Chapter- IV

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1973)

Arun Joshi uses Arnold’s line from “Thyrsis”, “It irk’d him to be here, he could not rest” as an epitaph in The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. The epitaph itself sets the mood of the novel. Arun Joshi in his novels consolidates the Western and the Eastern philosopher’s ideologies in order to define the “self” and “other”. Joshi deals with the existential perception to the people of 1970s and 1980s in relation with the major and minor characters of his most of the novels. Joshi’s The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is an amalgamation of various dimensions in diverse forms such as the spiritual quest of the protagonist, identity crisis, meaningless existence, isolation, anxiety, dread, discontentment, magic, supernaturalism, hallucination, love, traumatic experience, cultural conflicts etc. In fact, the novel is a portrayal of the conflict between “the primitive world” and “the civilized world”. It also presents the transcendent of the protagonist from the civilized to the primitive world. The above-mentioned issues that Joshi depicts in the novel are still alive that he connects with the manner of upper class of Indian and American society. It runs on the track of hollowness, cultural conflicts, and protagonist’s journey from America to the tribal world. The novel is the severe criticism of the ultra-modern civilized way of living, materialistic life, decay of faith and values, and spirituality. Probably Joshi’s chief intention behind writing such a remarkable work is to generate the interest in heart and mind of modern men. Perhaps the modern men have lost their interest in Nature as well as fail to recognize their inner “self”. Lokesh Kumar cites Joshi’s personal opinion, “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 the forest to heal themselves spirituality. Possibly that’s what he suggesting through not consciously” (Kumar 44). So far, the present novel is much more spiritual and psychological than his previous one. The novel presents a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life as discussed by Rousseau, Thoreau, Wordsworth, and Mahatma Gandhi in their philosophical works.

Like his previous novel, Joshi presents the journey of Bimal Biswas who is also known as Billy Biswas. His journey starts from civilized world of America and ends in the Bhil tribes of India. It is one of the tragic novels of Joshi in which Billy is killed by the so-called civilized people, whom he hates extremely. Billy’s confrontation with the stereotype norms of the civilized society is in fact the real angst and suffering of life. He belongs to the upper class of the society. By birth, he is a Bengali while his family settles down in New Delhi. His father was a renowned advocate of Allahabad and Delhi High Court who later on became the judge of Indian Supreme Court. While his grandfather had been the famous Prime Minister of the Princely State of Orissa, therefore his family had great name and fame all over India. Although Billy belongs to the upper strata of the society, yet he has great love and respect for lower class and the tribal of Indian and American society. Like Sindi, Billy also has no respect and regard for society, he also does not believe in social institution that is why he leaves the civilized world without consideration of anything. Billy’s this conception sometimes reminds Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who themselves did not care social ideas and beliefs.
Unlike *The Foreigner*, the narrator of the present novel is not its protagonist but the eyewitness Romi, Billy’s friend, who narrates the whole story of the novel by recalling the past events. Joshi, like his earlier novel, uses flashback technique in narration that produces complexity in the novel. However, the beginning of novel is set in America yet it commences with the song of Bhil, which is one of the tribes of the states of India such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Kshatishgarh, and some of the Western region in Deccan. Joshi begins the narration of the novel by presenting Bhil’s life style, manner, myth, belief, culture, tradition, legends and tendency toward life. The song of Bhil is as natural and melodious as it is: “I came a thousand miles to see your face, O Mountain; A thousand miles did I come to see your face” (*Billy Biswas 07*). The song reminds the tempting natural scenario of Satpura Hills. Romi narrates the story of Billy not only because he was his friend but also gradually understood and recognized his “self” by being in touch with him, as he thinks, “As I grow old, I realize that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. This attempt to understand is probably even more futile” (*BB 07*). The idea of understanding one’s self and individual feelings have been the major concepts in the Western existential philosophy. The same has been the motto of Indian philosophy depicted in the *Bhagavad-Gita* and Buddhism. Joshi employs the substantial ideas of the natural conception of human beings in the very beginning of the novel. As Romi recalls, Billy’s impulse of belief in relation to man’s consciousness, which leaves a great impact in the heart and mind of Romi:

If life’s meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from 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 belief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he behind in his turbulent wake. (*BB 08*)

Thus, the character of Romi reminds Joseph Conrad’s novel *Lord Jim* whose narrator Marlow also takes part in the novel as a friend and a detached narrator. Like Romi, he also fails to understand the feelings and emotion of Jim. Romi himself accepts it that he has neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilections of Billy Biswas.

Romi’s first meeting with Billy occurs at a dinner party in New York where he finds Billy a person of strange outlook. Since he belongs to the upper strata of Indian society, yet he dwells in a slum area in New York. The host of the dinner party introduces him, “Engineer, anthropologist, anarchist . . . and crazy, even by Indian standards” (*BB 08*). Romi is surprised having seen Billy, living in the area of blacks known as Negroes. Once Romi asks him why “he had chosen to live in Harlem”, (*BB 09*) he replies “that was the most human place he could find” (*BB 09*). He finds the black very natural, and is often seen among them to have tea, dinner and talk enthusiastically with them. He understands their emotions, feelings, ideas, miseries, existence and importance in the society and considers them as, “One of those rare men who have poise without pose” (*BB 10*). Those who come in his contact find him very strange in his behaviour and appearance nevertheless he knew very well how to attract and impress anyone. Romi says, “. . . his eyes which were the dominating feature of his face . . . never lost their deep sombre look. Most people who met him
considered him a light-hearted, good sport without quite noticing the incongruity of his eyes of suspending who went on in their dark depth” (BB 10).

