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So for me Meursault is not a reject, but a poor and naked man, in love with a sun which leaves no shadows. Far from lacking all sensibility, he is driven by a tenacious and therefore profound passion, the passion for an absolute and for truth. This truth is as yet a negative one, a truth born of living and feeling, but without which no triumph over the self or over the world will ever be possible.


Referring to the hero of The Outsider, its author Albert Camus comments that he is condemned to death "because he doesn't play the game,"\(^1\) an expression that literally sums up the theme of the novel. In the context of The Outsider, the game that Meursault refuses to play is to exhibit sufficient emotion at his mother's death, which makes Camus conclude thus: "In our society any man who doesn't cry at his mother's funeral is liable to be condemned to death."\(^2\)
In this sense, he turns out to be an outsider to the society in which he lives, wandering on its fringes, on the outskirts of structured life, solitary and sensual. But Camus would not agree to calling him a reject; rather, he would have his readers analyse in what way Meursault, the hero, refuses to play the game and observe why he lives on the fringes of society.

A similar motif does emerge in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, in which Arun Joshi narrates the story of a young man who wilfully opts to live outside the conventional society. The path which leads him to this self-imposed exile is fraught with doubts, apprehensions, uncertainty and the experience of rejection, bringing him very close to Camus' hero. Perhaps Billy Biswas' journey to unlimited freedom is rendered more complex as he is very much part of a sophisticated social structure, a system which is modern and advanced in every sense, and cherishes relationships. A retreat from such an environment into the wilderness in response to the call of the primitive force is effected only with great effort; it implies the breaking away from natural kinships, societal affiliations and civil obligations. Caught between these two polarities of an individual, instinctual pull and the expectations of the society of which he is a significant member, Billy goes through moments of anguish. But he finds a secure anchorage amidst the tribals
of Saal forest, where he experiences an authentic sense of belonging. The civilized society, unwilling to give up its claim on one of its members, traces him out with a vengeance, but that ultimately leads to his tragic end. Having refused 'to play the game' the society expected of him, Billy Biswas turns an outsider who is to be tracked down and forcibly brought back to civilization.

The significance of Arun Joshi among Indian English novelists is that, unlike most others, he has focussed not on social or political issues, but on the deeper layers of man's being. Ever since the publication of his first novel *The Foreigner* in 1968, his fictional world is in marked contrast to other Indian novels in English, and forms a class apart as his attempt is to create characters who turn inward and grapple with intangible realities. In a socio-cultural scenario that is losing its cohesiveness under the impact of new pressures of science, technology and affluence, it is natural that the novel should seek new techniques to transmute authentically the emerging outer and inner compulsions. Hence for Arun Joshi, the delineation of the psychic aspect remains the prime concern, the fictional elements like story and action being only secondary. The novelist himself is clear about his intent: "My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself."³ His exploration into the complexities
of life impinging on the individual often leads to a groping for strategies of survival rarely found in Indian novels in English. In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Joshi develops and conveys a new understanding of selfhood, emphasizing the multiple conflicts of the urbanized modern youth, who are torn by opposing dual selves in their search for independence and self-creation. His choice of narrative strategies allows its inherent paradoxes to become simultaneously theme and style. Contrastive parallelism, antithetical character development, subtle intricacies, multiple points of view and ambiguous figurative language are used by the novelist in order to bring out the complexity of the situation and the experience. The central figure, Billy Biswas, while enjoying his leading position, is defined in opposition to various other selves, exemplified mainly by the characters of Romesh Sahai, his long time friend, Meena, his wife, Tuula, his very perceptive girl friend and Rima who loves him with a naive infatuation. One feels that lacking an inner oneness, they are all portrayed as separate aspects of one being. Even more, the novelist emphasizes the existing double conflict between an Indian unified self and a different self which revolts against it in the person of Billy.

