investigates the magical powers of Billy and he is also surprised to see his accurate prophesy about the rainfall as there was no sign of it.

Romi keeps on visiting Billy again and again. Billy takes promises from Romi not to disclose his whereabouts to anybody because he didn't want "to establish a link, any link with the other world"(108). He tells Romi: "I am sure the civilized folks in Delhi will immediately try to reclaim me once they knew I was alive. And that could be dangerous"(108). Later one, this prophecy also came true. Billy had to pay the price of his affection with his ‘old chap’ to his life. With the help of his magic powers, he cures Romi’s wife Situ who was suffering from migraine and this made Situ to persuade Romi to tell the fact about Billy's appearance to his father and his wife, Meena. The tragedy takes place when Billy’s individual freedom is threatened by those whom he abominates.
When Billy’s wife Meena and his father, Mr. Biswas came to know about Billy's appearance, they rush to bring him back. Romi tries to calm down them but they do not realize the whole case and insist on meeting Billy. Romi refuses to join the operation and Mr. Biswas reports the whole case to the Chief Secretary and as a result, the police surveillances Billy who was hunted down by them. Romi was also the victim of red-tape system who lost the command of the situation as Billy’s quest was being organized by the higher authorities. It was deemed that Billy had killed one of their constables. It infuriated Mr. Rele, the superintendent of police who jealously carries out the search to avenge the death of a 'public servant on duty’. He was in direct communion with the Chief Secretary, the “supreme God of civilized bureaucratic India"(166). Billy Biswas ultimately has to pay his price with his life for not conforming to the norms of the so-called civilized life and he was shot dead by Rele's force. Billy dies uttering "you bastards"(167). Later on, records the narrator, one morning, the havildar who shot Billy dead, was found dead and Mr. Rele and Romi were transferred away. In this way, the "strange case of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of in the manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers" (172). Billy's case was result of the confrontation between the civilized society and the primitive. The narrator confesses:

"Gradually, it dawned upon us that what we had killed was not a man, not even the son of a 'governor, but someone for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we had killed one of the numerous man-gods of the primitive pantheon. (169)"

Billy's death is not the death of irrationalism, but it is the triumph of his ideals and principles. The civilized world is all out to destroy him. Even Romi, his trusted friend and the only link for civilization that Billy keeps, ultimately betrays
him because the situations have gone out of his control. Billy's dying word “you bastards” is a meaningful utterance which is “at the same time a direct abuse, an expression of anger at the betrayal of friendship and the meaningless assault of the civilized world on his creative privacy.”(Srinath, 126)

In this way Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* depicts the tragic story of a seeker who conducts his search in a hostile atmosphere that extracts a very heavy price from him. The sophisticated society prevents him from "seeking such meager fulfillment to his destiny as his tortured life allowed"(229-30).

All efforts to prevent Billy and pulling him back to this civilized world prove futile and end up in a dismal tragedy. Arun Joshi proves that modern man's tragedy is mainly because he has forgotten about his self, his belongings and "little we see in nature that is ours". Arun Joshi seems to take into account many dimensions of human existence and seems to echo existential philosophers that to make choice for his own existence is the right of the individual. He is free to choose his own course of living. He writes: "man's position is grossly misunderstood; because his freedom is threatened"(156). The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is an example to it. This is the tragedy of modern man also that he has made his mind "equipped with a built-in-apparatus for compromises"(136) and neglects the voice of his soul. On the other hand, it is the story of an individual who is rebellious towards the set-norms of the society. Several times he tried to adjust himself with the civilized people but he failed and he got the punishment of such failure. All these happenings of his life make his case a strange one. His case study is a study of human predicament in a hypocrite, ostentatious and spiritually and morally barren modern world where the protagonist escapes into a tribal life for the sake of his individual freedom and quest for truth.