The novel sometimes apparently takes its overview on existential point of view in the form of isolation, individual identity, and angst in the sense of “self”. Kierkegaard, the father of existentialism also believed that man acquires self-knowledge only when he has an intensified awareness of God. He stands his philosophy on the subjectivity of human existence. He was in favour of man’s free identity that was only possible when he would be out of social, political, economic and religious apparent. Later on Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers and Nietzsche accept Kierkegaard’s idea on the way of “faith”. They too think that society is an outcome of people, not people outcome of the society. Apart from it, they firmly opposed the traditional philosophy of rational ideas and its glimpse appears almost in every protagonist of Joshi’s novels. They give preference to emotion, rather than reason, for which Billy is the best example. Unlike Sindi, Billy’s identity crisis is connected with his soul who does not face the problem of belongingness and rootlessness in society. His anxiety has its place in his inner consciousness and its psychological conflict. From his childhood, he is haunted by a voice of inner self and always tries to fulfil his desire. However, his father sends him to America for the study of Engineering but when he reaches there he finds it useless and meaningless. His hate for materialistic ideas also appears in his study of Engineering which later on leads him toward the world where nothing seems to pleasant and satisfactory. Therefore, he turns himself toward the study of Anthropology and did his Ph. D. in Anthropology without informing his father. This notion of discontentment against society compels him to leave the civilized world. Thus, the present novel is the study of Billy’s natural mode
of his existence, which is not merely a fantasy or a sentimental whim but the voice of his soul.

Billy always pines for root and identity in the well set up civilized society that ultimately fails. His journey of life starts from New York to New Delhi and then moves to Satpura Hills that finally satiate his quest. After his father’s death, he returns from New York to New Delhi where he gets a job of a Professor in Delhi University. Romi becomes a Collector in India. Nevertheless, his curiosity after getting good job does not fulfill. Later on, he marries Meena Chatterji, a Bengali girl, who also does not get success in satisfying his curiosity of self. Consequently in the mid of the novel he takes shelter in the world of Bhil tribes. His abhorrence for the civilized world appears when he asks Dhunia, the head of Chandtola village to live there who takes his proposal in form of mocking; on this, Billy reacts harshly by saying:

Listen to me, you idiot, ‘he shouted to the top of his voice,’ ‘clear you stupid head and understand me well. I am fed up of those slimy bastards who are camped across the river, and I am fed up of the millions who surround me in that wretched city where I come from. I do not propose to go back, even if it means killing some of them. And if you don’t want bloodshed, I want you to wake up this moment and tell this lot of drunks they know nothing about me. (BB 105)

Unlike Sindi, Billy gets parental love and at every step his parents support him but their affection for him could not alter and appease the heart and soul of Billy. He finds himself isolated and alienated among his family members where he is dear to everyone. Despite it, there was no one in his family who could understand his
feelings. Even his own wife does not take interest in solving his problem. Billy writes in his last letter to Tuula about his search for meaning of his existence and constant quest to find out his identity:

It seems my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one’s grip on life. Why else this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At time I took at them, sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together. (BB 70)

Until and unless he leaves the civilized world, life seems him an illusion, meaningless, rootless, hollow, fake, hypocrite and without any value. He thinks that the meaning of life does not exist in ideas because it just shows the person what is right or wrong and which way to follow the meaningful life which has nothing to do man’s existence. It has nothing to do with individual existence, feeling emotion, idea and its meaning in the world. He thinks culture and civilization have trapped the man from his freedom. He has very strange opinion regarding the civilization, “I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy in earning and spending” (BB 69).

Shushil Kumar Sharma cites Elizabeth B. Hurlock’s view in his article, "The Strange Case of Billy Biswas: A Psychograph of an Alienated Hero" in which she identifies three syndromes of alienation i.e., “recessive, socially disintegrated and social ineffective” (164). She says that these three traits manipulate a person’s dislike
by others. Further, she talks about the features of an alienated person who lives reserved, listless, self-bound, involved with his own interests and welfare. While Encyclopaedia Britannica sometime defines the feature of an alienated person such as: “Powerlessness, meaningless, normlessness, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self-estrangement.” (WEB)

Today man’s life is passing through some unnatural terms such as urbanization, changing values, depersonalization, disorganization, self-misgiving, delusions, rootlessness, psychological and other maladjustments. Therefore, Arun Joshi in all his novels explores the conflict between the inner and outer reality of life. Billy withdraws from outer to inner world and explores the essence of human living. Joshi’s view regarding ‘self’ echoes the direct influence of existential philosophers such as Albert Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard as well as the essential impact of Indian Philosophy.