The thematic analysis followed here puts Billy in line with the characters examined earlier in this study as he represents a strong individual voice with its non-conformist
overtones. Paradoxes often arise out of the conflict between an individual's quest for independence and society's demands, norms and expectations. As pointed out in the introductory chapter, there is a "link between character and society" and Riesman puts his focus on "the way in which society ensures some degree of conformity from the individuals who make it up." In the case of Billy Biswas, Joshi even considers the possibility of bridging this dichotomy. Through Billy's character, Joshi affirms the need for individual autonomy and free choices--an essential strand in individualist thinking. Personhood is thus defined differently from the conceptions offered by conformists, broadening the traditional image of an individual. The author thus invests his hero with a high degree of potential to move away from collective codes, the capacity to accept a changed system and its inherent challenges. But on concluding the novel, one notices a certain ambiguity in the treatment of this theme. One wonders if the novelist is emphasizing, however, that an individual's search for self and identity can only be successfully carried out within communal and familial bonds. The district collector, Mr. Romesh Sahai, who is a representative figure and yet functions as Billy's sympathetic counterpart, reminds us of this necessity to share community's values and ideals while pursuing freedom. Hence one may ask whether the search for self-creation in an unconventional manner imply the exclusion of collectivity.
The reader has to think hard to reorganize his disoriented perceptions.

Billy's strange tale is told by Arun Joshi with excellent craftsmanship, maintaining the contrast between the seemingly impulsive and eccentric behaviour of Billy and the cool, composed account of Romi. Romi's deployment as the narrator is a technical necessity as well because Billy is so involved in and obsessed with his thoughts and actions that he is often rendered incapable of analysing his thoughts or motives. In the earlier part itself the novel provides us with significant details of their natural association as two Indian students in America. Romi makes out at the very outset that Billy belongs to the "upper-upper crust of Indian society," and eventually notices that such aristocracy is not limited to his material background alone, but that it finds a natural expression in his behaviour and attitudes as well. Thus Romi symbolizes a perspective, that of an "involved friend" and "a detached narrator," which helps in fusing the story with a considerable degree of authenticity, warmth and the immediacy of felt experience.

Hence Romi is armed with a vision which enables him to portray Billy's case with a certain objectivity and a balanced involvement because he has "neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilections of Billy Biswas" (150). He notices, as we do, several paradoxes in Billy in the wake of
their friendship when Billy takes him to his room in Harlem in New York. His justification for living in the slums of Harlem is that "white America is too civilized for him" (5). We might even say that Billy's lodging is an evoked presence and this evocation has its basis in a critical assessment of the details of American subculture: "His apartment was appalling. It was on the second floor of a tenement house that housed at least a dozen families. It was situated in what must have been one of the worst slums of New York city" (5). With his English public school background, Billy had a pronounced British accent, and that particular quality of behaviour which Romy qualifies as "poise without pose" (7). Hence he was struck by "the incongruity of that soft cultivated voice amidst the clatter of pots and pans, the thumping of children's feet, and the raucous noises of late afternoon...." (7). It is an appropriate choice for Billy with his aversion to the so-called civilized world and a strong streak of primitivism in him, as we learn later. As Surinder Joshi observes, "Romi's close association with Billy in Harlem is important in two ways: first, it brings him close to the character of Billy Biswas; second, it brings Tuula on the narrative scene." 7 So it is made possible technically for Romy to reach out to Billy's instincts through Tuula, his Swedish girl friend who first unveils Billy's suppressed self, and Romesh Sahai happens to be the second person to sense the creative force in him.
Though Billy becomes an isolated, alienated and mystifying character once he is removed from the public eye, the alienation attached to Billy's character is the result of a new way of looking at life. It also implies Billy's repulsion for ill-applied western standards found in the 'upper-upper crust of society'. The alienation found in twentieth century western heroes is the result of the purely materialistic outlook which followed industrialization, disintegration of values and eventual loss of faith, the outbreak of the First World War and the diffusion of the psychological ideas of Freud and Jung. But these realities which had shaken the western world and rooted out the institutional values could make very little impact on the Indian life. Hence, though Billy shares some of the characteristics of the alienated hero, we need an Indian perspective to grasp the full implications of his predicament.