If we have a peep into Billy's story from existential approach, we find that he is sensitive in the literal sense of the term but also conscious of his existence
which begins from his necessary yearn to 'know thyself.' The whole story turns into a search of the 'self in the society' around him and when he finds no satisfaction, he escapes into another world for the sake of this quest. He records:

> I arrived at the fork in my life that, without being conscious of it, I had waited for all my life. I took the turning that was irrevocable as it was awesome. Why all this happened to me I do not know, and even if I knew, I could not put into words. (104)

The whole case is a study of his subjective evolution in the search of an authentic existence. His selection echoes that truth is subjective and it is a matter of individual choice. In spite of growing tendency for a scientific temper and rational attitude in common, Billy has no interest in this rational and techno-savvy civilization like other individuals but he has a keen perception, belief in the old age values of primitive life because these are untouched by the malicious hands of civilization. These values can neither be understood by the so-called civilized world nor the rational human mind but require a subjective involvement therein. The witness narrator of this story, Romi comes from almost the same background yet there were many things which he could not see but "Billy saw and which step by step liked him to the only end that await those who see too much"(30).

Billy’s case can be analyzed in the light of existential ideas of Kierkegaard who treats the subjective reality of the individual above all. He says in *Training in Christianity*: “I do not know truth except when it becomes life in me"(Kierkegaard, 47). He further argues in his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* that truth as "an objective uncertainty that helps fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness"(Kierkegaard, 182). Billy's love of primitive science and his interest in the ‘other side’ of life is an instance of this search for ‘passionate inwardness’. His yearn for the other world and its selection is purely subjective and
existential. In this evolution of subjectivity there are some dimensions of existence that have been named as various ‘spheres’ of existence by Kierkegaard. He writes in *Stages of Life’s Way*:

There are three existence-spheres, the *aesthetic*, the *ethical*, the *religious*... The *aesthetic sphere* is the sphere of immediacy, the *ethical* the sphere of requirements (and this requirement is so final that the individual always goes bankrupt), the *religious* the sphere of fulfillment. (Kierkegaard, 476-477)

Human existence is shaped through these ‘spheres of existences’ and Billy's journey to his everlasting search is no exception to it.

Arun Joshi has divided this strange case of Billy Biswas in two parts, the first one consisting of about hundred pages and the second of remaining hundred and fifty pages but virtually the second part needs to be subdivided after hundred pages. The novel will thus have three parts, the first two covering about hundred pages each and the last one about fifty pages. The first part can be designated as 'the civilized world' that denote the hero's involvement into *aesthetic sphere* of his existence. The second part is his *ethical stage* and the third part would have the *religious* one but the protagonist dies because of the interference of this civilized world into his individual freedom.

The first sphere of Billy's existence is the *aesthetic sphere*. Here, says Kierkegaard, the human being lives in and enjoys a life dominated by material pleasures and exterior things. Satisfaction comes from sensual pleasures - the desire for possessions, art, and the thrills of sexual satisfaction. This stage is essentially individualistic, and one lives for oneself in the pleasures of 'immediacy'. Billy is living with this civilized world and like an ordinary student, he is sent to America for the study of engineering because his father thinks that “man is
governed by only engineering and law, nothing else"(25). Billy is living with the things around him but has an awareness of the deeper layers of his personality that makes him something like an existential being, alienated from the superficial reality of life. "The ordered, systematized, civilized life which the contemporary man is proud of intensifies Billy's problem of identity."(Mathur and Rai 144)

Commenting upon this sphere of existence Ignance Fuerlicht says:"modern man may either try or adjust to the other, to society, to system abducting his true self. He tries to adjust this life abducting his true self or he may strive to keep and develop his individual and thus alienate himself from society"(Fuerlicht 41). In his pursuit of "tenuous thread of existence"(8), there comes a moment in Billy's life when he encounters both types of alienation, from himself and from the society. In his attempt to adjust with the society through the social institution of marriage, Billy becomes alienated from his self, and in his pursuit to find the self, he becomes a "refugee from the civilized society"(29). The centre theme of the novel reflects this dilemma of the protagonist. He renounces his past because of his 'self interest' in the primitive world but the world does not renounce him and this clash ends with his life. Everywhere in the novel we find Billy's everlasting wish to join the world of the primitive and his interest in the study of anthropology is an example. His decision to live at the "most human place"(9) Harlem offers a peep into his mind that it was in fact, around his “interest in the primitive world that his entire life had been organized"(12).