Billy’s inclination seems very much analogous to Sindi in respect to love and marriage. Apart from Meena Chatterji, Billy comes in contact with several other girls like Tuula Lindgren, Rima Kaul, and Bilasia. He first encounters with Tuula, a Swedish girl in New York and about whom he tells to Romi his relationship with Tuula. He points out that she was very different girl who never run after money, he says “. . . her total disregard for money. She was the first person I met for whom money had no value. Since I came here, I have met several other-my parents, wife, for example-but she was the first” (BB 126). Probably in the contemporary world, money has become the centre of attraction for everyone so people are busy in earning and spending. They consider that life is useless and meaningless without money. This is
also true that money produces devilish notions in people. It breaks their close relationship with anyone whether brother, father, mother, friend. The greed of wealth and money reminds one of the tragic plays of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. Shakespeare delineates how Goneril and Regan after getting the kingdom of Lear, leave him on his ravaged and wretched condition. One of the great Romantic poets, Wordsworth composes a sonnet, “The World Is Too Much with Us” on the background of people’s tendency of earning and spending:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,

Getting and spending. We lay waste our power:

Little we see in Nature that is ours;

We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!

*(Fifteenth Poets01-04.239)*

Billy observes that Tuula was a girl, who had her own philosophy. Her mindset was very much akin to him. She was very simple, cute, humble, and good hearted in nature. Like him, she also did not have much interest in materialistic life. However, she has belief in Indian Philosophy. She finds him an introvert person who has primitive attitude. He further tells Romi:

She had quite a simple philosophy, really, bordering almost on our Hindi beliefs. She believed that to survive man needs a minimum of goods which must either be given to him by the society or he must receive the exchange to procure them. This minimum, however, is
very, very low, much lower than people imagine, and, except in times of great calamity, like war or famine, easily available. Once the society or your profession ensures the minimum, you should devote all your energies to the full of exploitation of your gifts-endowment she called them-gifts that you are born with, and in the process contribute as much to the society as you can. (BB 126-27)

Billy reminds that she had good command over psychology particularly on the theory of Freud, Karle Jung, Alder and works of Karl Menninger that she often discusses with him. When Romi asks him about his relationship with Tuula and why she has left him, Billy says, “We were very good friends. Like you and I are. Luckily, our emotions never got into male-female tangle. Tuula’s inversion ensured that. Such a tangle would have ruined everything. We would have quarrelled after a brief affair. For all her friendliness, she had a way of detaching herself that I did not like. As it was, I learnt great deal from her” (BB 126).

Having returned from America, the next girl comes in his life is Meena Chatterji whom he finds very much materialistic. He tells Romi that she is, “quite usually pretty in a westernized sort of way” (BB 28). Due to hallucination, he takes immature decision to get marry Meena without analyzing her attitude, likes-dislikes, behaviour, thinking, manners and materialistic way of living. He tells Romi, “What with being an Indian and having been brought up in a close-knit family, the only thing I could think of was to get married. It was like taking out insurance on my normalcy” (BB 130). Within a year he realizes that he has committed a blunder in taking the
decision of marriage this is why his married life is unsuccessful. He tells Romi about Meena’s nature:

Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. These, I am afraid, she did not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney-society-all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became. (BB 133)

Meena never tries to understand his feeling and fails to pacify his inner intension. On several occasions, his relation of married life is tensed by harsh arguments. In an argument with Billy, Meena harshly speaks, “You have no right to make fun of me. Go to your cannibals, if you find me so intolerable . . . ’Oh I wish I were dead” (BB 58). Both Billy and Meena were opposite to each other if one has the way to North then other to South so confluence would not possible. Consequently, the mutual understanding between both of them collapses down which never recovers.

Freedom and responsibility have been the two major issues in the Philosophy of Sartre that he discusses in his book Being and Nothingness. Billy does not prefer to take any responsibility of his family; he has responsibility of his self that he confesses to Romi, “I had greater responsibilities towards my soul” (BB 133).

Rima Kaul, the next girl comes in the life of Billy whom he loves very much who in fact also tries to quench his inner desire of life. His restlessness passes through a sense of isolation. His occasional visit to Mumbai raises suspicion over Billy’s relationship with other girls, which Meena shares with Romi, “. . . do you think he is
having on . . . an affair” (*BB* 56). A sense of sexual jealousy develops in her mind that Meena expresses harshly before Romi that he does not love her because he has not touched her even single time for six months. His last relationship with Rima alarms him to leave the entire civilized world. After that, he could not get courage to meet his eyes with her. His life becomes worst and he loses the control over himself, his heart breaks down, his soul does not allow him to remain in society. Even his consciousness pinches him all the time, which he narrates to Romi:

> It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was through my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that other thing that it had been clamouring for. Here you swine, if you haven’t the guts to break away from this filth, well then, I am going to wallow in it until it makes you sick. (*BB* 135)

The novel takes a new shape when Billy at first sees Bilasia, a Bhil tribe, the niece of Dhunia and in a very first glance he is fascinated by her beauty. He waits her at her village, which he describes, “It was as though during that half hour, it was Bilasia I had been waiting for but my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life” (*BB* 83). As soon as she returns his eyes stuck on her and his heartbeats starts increasing as something is happening in his body. He loses his consciousness and feels, “. . . something unusual was happening to me, that I wasn’t behaving quite normally” (*BB* 84). He feels that something is pulling him toward the primitive world particularly Bilasia. In terms of psychoanalysis, both Billy and Bilasia are considered two aspects of one personality. He forgets his identity crisis after beholding her, as he
thinks, “It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and father of a handsome child; it was as though I were not all this but the first man on this earth facing the earth’s first night” (BB 88). The portrayal of Gita in Joshi’s next novel *The Last Labyrinth* is much similar to Bilasia, in which Som Bhaskar also leaves his wife and two children for her. Billy thinks that she is the same girl who used to come in his dream and called him to return. Probably she called me first from America then from New Delhi to her own world. He feels that some invisible force is working in him by calling him, “come, come, come, come” (BB 89).