It is possible to look at The Strange Case more as an allegory of the realization of one's true self, the attainment of one's goals, the meaning of which "lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun" (4). This contrast between the superficial and the real seems to inform the whole work, investing it with a rare quality of a spiritual quest. The need to live an authentic life is often
theoretically admitted, but it needs an uncommon conviction and commitment to respond positively to it. A sensitive soul like Billy is attuned to its call, the irrepressible call of "a great force, urkraft, a ... primitive force" (19) which makes him abandon his conventional identity. This response leads him to a state where "layer upon layer was peeled off ... until nothing but [his] primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight" (119). The confusion persists as to whether he belongs to "the wilderness" or to "the marts of the Big City" (92). But he feels that his soul had all along been clamouring for "that other thing", which is "something like" God (187). Eventually after becoming one with the forces associated with the wilderness, Billy is supposed to have gained mystical powers, which is also an affirmation of man's essentially spiritual dimension. This obviously suggests a denouncement of the values of the material world, and all related ties including the familial. Thus while rejecting a system which he found shallow and meaningless, he is very powerfully in touch with the roots of Indian culture and ethos, from where the ancient voice of the Kala Pahar calls him incessantly. This inner urge is so compulsive, for "there is nothing you can do but go" (160). So Billy's case cannot be equated with the rootlessness and the empty alienation of the western heroes. "The society from which he runs is spiritually empty; the society he chooses for himself is not corrupted by forces of civilization like law,
intelligence, judgement and the so-called pretensions."  
And the new society of the primitive tribals live a life of unalloyed happiness in the midst of "the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor ... an occasional feast ... dancing and love-making, and no ambition, none at all" (148). Billy's escape into this world of his choice is in fact a liberation from multiple bondage, an escape into freedom. His absorption into a life-style which is activated and nourished by a primeval consciousness may seem strange to the civilized world, though it is wrong to presume that he is 'alienated' in the western sense of the term. Billy and his friend Romi do not suffer "from that alienation that many other Indians seemed to be burdened with" (25). Even while tossed about by conflicting loyalties, Billy has his perceptions clear, deeply rooted in Indian cultural heritage, and that makes him a hero with a distinction.

Billy's passion to go beyond the surface realities of the civilized world and penetrate deep into the human psyche is consistently developed in the narrative. His inner urge to live like a primitive man in a primitive world is made evident at a very early age in the Bhubaneswar episode. He says that he had received intimations of his primitive self from the moment he emerged from the railway station: "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake" (120). He admits that at that time he could not
analyse his feelings properly: "I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (121). It had seemed to him that the sculptures at Konarak can give him a solution to his problems of identity. But finding most of the sculptures aesthetically unsatisfying he concludes: "If anyone had a clue to it, it was only the adivasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark, inscrutable faces" (122). At their night fair, he experiences a great shock of erotic energy and a feeling of unreality sharper than any he had known. He could only exclaim: "Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of" (123).

Another early evidence of such primeval longing in Billy is seen in a music session he has at a party in his friend's apartment. As Billy played a pair of bongo drums for nearly a quarter of an hour, it conveyed a message more fundamental than the rhythm, "a mesmeric pull that held us by its sheer vitality" (17). It is Tuula, who has come to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work, who senses clearly what goes on in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Billy. It is Tuula who refers first to the peculiar instincts of Billy when she recognizes the exceptional person in him. She exclaims: "Billy feels
something inside him, but he is not yet sure. Sometimes he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it" (19). Again, in her attempts to concretize the nature of this unnatural pull within him she observes that it is "a great force, urkraft, a... primitive force. But it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode any time" (19). With her extraordinary intuition and a psychologist's sensibilities, she comprehends the dilemma of Billy's life, and finds him obsessed with a latent quest. Even during long walks with Billy, 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" (26). Later he was to learn from Billy how he often had hallucinations: "It would be like a great binding flash during which I would be totally unaware of anything else" (181). Tuula, with whom he discusses them, tells him that, "in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in everyone--all art in a way flowed out of them," but she advises him not to "encourage them too much" (181).

Another occasion when we notice the strangeness of Billy's approach to everyday realities is when we find him defending before his father vehemently the child sacrifice by a clerk to appease the goddess for the recovery of his ailing son: "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. Look up the court records of any of the tribal agencies, and you will know what I mean" (54). He even asserts that there are worlds at the periphery of this one, above it and below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them. This reinforces the position revealed by Billy earlier when he talks to Romi of his 'glimpse of the other side': "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" (18-19). It is obvious that this other side which so totally illumines his vision concerns the primitive life untouched by the sophistication, inhibition and restraints of the civilized world.