There is a restlessness in Bill's soul for his own existence which is expressed through his desire for continuous travel and is externalized through his extraordinary obsession to “read about crimes"(13). This sense of restlessness and longing for primitivism is intuitively ingrained in Billy's mind as a natural tendency. He has experienced it at an early age of twenty-one at the railway station during his journey to Bhubaneswar. At that time he could not realize his feeling.
He recalls: "I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Why was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (89)

After the aesthetic stage, says Kierkegaard, the pleasure of immediate objects before him eventually leads the individual to some form of despair, and he begins to realize the finite nature of the aesthetic stage or sphere. Kierkegaard emphasizes that many individuals never leave this stage, because they never experience the despair and boredom that results from the repetitiveness of satisfying material pleasures. They simply die without even contemplating the value of anything beyond their material existence and the fulfillment of immediate desires. In Billy's case, he 'sees too much' and this existential despair and an urge from the soul enhances his disenchantment with the so-called civilized life and makes him feel restlessly out of place and it will cause his transmigration from aesthetic sphere of existence to that of ethical. He realizes this fact—what made me unhappy was the awareness that all I wanted most was just there, across the little patch of jungle, screaming to be taken, and I could do nothing but sit there in that stupid chair all tied up in a knot by a stiffing system of expectations which I did not yet understand but which I knew, I had the misfortune to be born" (125).

Billy is mistaken when he understands that marriage will solve his problems but instead of leading to the ‘other side’ of the world, it proves a hindrance to keep him involved in this phony and materialistic upper middle class society of India to which he has returned from America. His encounter with his real ‘self’ becomes more frequent and he is gradually entrapped into aesthetic despair. His life is going to become more unilateral. This stage of Billy's mind is described by the narrator during his Shimla sojourn:
His expression was a mixture of nearly all those emotions that we tend to associate with great predicament. It was drawn and had the peculiar intensity of concentration which... seen in rioters. Yet it had no violence in it. It had on the other hand, the clear stamp of sorrow (33).

This sorrow, doubt and despair have become the integral part of his existence which are the symptoms of Billy's requirement to *ethical sphere* of existence. Billy is reduced into an existential wreck: insecure, fearful and lonely. His incomprehensible reality that ingrained in his restless soul and his aversion to superficial reality of so called civilized have made him a revolutionary without revolution, a rebel without a cause. Kierkegaard compares this stage of existence with *Don Juan* who later on changes into *Faust*. This doubt gives rise to despair. Billy desperately searches for emotional props against the impersonal darkness of the world. His decision to get married is result of a search for this emotional fulfillment:

I had thought terrible things might happen, unless I did something drastic. What with being an Indian and having brought up in a close-knit family, the only thing I could think was to get married. It was like taking out an insurance on my normalcy.(180)

Billy's urgency to get away from the ‘hallucinating business’ and transcend his fear of loneliness inspire to his marriage with Meena. This is the consequence of non-realization of the self. Billy gets no satisfaction in his marriage because Billy had an urge for primordial world and on the contrary, Meena represents a world where purpose of life is only "making and spending of money"(69). Consequently, Billy finds no peace in this world where "nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone." (128-29). 

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Nevertheless he tries to adjust once more. His tragic despair leads him to find emotional fulfillment in seducing Rima Kaul.

Kierkegaard tells that despair is the reason behind the change from the *aesthetic sphere* of existence to that of *ethical sphere*. It is the denial of limitless material pleasures as a path to selfhood, and a focus on an ethical life. In the ethical stage the human being contemplates the value of non-material relationships and decides to live a life not just for himself, but also for others, for what’s best for the community. The individual finds his self-attachment as a prominent reason of this despair. Billy also finds that "a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as through my soul was taking revenge on me for having denied for so long that 'other thing' that it had been clamoring for"(135).