Being a social human being man has to follow all the social customs, rules, regulation, norms, reality and dogmas of the society. No one can run away from the performance of social reality and responsibilities. If anyone goes against its approach undoubtedly, tragedy occurs with him. Billy is the best example of it. He is an ideal figure who has no zeal for any social responsibilities that existential philosophers support. Joshi delineates changing attitude of the modern men from natural to the materialistic world. On this, Siddhartha Sharma cites R. K. Dhawan’s remarks over Billy’s condition, “All of a sudden, Billy is seized by a phantom which makes him anxious to have the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice riches and hypocrisy” (Sharma 41).

Joshi has divided *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* into two parts: the primitive world and the impingement of the civilized on the primitive world. The problem of dehumanized and mechanical progress marks the erosion of basic human values, leading to existential crisis. It is the novel of Primitive verses civilized world.
Joshi points out that Primitivism provides solution to every individual’s problem, and develops vitality, order and spiritual nourishing. It also signifies the harmony, purity, innocence, oneness and completeness of the existential levels. In fact, it is revelation of individual alienation from his deepest self and his nature. After coming to the world of nature, Billy finds peace, happiness, freedom, and tranquility. He expects that now his desire is about to complete. His judgment recalls one of the great Romantic poets Wordsworth, who is considered the worshiper of nature write the fidelity and love of Nature in his poem “Tintern Abbey”:

My dear, dear sister! And this prayer I make,
Knowing that Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her; (FP124-26. 238)

Like Billy, Willy Loman the protagonist of Arthur Miller’s Death of Salesman also entangles in the trap of hustle bustle of the modern superficialities. He also tries to escape from the false values of phoney society that leads him toward tragic end of life.

Billy Biswas, the upper class civilized person turns into primitive one only because of his dissatisfaction with the civilized world. The invisible force that suppresses him always is at first understood by his Swedish girlfriend Tuula in America. She tells Romi, “A great force, urkraft, . . . a positive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it; she made a gesture of compression. But it is very strong in him, much stronger than you and me. It can explode any time” (BB 18). His soul often calls him to move out from the materialistic world. His sense of belongingness sometimes leaves him in hallucination but after coming to the world of tribes, he finds
inner security. The Western existentialists emphasis the inner security of men that Billy exemplifies through his original ideology. He tells Romi, “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” (BB 91). He recalls his childhood during the visit of Bhubaneswar with his mother where he roams the whole day in jungle with his uncle, then suddenly some strange questions arise in his mind, “Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” (BB 89). Later on without telling his mother, he strolls in the garden the whole night. Crossing the garden, he goes into the forest and reaches a village where he watches dancing, drinking, singing of tribes. While watching the tribal dance he thinks, “This is where I belong. This is what I have dreamt of” (BB 91). Tapan Kumar Ghosh writes in his book:

He is concerned with deeper and far more serious problems, with the question of his spiritual identity and with the mysteries of life. His entire life is attuned to that mysterious, primitive urge which finds occasional expressions in incidents already referred to and in his informal talks with his confidants like Romi and Tuula not only the mind of the speaker but also the dark unknowable layers of the mysterious world that surrounded us.(73)

Billy’s life is surrounded by the civilized and primitive world. His ideas stand against the phoney society, which is justified by the tradition of primitivism. Joshi’s delineation of the novel is much akin to the story of D. H. Lawrence’s The Woman Who Rode Away and The Plumbed Serpent. Even the frame of adopting the primitive world comes in his dream in which he transcendent the civilized world. Lawrence in
his novel *The Woman Who Rode Away* shows how White Lady finds herself in the state of confusion and degradation in the materialistic world, who also decides to take shelter in the world of Nature. He tells Romi, “All I want is this striking brew this forest and these hills, these filthy men, and one of these women” (*BB* 100). Billy’s leaving of the materialistic world also reminds John Keats’ an ode, “Ode to a Nightingale”, in which he gives the theory of Negative Capability’. He expresses his inner feeling by transcending to the world of Nightingale. He tries to leave this materialistic world by various ways, such as imagination, wine, opium, chariot and so on.

O, for a draught of vintage! That hath been
Cool’d a long age in the deep-delved earth,
Tasting of Flora and the country Green,
Dance, and Provincial song, and sun burnt mirth!
O for a beaker full of the warm south, …
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen,
And with thee fade away into the forest dim.” (*FP*11-17.360)

Billy often considers that it is useless and meaningless for him to remain in this sophisticated atmosphere of the modern society. His leaving of the artificial world was not to become Yogi there but to remain as a common person. The thorny route of Billy’s life recalls Querry, the hero of Graham Greene’s *A Burnt out Case* and Samuel Beckett's’ *Murphy* the eponymous hero. Like Billy, Querry also gets success and makes reputation in the society. Being an architect, he hails worldwide fame but it could not satisfy his self. He also leaves the civilized world in order to get real
satisfaction to his self. Similarly, Beckett’s Murphy, a male nurse also denounces his earlier world and takes shelter in the world of asylum for lunatics. Billy’s rejection of the civilized probably creates a way for the modern men especially individual to peep once into his heart and realize the self.

The theory of suppressing desire is very much applicable to Billy, which Tuula shares with Romi in America. All the phenomena of Nature-flora and fauna seems to be waiting for him and calling him to join them, that Billy could not stop himself:

Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you . . . come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? . . . this is all there is no earth. This and the women waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of the hill. You thought New York was real, you thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have bee! Mistaken and misled. Come, come, come. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic Night. (BB 88)

The voice of primitive world to Billy, during sitting under the Saal tree on the rock, sometimes reminds, T. S. Eliot’s ideas that he expresses in his famous modern epic poem: The Waste Land, section first “The Burial of the Death”. Tiresius, calls modern uprooted young men to come under red rock:

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),

And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust. (*The Waste Land* 25-30. 89)

Billy’s quest for self starts removing as soon as he starts living with tribes, and follows their getup. He is considered not a common person in Bhil’s world as Dhunia, the head of the village called him ‘Mahaprasad.’ He was very fond of watching and listening the dance and song of tribes. During watching and listening their dance and song, a strange feeling emerges in his heart, “I don’t know why, but the moment I sat down, I started to cry, actually weep, something that I hadn’t done for ages. I sat with my hands pressed against my eyes I don’t think I made much noise but my chest heaved something terrible” (*BB* 87). His sense of realizing ‘self’ is the embracement of ‘Atma’ and ‘Paramatma’, which is in real sense concerned with Buddhism.

Buddha (Prince Siddhartha) for whom palace life was uncomfortable and useless. He had yearned for a deeper and more spiritual ways of life. For him the present world in which he is living is ‘Maya’ where people have no courage to come out from it. The atmosphere around him was fake and artificial, that does not give him any satisfaction. Young Buddha thinks that palace walls are a mental barrier to keep him away from the realities of life. Therefore, in search of spiritual knowledge he leaves the world of palace life. After six years under the Bodhi tree in Gaya he recognizes his ‘self’ and remained there for seven weeks pondering his future. His realization of self under ‘Peepal tree’ resembles in the present novel of Joshi in the form of ‘Saal tree’ where Billy sits and realizes his self. Similarly, in *the Bhagavad-
Gita, when Arjun finds himself entangled in illusion, Lord Krishna shows him way by preaching him:

But now it is necessary to bring out more definitely the precise relations between the supreme Purusha the immutable self, the Jiva and Prakriti in her action and her gunas . . . he asks him to learn of the Purusha and Prakriti; he enquires field of being and knower of the field and of knowledge and object of knowledge. Here is contained sum of all the knowledge of self and the world there is still needed if the soul is to throw off its natural ignorance and staying its steps on a right use of knowledge, of life, of works and of its own relations with the Divine in these things ascend into unity of being the eternal spirit of existence. (Aurobindo 409-10)

Further Lord Krishna preaches that self-knowledge is the only way where a person acts the divine action in other words it is an instrument of divine action. Thus, Billy’s following the way of ‘self-knowledge’ leads him toward spirituality but it was not written in his destiny to reach at his goal.

Billy’s life is much strange than the other characters of Joshi’s novels. When he enters the tribal world by that time, he is considered as a magician, a priest, a saviour, and caretaker. Dhunia, the village-headman, calls him caretaker when he takes back the life of his grandson since that time he calls him ‘Mahaprasad’. On another occasion when Romi’s own wife undergoes the critical problem of migraine, Billy saves her life. Romi observes a strange phase on Billy’s face, “Billy stared at her without moving. His face had acquired a tense but distance look, whose antecedents, I
now remember, went as far as our Columbia days” (*BB*142). Billy’s strange case also sometimes reminds the case of Aaron’s in D. H. Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*. Aaron, an amateur flautist leaves his wife and job for flute playing, quest and adventure. Unfortunately, once his flute is broken down and with that, his life leads him towards disaster, thus his quest is not fulfilled.

Joshi also depicts the culture, tradition, belief and style of Bhil. His consideration of depicting their legend, myth, dogmas, and history has been to connect people from the society of other world. It’s really very much strange that how a well cultured, educated person from the Western University starts believing in magic after adopting the world of tribes. Bhil considered Billy reincarnation of their legendary sculptor king, ruling thousands of years ago. Dhunia tells Romi that Billy is actually his legendary king, and with his returning, ‘Devi Mata’ has returned to meet him. He tells him, “Haven’t you seen the way he stand? Haven’t you noticed the regal carriage? Who else but a king can hold you with his eye the way he does? What is more, the Devi would never have returned if he had not been king himself” (*BB* 112). He tells the completely legendary story of their king of that area who had versatile genius. He knew how to rule over the empire, the quality of saintliness, and was a greater sculpture. He had a desire to construct such an idol in which the face of God Himself would appear. For this, he forgets everything of his kingdom and keeps involve himself into it the whole day and night. Ultimately, he prepares such a unique idol in which God has to come and asks him for a boon. But due to lack of ideas about what to ask to Him, he prays Him to reappear again the next day. However, it was not in his destiny and that very night out of jealousy king’s brother gives him poison. After the death of king, queen known as Devi Mata also immolated herself on the
pyre of her husband by prophesying that she would return when once again her husband would return. Dhunia further tells that with Billy’s coming back, Devi Mata also has returned and their grace over us now clearly appear. He says Bilasia is not common girl. She has the image of Devi Mata because now Billy realizes free from all the materialistic concerned of the civilized world in her arms. He has developed his latent natural power, which is something like miracle, and forecasting power has also been developed. By watching the location of stars he even can forecast about rain, that Romi thinks unbelievable. He tells Romi what Billy has told, “Watch these two sets of stars during the next four weeks. They’ll move towards each day. This is when it will rain” (BB 81).

Billy’s quest for self juxtaposes Raju and Rosi in R. K. Narayan’s The Guide that offers interesting insights into the two protagonists’ endeavour. But both the novelists work on dealing with the quest for self from different angles. Raju in The Guide tries to seek self-realization in the traditional Indian way by seeking ‘nirvana’, whereas Billy’s mystic force works on his self to join the tribal world. Both the persons are searcher of almost abstract realities. While Raju’s life changes according to circumstances and how an innocent boy rehabilitated into wicked. He plays different roles in the novel such as an executive, a guide, Rosie’s lover and ultimately Swami. Narayan tries to show how an innocent person is compelled to adopt any pathetic condition in the modern world, in which he does not get any chance to realize his self. Like Billy, Raju was also dissatisfied with the modern world. He could not recognize the abstract force that works in him while Billy realizes it therefore he takes shelter in the world of tribes. Actually, Joshi was heartily touched with tribal world that he speaks in an interview with Purabi Banerjee that Arvind M. Nawale cites in his
book, “Tribals are very civilized according to mine and Billy Biswas’s understanding. It is the post-independence pseudo-western values that he rejects” (Nawale 100).

_The Strange Case of Billy Biswas_ is a condemnation of the post-independence Westernized Indian society. In comparison to Sindi, Billy’s quest is related to his heart while Sindi to his mind that is much akin to psychology. Billy’s mystical urge leaves a mark on the mind of those who are sympathetic toward tribes. In a way, the novel expounds the union of the male and female in the Sankhya system of the _Bhagavadgita_. As in the Sankhya system of Indian Philosophy, it is believed that the evolution of human beings takes place when ‘Purush’ and ‘Prakriti’ come into contact. As in the novel Bilasia is supposed to ‘Prakriti’ while Billy ‘Purush’. Prakriti is supposed Shakti, therefore Dhunia tells Romi that she is Shakti of Billy. It is only unification with Bilasia that Billy realizes his self in a complete point of view. She represents the feminine principle of the Sankhya system. She is the realization of Billy’s self and completion of his dream. Both become complete after their unification after a long time. The confluence of Billy and Bilasia takes place in the novel that appears not just a momentum role of their life but for the eternity. Siddhartha Sharma cites Hari Mohan Prasad’s opinion, “In the retreat of Mr. Biswas from the modern wasteland of Delhi to the ancient Garden of Eden in Maikale Jungle, from the smothering clutch of Meena to the primeval possessiveness of Bilasia ‘Purush’ meets ‘Prakriti’ serving the two ends of evolution, out lined by Sankhya, enjoyment (bhoga) and liberation or Sansar as well as ‘Kaivalvya’,” (Sharma 45). Joshi gives his personal inspection in respect to the novel in a lecture at Dhranyaloka by clarifying it that Lokesh Kumar cites in his book:
The first three novels to me, concern generally about the question of identity and probably ethics. The protagonists feel truncated, unfulfilled in some way. There is a withdrawal from the world, then a return to it, the process making them somewhat more whole. In Billy Biswas this withdrawal and return something Toynbeen calls Transfiguration - is clearer . . . As I see it, Billy Biswas is not about “return to Nature” as some people have made out. If Billy had not decided, with a deliberate act of decision to establish contact with the collector it might have been said to be that. (Kumar 5-6)

In respect to the present novel Joshi was very much influenced by Matthew Arnold. Billy’s rejection of the civilized world that too reminds Arnold’ poem “Scholar Gypsy” in which Arnold shows how his Oxford friend Scholar Gypsy, nauseated by the superficial, civilized society with its innumerable ills, which causes him to leave the civilized society. Similarly, Billy’s search in Maikale Hill also reminds the following lines of Matthew Arnold’s “Thyrisis:

This does not come with houses or with gold,
With place, with honour, and a flattering crew;
Tis not in the world’s market bought and sold. (FP 203-05.482)

Like Arnold, Billy’s friend Romi too misses him. Romi tries his level best to search out Billy. Billy’s death at the end of the novel is considered tragic by the critics. They consider that he could not live so long after leaving the civilized world because it was already written in his fortune known as tragic fate. Arvind M. Navale cites Indira Bhutta and Suja Alexander’s remarks in his book: “Arun Joshi makes Billy
conscious about the inner layer of his personality and therefore he feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life”(39). Billy’s transformation into the tribes is his own inner voice. The sense of missing of Billy by Romi also reminds Arnold’s Oxford friend Scholar Gypsy for whom he mourns in his poem ‘Scholar Gypsy’:

Here, where the reaper was at work of late
In this high field’s dark corner, where he leaves
His coat, his basket, and his earthen cruse
And in the sun all morning binds the sheaves
Then here, at noon, comes back his stores to use-
Here will I sit and wait . . .
With distant cries of reapers in the corns
All the lire murmur of a summer’s day.(FP10-20.470)

Billy thinks that in the world of nature there is nothing like any rule and regulation. One is free to follow one’s will without anyone’s pressure or permission. While being a social person one has to do what the society demands that has main concern with the welfare of the people mob not the individual. It has nothing to do with individual emotion, feeling, or the inner consciousness. Billy sees that there is no one who could understand his natural emotions that he conceives from his heart except Bilasia who is real child of Nature. Billy’s this feeling recalls, one of the dialogue of Shakespeare’s play King Lear, in which Edgar the legal son of Gloucester speaks in his last speech of the play a very natural idea after the death of everyone on the stage to Kent:
The weight of this sad time we must obey.

Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say

The oldest hath borne most, we that are young

Shall never see so much, nor live go long. (King Lear 520, 5.3.)

Before taking any judgment, Billy ponders very deeply over the matter then takes decision by using his intuition. His father is very intelligent who always gives his judgment skilfully on the basis of witness. Once after knowing a little bit on the murder case Billy gives his opinion to his father not to give his judgment just on the basis of witness. He says that murder of the twelve-year-old boy by a clerk and his wife was just for the self-defense. He tells him, “The murder was premeditated and committed to propitiate the Goddess Kali order that the clerk’s young son, suffering from leukaemia, should get well” (BB 39). The discussion with his father over Krishna murder case sometimes stuns the readers. It appears that Billy had firm belief in supernatural things, and other world. He argues a lot with his father over the case:

But that is where you are wrong, Papa. Premeditation, as you use the term, is the concept of this world, the everyday world of government offices, power break downs stock exchanges, etc. you do agree with me that this is the only world for which your laws are made, don’t you? . . . who knows? If he did, it would not have been the first time. Similar cases have been reported from Africa, Indonesia, Japan, from even a country like Sweden. As far as India is concerned, there are enough such cases to fill a thousand page volume. (BB 40)
Like his first novel, Arun Joshi depicts the beauty of nature also in his *The Strange of Billy Biswas* in concrete form. Almost, in all his novels, he portrays the beauty of Nature in different ways and in various outlooks. Actually, Joshi himself had great love and fascination for natural beauty. In the present novel, he shows how the tribes celebrate any festival under the light of moon. The Bhils see that with the coming of Billy in their world the full moon has started shining. On the very first night during a visit at the Chandtola village to get rope Billy is surprised by the beauty of Bilasia as well as Nature. He sees, “The sky was very blue and seemed to draw closer as the afternoon wore on . . . Except for the murmurings of the wind in the trees and the occasional plop of all” (*BB*62). Romi always takes Billy’s opinion like a stranger and considers a cynic away from the reality of the society. However, sometimes he becomes amazed after hearing his philosophical ideas. Although he has no idea of spirituality, yet his expression appears very much spiritual without his knowledge. He once suggests Romi the very practical idea to not to make unhappy to anyone of his seniors, otherwise thing will not be under your control. This really happens when chief Secretary asks Romi to start searching operation of Billy; on this he does not obey his order, and consequently the case of Billy’s search operation is hand over to S. P. Reele. Although Romi is a senior officer of the district yet fails to control the situation. Consequently, he finds himself unable to save the life of his best friend, Billy whom he deceives by telling his parents and others.

The novel is not only production of man’s individual identity but also the observation of his relationship with Nature. Romi meets Billy after ten years at Maikale Hill. He is surprised at his getup. He tries his level best to convince him to return to his home. Billy replies that he has no world outside of the Maikale Hill. He
is nothing else but a tribe, that is his real identity and here he has been living peacefully since last ten years. When Romi informs Billy about his mother’s death, he remains indifferent. Billy shows him his harsher look of not returning to his society by saying that he has always run away from the responsibility, which probably shows a person’s nature as a coward.

Apart from these aspects of human nature regarding understanding self and identity, Joshi also exposes woman’s nature, understanding, likes, dislikes, and her judgment in taking decision. He points out that a man cannot keep anything secret if a suspicion develops in the mind of woman. This happens in the novel when Romi’s wife becomes seriously sick. Billy offers his healing touch and knowledge of herbal medicine and cures her. From this incident, the story of the novel takes its change toward tragic atmosphere. Billy warns Romi not to tell anyone of his appearance in this world otherwise the result would be very difficult to face. He warns Romi, “If they ever get hold me they will not leave me alone. And you know havoc it will play with life here” (BB 109). Romi’s pestered wife, Situ does not eat anything except crying the whole day and night for not telling the name of the person who cures her. Therefore things go beyond his control and he has to disclose Billy’s alive but Romi convinces her not tell anyone this secret otherwise the result may be chaotic. However, she discloses this secret to Meena and her father-in-law, Mr. Biswas. However, Romi rejects the offer to Tke the charge of searching Billy. He even warns Mr. Biswas of its ill result. But he does not listen to him. He goes to chief Secretary for the search operation of his son. The chief secretary orders Romi to reopen Billy’s search operation file, which he refuses. Hence, S. P. Rele is appointed the chief of search operation of Billy in the Maikale Hill. In the mean time, Billy kills a constable.
The murder of constable makes the matter more serious. The constable’s murder shows Billy’s hatred to the civilized world. Romi tries his best to protect Billy from the destructive hands of the civilized world. Reele calls Billy several times during the search operation an “irresponsible fools” and “common criminal” because he did not know him in real sense. Rele is an enthusiastic person who has no experience of life. Even he never met Billy earlier so definitely it was impossible for him to understand Billy’s feeling. In fact, his approach is purely mechanical and devoid of any sensibility or understanding of human psyche.