A person with such extraordinary perceptions and a rare sensibility to primeval forces is bound to be a misfit and failure in the 'phoney' and materialistic upper class society of India to which he returns from America and for which he develops an aversion from the beginning. The society of Delhi had begun to exasperate him:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am, of course, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes ... I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a 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. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or to go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year-old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud-mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries (178-179).

Billy's interest in Anthropology was mooted by his near obsession to go into the details of tribal life coupled with his revulsion for Delhi culture and its vicious attempts to cut off our moorings from our tradition. Apparently, Billy returned to India for what she stood for culturally, but is frustrated to notice its neglect and disregard by the younger generation. Billy recollects his reaction while on a visit to his wife Meena's house:

And the first thing I hear ... 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 (56).
Disillusioned by the shallowness of this pseudo-western culture and the foolishness of his own family, Billy struggles hard to frame his future career. His rational, convincing outlook on 'urkraft' triggers off his creative energy to the extent of prompting him to do what he thinks fit with total disregard for social expectations. It is this moral courage that makes him argue with his justice father about ordinary human laws being inadequate to judge people who live and act under extraordinary and non-human circumstances.

When Romi asks Billy later whether his desire was to become a primitive man, the latter responds: "Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end ... I realized then that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else" (187). There is a certain vagueness about the nature of his goal, especially at the early stage. With his other-worldly concerns and disagreement with prevalent social values, even his marriage to Meena turns out to be a failure. Billy himself finds it difficult to specify where precisely his marriage went wrong. He can only say that "it was just ill-conceived, ill-fated" (183). He comments that it was ill-fated like a ship that gets smashed up in a gale, with only one in a thousand chances of saving it. There was a basic mental incompatibility between the two, with very divergent worldviews. Billy recalls:
It might have been saved if 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 (183).

So the more he tried to explain to her what was corroding him, the more resentful she became. And it eventually led to a breakdown of communication between the two. It pained Billy to see that whatever he said got distorted in the mirrors of her mind. All his efforts to give her a glimpse of the gathering nightmare, so as to avoid a marital disaster, proved to be failures. When he longed to be left alone, what Meena wanted was dozens of promises directed to ensure that he would not be left alone. It became a vicious circle of great quarrels followed by tearful reconciliations, and a few days of peace ending in another flare up, so much so, as Billy says, things had reached the breaking point when he undertook the expedition.

Billy's relationship with Rima Kaul brings to light an aspect of him about which Billy himself has clear notions only at a later stage. During the conversation between Billy and Romi, Romi's reference to the 'something terrible' that he did and mentioned in his letter to Tuula, made Billy
fidget a little despite the ease with which he was clarifying his position. It was a sensitive spot, yet Billy managed to bring himself to speaking about it as something for which he would forever hold himself in contempt. Billy had known Rima as a young girl, and he frequently met her at his aunt's place in Bombay as an acquaintance. But as the strain between Meena and himself increased, he noticed a peculiar turn in his relations with Rima. What still plagues his mind is not that he seduced her, but the way he seduced her and why he did it. He recalls that an element of self pity started to colour whatever he said to her: "I started to play act. I started to whine; at times, downright to lie. In short, I started to behave in a manner that in other men had excited my greatest contempt. There was nothing that I had ever detested more than whining. That I would one day lie had not seemed possible in the worst of my nightmares" (185). It was too late when Billy realized that all the mendacity that he had seen all around him had finally grabbed hold of him and that he was becoming all that he had despised. Being well aware of the corrupting force and degeneration at work in him, the only explanation he can offer here is that "it was as though [his] soul were taking revenge on [him] for having denied it for so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for" (187).

So this internal dichotomy experienced by Billy could be viewed as a facet of his transition from an earthy, physical
realm to one where supernatural and metaphysical powers do exist. Billy himself could never define successfully what 'That Other Thing' was. Even becoming a primitive was for him only a first step. After running away from the civilized society, he realized that he was still seeking something else. The Rima incident gathers significance in this particular context, taken as a warning signal not to defy the call of the inner voice. Looking back Billy observes: "It was as though a mastermind had arranged the whole thing to give me a preview of what awaited me if I continued to defy its call. Poor Rima had crystallized for me the alternatives..." (187).

Here we find Billy faced with a matter of choice rather than an impulsive desire to go into the wilderness. He observes that he had two clear choices: "I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever be the cost, or be condemned to total decay" (188). It is true that some time or other in their lives, most men are faced with similar options, though their choices may not be as drastic as Billy's. But here Billy's quest for a world of meaningful relations is strongly motivated by a desire "to meet the demands of the inner self by outstripping the narrow confines of the self."10 It also springs from a conviction that something has gone wrong with the world because initially it was "hung on this peg of money" (93). Passages from his letters to Tuula throw much light on his mental disposition
and struggle which led to his crucial decision and subsequent disappearance to the Saal forests of Maikala Hills. (Incidentally, we recall that Billy had great admiration for his Swedish friend for her ability to treat money for what it was worth: a whole lot of paper). His occasional expeditions leave a deep imprint on his mind and thinking:

When I return from an expedition, it is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of the forest. 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 (92).

This sense of belonging he feels to the wilderness is reinforced by its sharp contrast with a world which passes for civilized society, leaving a sense of repulsion in his mind:

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas, and while I am looking at them under my very nose, they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws (92).

Even the very concept of a "civilized society" as we have it today poses unresolved problems for Billy. He has obvious
contempt for those pseudos who glorify in aping shallow western values and organize their lives around the making and spending of money:

I sometimes wonder whether 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 ... (93).

This revelation prompts us to assume that Billy's withdrawal from the world is in the nature of a reflex action, that is, he withdraws in order to preserve himself from the mediocrity around him which had also begun to make inroads into his character. Hence it is a very perceptive observation to say that long before "his physical disappearance into the Saal forests of the Maikala Hills, he had ceased to belong to the world."11 So much so, even before he disappeared into the woods, a visible change in his appearance is noticed by Romesh: "It was as though some part of him had gone on strike. All my words simply sank upon his listless mind without so much as causing a ripple. Gone was the staggering intelligence, the spectroscopic interests, the sense of humour ... the Billy Biswas I had known was
finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain" (66). But it does not escape the notice of the observant Romesh that the only time that a change came over Billy's face and momentarily lost its vacuous aspect was when he related to him the great incomprehensible tragedy that was rural India. For a very brief moment Romy became aware of that extraordinary sensitivity to the world that used to be the essence of Billy. In retrospect we feel that Billy in a way was driven out by the superfluity of civilization, into a world which he found more fascinating and meaningful.

From the technical point of view as well, Billy's letters to Tuula achieve the desired effect of revealing the inner recesses of his mind without making him verbalize such vulnerable thoughts even in private conversation. It is those personal thoughts that support Billy's exit from the civilized world, courting the company of Bilasia, who symbolizes for him the very essence of primitive culture. It is right to say that, "that exit reminds one in a minor way of Siddhartha's renunciation of wife and child in search of Enlightenment. To Billy it is a movement from darkness to light." The dark jungle holds forth for him the promise of a primordial force that can nourish him, and the eventual vibrant life that he leads as a tribal indicates the remarkable change in Billy serving as a contrast to his earlier restlessness and uncertainty.
Ironically all this takes place behind the screen of the mundane world which is only curious about the mysterious disappearance of the son of a judge. Various conclusions about his disappearance are advanced such as his elopement with an American girl or that Billy is turned a spy for the princes of Bastar. But the argument adopted by the police that Billy was killed by a man-eater is accepted as official and hence the case is closed. The remarkable control exhibited by the novelist in handling this challenging theme is astonishing; at no point does it glide into sentimentality or melodramatic verbiage. Rather one can sense the inner compulsion experienced by Billy and the deep concern of Romi, his collector friend, who is involved in the official search. It is with Billy's reappearance, not before the world which had long ago rejected him, but in Romi's presence that the second phase of the novel opens with a rare artistic skill, and we are introduced to Billy's new life and all that is associated with it. Billy's own narrative which has the same restraint and sense of humour as well as Romi's seemingly formal deport reveal this significant phase of Billy's life.