This existential precariousness coupled with the appropriating pulls of society on his self triggers the final crisis. His own sense of guilt regarding Rima finally forces him to take a final leap He says "I had two clear choices. I could either follow this call, this vision. Whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay. I suppose most men are faced with similar questions sometimes or the others"(188). Kierkegaard writes in *Either/Or*:

... it is manifest that every aesthetic view of life is despair and everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair, whether he knows it or not. But when one knows this and you certainly do know it, then a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement.

(Kierkegaard, 192)

Here Arun Joshi seems to echo Kierkegaard in dealing with the existential problem of Billy Biswas. He has lived his life aesthetically, i.e. being conscious of his existence. The seduction of Rima Kaul brings out this awareness and strengthens his requirement to take a final decision to disappear in the *saal* forests.
to avoid the "blurring of reality" (70). Billy's renouncement of this world is his shift from aesthetic to ethical sphere of his own existence. He finds satisfaction in his union of Bilasia, the tribal girl and discovers "that bit of himself that he had searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others" (140).

Bilasia is the primitive version of Meena and at the same time, the Indian form of primitive Tuula Lindgren. Billy loves the primitives but loves his mother country too. In Bilasia, the missing part of Meena and Tuula is apparent and therefore, she proves to be not only a tribal girl for Billy who gives him that emotional fulfillment which Meena failed to provide, but she is embodiment of his own self. She represents feminine principle of the Sankhya system which postulates two ultimate realities, Purusha (self) and Prakriti (Primordial nature) and the manifestation and evolution of the human spirit in the union of the two. Billy’s union with her suggests his communion with Prakriti that enables him to find his true self, achieve the fullest perception of reality and realize his own potentialities. Such realization is called Kaivalvya in Sankhya philosophy. Devinder Mohan observes:

Bilasia symbolizes nature's fecundity; she is pure subjectivity beneath all civilization, "essence of primitive force," which embodies their mythic dance and rituals, "the frantic drumming, the constant foot work, the making and breaking of formation, the yelling." Billy feels “closer to madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God.” Merged with her, he becomes like her, the whole earth, free from all ambitions, all civilizations. (24-25)

Billy accepts: “layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moon light” (88). His shift toward the
primitive society is a step in the *ethical sphere* of his existence which will help him
to transcend his alienation through his meaningful, real and the unselfish relation
with Bilasia and Dhunia, the village headman and it will help him in his quest for
‘the other thing’. In this way, living a life of the primitive is not an end to the
quest of Billy, but only a means to the end but the coincidental interference of the
‘bastards’ of the civilized society in his quest make the tragic end of his case. He
was searching for a system of beliefs which can provide anchor to his life, as God
does in the lives of "millions of the others, including the primitives"(156).

What would have been the final predicament of Billy if his life has not been
ended untimely? There are so many expectations. From existential point of view of
Kierkegaard, we can say that Billy has shifted himself from the *aesthetic sphere* of
existence to that of *ethical*. This uplift of his self is "theological suspension of the
ethical". After the passage of time, he might feel restlessness and despair once
again and then might have shifted himself to the *religious sphere*. The rise of some
magical powers in him is an adequate pre-indication. In his conversation with
Romi, he hints:

>Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. Of
>course I realized it only after I ran away. I realized then that I was
>seeking something else. I am still seeking something else."

What is that ?"
He seemed to be thinking
"God?" I [Romi] prompted.
"There, there, old chap, that is too big a word"
"Something like that?"
"Yes, something like that"(136).

It is also possible that Billy was seeking for a world-order where man can live
without the feeling of meaninglessness and absurdity. The strange case of the

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protagonist is the search for an authentic existence. Billy does not condemn the civilization but he condemns so called bourgeois society which ape the emotionally dehydrated and spiritually barren society of the West. Joshi says in an interview with Purabi Banerjee: "tribes are very civilized according to mine and Billy Biswas' understandings. It is the post-independence pseudo-western values that he rejects." (Bannerji, 4)

Billy's search for 'something else’ reminds us of the Indian philosophical system where sadhaks renounce the world in the search of the eternal truth. He has left the civilized society in order to pursue the pure knowledge, the jyana. In an interview Arun Joshi has confessed that The Strange case of Billy Biswas:

…is about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away... In a number of Indian legends and religious texts people go away to forests to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that's what he is suggesting, though not consciously. (Banerjee, 4).