After the murder, Rele shows his violent outlook in the search operation, which becomes a manhunt. Romi always tries to convince Rele not to take the matter seriously, as a murderer. He himself goes to Billy’s village by stopping all the cops outside of the village. When Romi enter the village, Billy was not there then he meets Bilasia and persuades her to tell the location of Billy. She does not tell even a single word about Billy because she had fear that they would take him away from her world. Romi becomes tired of convincing her but she does not reveal anything. This raises many questions in his mind. Like Joshi’s first novel, The Foreigner, the present novel is also full of questions, which are general features of existential philosophy. Romi thinks, “What was Bilasia? What is the playful effervescence of the mountain stream? What is sunlight filtering through a glade? What is the thunder of a volcano or the hardness of granite? What is vengeance of a cobra whose mate has been killed?” (BB 162). Here Romi finds himself a defeated person who could not take the situation under his control. The conversation with Bilasia reminds him the entire incident that occurs with Billy when he was living with him in New York. It also reminds him about Billy’s works and deeds. He recalls the letter that Billy had written to Tuula:
A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi; nursing a child in the shade of 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, beside tank in Benares. And once I saw her, her face strangely luminous in the twilight, loading a freight train with sulphur: on a siding in one dream, causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand. (BB 162)

Romi tries his level best to control the whole situation but could not change the destiny of Billy’s life. Consequently, one of the police officers in enamored of jealousy fires at Billy who was returning from jungle. Billy did not know what would happen after returning to his village? He is shot dead by Havildar. In a hasty mood, Romi comes out from the village toward the shot place: “Billy; I cried. ‘Billy’. He opened his fast glazing eyes for a moment and appeared to look at me. You bustard’s he said hoarsely. Then he died” (BB 167). Billy’s harsh words at the end of his life does not only unfold abhor of his own but also of those who are very unsatisfied with the modern world. Romi already guesses that such a serious result may take place. At the end of novel, the tragic death of Billy proves that he cannot be forced to join the civilized world. With his death, his hopes, remembrance, desire, identity, a new outlook of life assimilate in valley of Nature. It also shows that Billy could not get the perfection in both the civilized and tribal world. He is also considered “modern new hero” with his standpoint. Siddhartha Sharma cites Richard B. Sewell’s ideas regarding the tragic death of Billy in his book: “He struggles not so much with a crisis
as with a condition, and the condition is the contemporary confusion of values and the
dilemma in his own soul. He does not shape events in bold strokes rather, event shape
him” (53).

In many ways, the terrible death of Billy sometimes reminds the death of Yank, the protagonist of Eugene O’Neill’s play *The Hairy Ape*. Yank, a robust but full of resentment too hates the upper class society. He even does not like to hear a single word against the lower class or about himself. He always searches his identity in the modern sophisticated world. But later on he relates himself in the world of animals. No one tries to understand his feelings. Even if his colleagues leave him on his wretched condition which leads him toward the deeper sense of the problem of identity. Consequently, at the end of the play, he visits a zoo where he correlates a Gorilla to himself and thinks to take shelter in the world of animal instead of men. He extends hands of friendship, but he is brutally crushed by it. Similarly, Billy is killed by Police while his denial of returning to the sophisticated modern world clarifies his real intention and existential belief of life. Thus, the death of Billy symbolizes that he does not have any respect as human beings in the civilized world or in primitive world. One may definitely think of the short life of Billy that his world is not self-enclosed and the novel is not a tale purely of erotic love, but it is actually the story of a man wondering away into the hills and living a life of anonymity. In respect to Billy, Jasbir Jain quotes Mahasweta Devi Verma in her book, “The best way to know them is to live with them and this is also a performance in embryo of what is to happen later on” (14).
In fact, the novel has a fundamental positive importance on the reader’s mind, which appears in the symbols of fantastic and civilized form. Jasbir Jain quotes Joshi’s interview with Purabi Banerjee in her book:

It is very difficult to explain this novel . . . . The book is about mystical urge. In a number of our legends and religious texts, people go away to the forests to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that’s what I am suggesting, though not consciously. Yes, Billy’s death is metaphorical. The modern Indian city is disoriented and kills sincerity. A woman who enjoys dancing might be married off to a person who does not let her dance after marriage. This kind of killing goes on when the social organism does not know its values. We only understand the value of money and power. Only Billy had gone through the process of healing, he came out of the jungle and made contact with his friend the collector. He knew the danger he ran but he was worried about the corruption and intensity of friend. (96)

Thus, Joshi leaves clues of self-realization throughout the novel. The novel consists complex narrative, full of mystery, nature-worship, tribal religion, superstition and degree of violence and deeper debate of Billy’s heart. Billy becomes an ideal character for those who are still fed up with modern world and find difficult to decide to follow a better future. Arvind M. Navale quotes in his book K.R.S. Iyengar’s remark, “In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of hopeless, rootless people a stage further, and has revealed to our gaze new gas chambers of self-forged misery” (36). Thus, in this
novel, Joshi probably tries to open the gate for people to understand their feeling who have somewhere lost their peace of mind in the so-called civilized and modern world. He advocates nature can console man. Even man can understand the authenticity of his self only in the lap of nature. Billy renounces the civilized world and joins Bill’s Maikale Hill. His death also indicates that one cannot run away from his responsibility. Joshi through this novel tries to convey the message that one cannot exist out of society because it always hinders the freedom of the person and drags him towards itself. Thus, Joshi in the novel tries to apply the ideas of the Western Existential philosophers like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre only in reference to freedom and responsibility, against social values and norms.
Work Cited