As his other self grew even stronger than his temporal existence, it ultimately made Billy realize that he had been running after shadowy and illusory appearances. The night before he took his momentous decision to escape is presented by the novelist with deep mystic overtones:
...The wind cried in the leaves, the little insects in the underbush; the water trickled over the rocks, and they all said, "Come, Come, Come, Come, why do you want to go back?...You thought New York was real. You thought New 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" (119).

Billy readily responds to this call and finally "undergoes a new transformation" (137) whereby he is received into the solidarity of the tribals. And once he joins the tribals in the forest with whom he had only very limited acquaintance during his earlier expeditions, we find Billy behaving just like them, drinking liquor, participating in their rituals and waiting for the moon to rise:

Earlier he had waited for degrees, for lectures, for money, for security, for a middle-class marriage, for the welfare of his child, for preserving the dignity of his family, for being well-dressed, and for being normal and all those things that civilized men count as their duty or the foundations of their happiness or both (135).
Sitting there amidst the half-drunk tribals, he could clearly experience a change entering him and while he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back. And he could sense a rhythm different from that of the civilized world overpowering and subduing him even in the midst of the 'tortured awareness of his conflicts' (136). And so Billy Biswas, "a refugee from civilization, sat in the shadow of a saal tree, a thousand miles away from home, and gradually underwent his final metamorphosis" (139), after having wandered too long in forbidden cities.

Though Billy withdraws from the humdrum world, he does not withdraw from the world of love and pain, or from the world of sensuality and sensitiveness, and this he finds in abundance in the Saal forests—among the aborigines, and in his relationship with Bilasia, who reflects the primitive force which Tuula had long ago sensed in him. Bilasia is characterized as a contrast to all that Meena stood for, and as the embodiment of all Billy's dreams about a life outside the phoney society. We find a vague reference to it in one of his letters to Tuula, an attempt to concretize and convey in words his ambiguous thoughts:

A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her... buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen...
pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benares... Yes, this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand (93).

This constant and fearful disturbance goes to the extent of Billy losing his "grip on life" (93). And it is into this bizarre world of blurred realities, where Billy thinks of his family as being brought together by the accident of creation, that Bilasia is introduced as the very epitome of the forces which have been chasing Billy so long, though intangibly. As Billy says later, when he meets Bilasia he feels that he has "suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than a poor reflection of a million others. Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year" (140). If the forests and the hills had earlier beckoned him from a distance, Bilasia was now leading him by the hand. Yet she seemed so elusive, like a gust of passing wind. So in the context of the narrative and the development of the theme, Bilasia acquires a pivotal significance, almost that of a primitive goddess. Thus, once physically and emotionally severed from inherited structures and social bonds, Billy partakes of more forceful realities, represented mainly
through Bilasia and her uncle Dhunia, of whose mahaprasad (intimate friend) Billy eventually becomes.

If the civilized world regarded him a rebel and an outlaw, the tribal world looked upon him as their friend. And it is not escape from order and form into reckless freedom and wilderness that we see in Billy's life now, for interestingly enough, his second phase as a tribal reveals order and form of a different kind. We gather from Dhunia, Billy's closest friend among the tribals, and their chief, that Billy has been a priest and some kind of healer and magician to these tribals. And perhaps even more: "He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away" (157-158).

Dhunia also comes out with a folk-legend to support his claims in favour of Billy, saying that there was a king who lived thousands of years ago in these parts. Being a great king and an excellent sculptor, he wanted to build one temple which would excel all the others he had built, and so he undertook to make the chief idol himself. He worked on it day and night for nearly ten years, and on the last night of the last year, under the light of a fullmoon, the king produced an idol which was so beautiful that the God decided to enter it and told the king to ask for a boon. The king did not have anything to ask for, but the God gave him a day
to think it over. That night the brothers of the king, who got scent of this divine benediction on their brother, poisoned him, and the queen, Devi, immolated herself prophesying that she would return when her dead husband returned to the forest. And at her return, Chandtola, the cliff, would glow again on moonlit nights. And so, Dhunia concludes that Billy is that king after whose return Chandtola has started glowing. When Romi asks him why Billy took that decisive step in his life, Dhunia offers an explanation that is so poetic and mystifying:

When the Kala pahar calls you, collector sahib, there is nothing you can do but go. The first time I heard his drumming, I knew the Rock had called him. It is like a woman calling you. You become blind. All you see is the Big Rock. All you hear is its call. Day and night it calls you. Night and day. And you go like a fish hooked on a string, in spite of yourself, bound hand and foot. There is nothing you can do but go, when the Kala pahar calls you. Yes, collector sahib, the Black Rock is the master of us all (158).

There is a sense of awe and reverence with which Dhunia speaks about the Kala pahar (Black Rock), giving Romy a feeling that man's language is grossly inadequate to communicate its mystery. He also realizes that it refers to
a different kind of knowledge from what is offered by the materialistic world. The quick succession of short sentences here suggests the nature of the overpowering effect of the Black Rock on Dhunia who verbally sways to its spell. This tribal chief with his instinctual wisdom could sense the unusual rhythm of Billy's drumming which, after all, is a powerful medium of expression for the tribals.

After a lapse of ten years when Billy discloses his identity to his friend Romy, there is no underlying motive to return to the civilized world, only a desire to prevent bloodshed. Romy's close association with Billy imparts credibility to his point of view giving the impression that genuine action is being presented. The reciprocative visits of Billy and Romy to their respective place of living are significant in this direction. These encounters reinforce the views of Tuula and Dhunia about Billy, and lead, in turn, to the enriched consciousness of Romy himself. In fact their visit to the remote temple of Fate in the Maikala Hills lets Romy recognize in Billy a rare quest for spiritual awakening. There Romy has a baffling experience of "another presence" attending them while discussing about Fate; a presence, the contours of which Romy is not able to convey, but which meant to signify a message: "There are things that the like of you may never know. There are circles within circles, and worlds within worlds. Beware where you enter" (190).
It is unfortunate that Billy's later visit to Romi's place to cure his wife Situ of her illness determines the further development of the story. The irony is that Romi, the only link from civilization that Billy can trust, too is part of it despite his earnest efforts to protect Billy from the reclaiming arms of civilization. Things get beyond his control when through Romi's wife the secret of Billy's reappearance is shared with Billy's father and wife who are determined to get him back to normal life. There is a search again for Billy, now more vehemently than ever, and that ends tragically in the death of Billy when a havildar shoots him. Billy's dying accusation, watching his close friend Romi approach him, is 'you bastards'. It is a significant utterance which acquires multiple meanings in the context. "It 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. It is all this and more. It is Billy's final verdict on civilization which to him is not natural but bastardly."

The Australian writer Patrick White's *Voss* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* offer some interesting points of comparison for any researcher. Both the novels belong to the genre of quest literature, where journey is the controlling pattern, and they present the respective hero's journey into the interior regions with rich symbolic connotations. Patrick White writes about *Voss*:
His soul must experience first, as by some droit de seigneur, the excruciating passage into its interior. Nobody here, he suspected, looking around, had explored his mind to the extent that would enable him to bear such experience.14

And Arun Joshi comments about Billy Biswas:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish for ever hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself, so recklessly to its call (4).

As two characters who desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, leaving behind trails of glory and shattered hearts, both Voss and Billy stand apart from other fictional heroes. The expedition undertaken by both of them are explorations—not only of the outer space, but also of the inner reality, not only the vastness and variety of the landscape, but its human dimensions too.

Notwithstanding the difference in the geographical and cultural implications of the two novels, they both centre around an interior landscape which transcends all regional and nationalistic concerns. That could be the reason which
prompts both the novelists to deploy a journey, which is also extended into a metaphor of the mind. We might add that it is also an exploration of the past in order to infuse the present with greater meaning. Eventually in both the novels, the metaphor gains added significance as it exploits an aspect of self-discovery, compelling the heroes to ask questions like "Where do I belong?" (Voss, 364) or "Who was I? Where did I come from? Where was I going?" (The Strange Case, 120).

Along with this persistent attempt at self-discovery, both Voss and Billy exhibit a strangeness of behaviour, and passion for travel. Voss is depicted as a kind of 'foreign man', a 'German', 'an explorer'. Billy is also regarded as a foreigner who was sent to study Engineering in America, but ends up doing Ph.D. in Anthropology. On completing his studies, his only wish is to return to India, travel through the wilderness, and learn more about the aborigines. "Travel, travel. A little bit here and there, but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India" (The Strange Case, 10). It is also clear from the beginning that both Voss and Billy are prompted by an inner compulsion, a primitive force, an obsession to undertake the exploration. The only difference in this compulsion is that "while for Voss the expedition is a personal wrestling with the continent, for Biswas it is a sort of communion with the wilderness."\textsuperscript{15} And to that extent, Voss's exploration
is deliberate and well-planned, whereas for Billy it is spontaneous which nothing could prevent.

Unlike Voss, Billy never tried to establish any link with the civilized world, yet both are passionately committed to their quest and the realization of their driving force. Once these 'refugees from civilization' have left their respective family and place, the aborigines become their chosen people. So, though eventually Voss is killed by one of the aborigines, as Judd says, "they talk about him to this day. He is still there--that is the honest opinion of many of them--he is there in the country and always will be" (Voss, 443). In the case of Billy Biswas, it was the civilized world that wanted to take him back, and in the process he was killed. But as Voss is remembered, the memory of 'Billy Bhai' is cherished by the aborigines of Maikala Hills. They have elevated him to the status of a demigod and have even built a shrine for him.

It is possible to argue that the total worldview that emerges from The Strange Case is the artist's wholesome advocacy of the vision held up by Billy in the midst of strong forces of darkness and materialism that engulfs modern man. It took too long for the elder Mr. Biswas, despite all his knowledge of law and justice, to come to an awareness of the transcendental primordial force that controls human beings at one time or another: "You must forgive me Romesh." He said in his halting, now diffident voice. "I don't know
what came over me. I had loved him so much ..." (237). The narrator reveals a faint hope that on seeing the urn which contains Billy's ashes, perhaps even his naive wife also had a glimpse of the phantoms that had driven him out of her life and now out of this world. Romesh, who had spent a great deal of time with Billy in America and India, and who saw Billy die before him, is the only one who fully comprehends the depth of the world that Billy stood for, and experiences its strange presence on more than one occasion. While being in Billy's world, Chandtola acquires a new significance for him: "And there, staring me in the face, was Chandtola, the grim chalk-white granite face that on moonlit nights dominated the bastions of civilization from where we had come" (119).

The novel portrays for us convincingly a radiant picture of the original man and woman, a symbiosis of the forces of nature, upholding an ideology that challenges those who fall outside its precincts. Yet its potent message fails to reach out to the wider world. The death of Billy is highly symbolic too, suggesting the incapacity of the mundane world to move beyond peripheral concerns. As the District Collector, Romesh has the painful task of sending in a report on Billy's death. He forces himself to perform his duty, without interest, for "what is the point in saying things which no one would have understood" and no one wanted to hear. "Who, moreover, has succeeded in putting into words
what is truly wondrous and fearful about men?" (238). Sitting idly at his office, and watching the shades of evening settle slowly on the drab little town, Romesh Sahai has the bitter realization that nothing but blind, blundering vengeance awaits all those who dare to step out of its stifling confines. And it results in a confrontation whose outcome is as disastrous and certain as the end of solitary boats beating against a maelstrom. So in keeping with its characteristic superficiality, the strange case of Billy Biswas has been disposed of "in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers" (238), despite the fact that the 'great god of the primitive world' had until then guarded him as his own. Still, while the civilized world destroys him, the tribal world tries to perpetuate the memory of this mangod by building him a shrine.

It is fascinating to note that the name of the hero 'Bimal Biswas' suggests 'pure faith'. While celebrating the nature worship of the Vedas, the narrative also portrays the charming simplicity of an authentic life in a primitive community, the virtues of which may act as a corrective to the overly materialistic, pseudo-western culture of today. The affirmation of these values is very fundamental to us, offers challenges, yet, unfortunately, living upto them, and the refusal to be part of a collective inauthenticity, has proved to be fatal, reducing it to a mere 'strange case'.

NOTES


2 Camus 118.


4 Arun Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1971). All further citations are from this edition with the page numbers given in brackets.


7 Surinder Joshi 71.


9 M. Mani Meiti 18.

11 Jasbir Jain 54.


13 C.N. Srinath 126.