Gautam Buddha also renounced the world in order to find out the "unborn, un-aging un-decaying, deathless, sorrow-less, undefiled and uttermost security from bondage - nibbana" (M.I.163). The Bhagavadgita also says the true purpose of jnana yoga is to achieve liberation by realizing our true nature, overcoming our ignorance and transcending our limited selves that are usually sense dependent and bound by karma. According to the Bhagavadgita, following are some of the developments that we experience when we practice jnanayoga:(a) Equanimity of the mind 'sthithadhi' through control of the senses and desires and mental discipline (b) Detachment 'asangatva' (c) Impassion 'virag' and (d) Sacrifice 'tyaga' (Gita, Ch.4). In Billy’s case all these things are perceptible. His renunciation may be said his effort to free himself from all desires, longings and attachments following the path of knowledge. The path of jyanyoga requires all things
mentioned above. To quote Radhakrishnan: “To get the existential experience of
the self, we should get free from the diversity of objects, external and internal,
which impedes and prevents the direct or intuitive vision of the essence of the self
(57).

In this way, we find that Arun Joshi’s The Strange Case of Billy Biswas depicts
man’s predicament on this earth where he is bounded by some laws that he is not
even allowed to follow the call of his heart. If he does so, he will be treated as the
‘refugee from the civilization’ and will have a tragic dismay. The novel narrates
the story of Billy Biswas from America to India discussing his longing for an
affirmation or, in existential terms, for an authentic existence. The novelist
presents a glimpse of the truth that “man’s position is being grossly misunderstood,
because his freedom is threatened” (148). The novelist highlights individual’s
threatened freedom how society gives no chance to pay heed to his voice of the
soul. The novelist comments:

How for four years he drifted between hope and despair trying his
best to adjust to the life into which, for lack of a better
understanding and a momentary surrender to convention, he had
carelessly slipped. (147)

Thus, the novel runs on existential lines where Arun Joshi also takes the help
of some symbols and images to identify the existential situation of the individual.
For example, the mountain is a symbol of the inner voice or a call from the deity to
realize the true self of the individual. The conversation between Dhunia and Romi
reflects:”when the Kala Pahar calls you, Collector sahib, there is nothing you can
do but go (115). The novel opens with the mountain song that seems to be a
symbolic epithet: "I came a thousand miles to see your face, O mountain; A
thousand miles did I come to see your face"(7). Some other significant existential
symbols are in ‘Bongo drums’ and ‘ghungroos’ that denote the inner instincts in Billy.

To conclude, we find that Arun Joshi's *Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents a clash of the individual and the society. It records not only an existential protest against the superficialities of a grossly materialistic civilization and a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life of a primitive society. It also studies the total estrangement of its protagonist from Indian society with its material concerns, spiritual shallowness and blind imitation of Western culture in utter defiance of its traditional values and beliefs. The novel not only portrays protagonist’s search for identity but also his uncompromising quest for self’s spiritual destination. Whether we study this work in the terms of in existential philosophers like Kierkegaard or Indian spiritual concern in the Vedanta and Sankhya philosophy, we find that Arun Joshi seems to suggest that subjective evolution is the right of the individual and he should be prepare to make a decisive choice that suits him best, it has no matter how painful the consequences are. So long as there are individuals like Billy on the earth , who instead of overlooking the situations, try to pin it down by taking a sincere stock of the situation through their decisive choice, there is still a hope for humanity. All of them need not have the vision of Billy; only knowledge of human suffering and loss, an honest and humble expiation as well as a determination to follow the problem to its end, whatever the cost, can redeem man from contemporary corruption and confusion of values - a theme that Joshi explores in his next novel, *The Apprentice*. 
Works cited:


