The fictional world of Arun Joshi presents the various themes. It is an informed and artistic portrayal of individual minds overpowered by conflicting urges within themselves. It highlights the basic contradictions of the post-independence Indian society with its scientific and technological progress, growth of the materialism, spiritual degenerations and confusion of values. His novels present the problems of Westernized Indians who have somehow lost their spiritual moorings and suffer from cynicism, estrangement from the community, intellectual doubts and the crisis of faith. Joshi has the deep concern for the almost institutionalized corruption, moral decline and precipitate erosion of values in post-independence India. He admits it that the novel ‘The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’ (1971) concerned about the values and attitudes of the young today.

This novel is a critique of this ‘diseased’ Indian society. It is the study in the complete alienation of Billy Biswas from his upper class Delhi society with its material concerns, spiritual uprootedness and shameless imitation of the Western cultural norms in defiance of its traditional values. It underlines the spiritual degeneration of this society and lives through a rare spiritual rejuvenation in Billy Biswas. Joshi suggests the need for a vision—whether
moral or mystical—and for courage to make a decisive choice with full
knowledge of its consequences to guide man through the labyrinth of the
contemporary life with evils of materialism, confusion of values and spiritual
decay. Joshi could not feel at ease in the dwindled stream of modern,
mechanized society, which is hooked on the page of money and unhinged
from its cultural roots.

This novel is not merely record an existential protest against the
superficialities of a grossly materialistic civilization and a romantic nostalgia
for the simple mode of life of a primitive society. The novelist presents his
protagonist Billy's strong primitive urge—his 'urkraft' as it is called in the book
to critically at the inner decay and sterility of this society. Side by side, there is
an endorsement of an anti-materialistic, essentially Hindu, world-view. The
traditional Hindu ideal of simple life with its few needs, total 'disregard of
money. Tuula Lindgren, Billy's Swedish girl friend and his wife Bilasia are
presented with the lack of ambition and its harmonious relation with nature—a
life given to the cultivation of man's inborn endowment as well as the higher
things of the life.

The primitive tribes of India—living far from the corrupting influence and
polished banality of the so-called civilized society. The tribal life of Maikala
Hills in Central India becomes a concretization of this world-view and Billy's
return from White America to India and his ultimate rejection of the post-
independence, pseudo–Western values of his Delhi society to join the
primitives and accept their lives. Billy's fight at this hill stands obvious comparison with Siddhartha's renunciation of his palace, to fulfill the 'greater responsibility towards my soul.' \(^1\) (186) It was not a shrinking of his responsibility to my family, but not attempt to discharge a greater on. In taking to the forest, Billy unlike Siddhartha was not fully conscious of his act. He came under some mysterious spell, which could not be shaken off for days. 'I had no idea it was going to happen. It was two days – and two nights – before I knew that I had done. By then it was too late.' (111)

He earlier remarked about Krishna murder case and it is relevant. His act was absolutely unpremeditated and he was under the overwhelming influence of some non-physical world. The next point to analysis is the type of self-motif. He finally attained in life of the tribes and the extent to which he travels back. The tribal life in the novel is a symbol of the primeval, elemental life where nature and the absolute are not conceived as separate entities. The song at the opening in this novel purported to be current among the Bhils of the Satpura hills: 'I came a thousand miles to see your face, O mountain, A thousand miles did I came to see your face (01) is revealing. The mountain here may be the totemised object of the group. Anything can be a totem is symbolic of the elemental unity between the realms of nature and the divine. It is not to say that the tribals do not have a sacred–profane distinction. They have it exceedingly, except that the distinction is arbitrary. The absolute as the substratum of the animate and inanimate world as understood in the
Upanishads has similar echoes. The forest, which Billy escapes is both an agent and a background in which Billy finds himself. Here he is free of many earthly restraints. It is a place where the borderlines of divinity, superstitions and magic converge. In the tribal village is a glowing white cliff, Chandtola. The colour of the cliff is a mystery to everyone. Billy says that the tribals like to be ‘the work of some supernatural forces.’ (105) Romesh quickly informs the reader that Billy was not entirely joking. Quite significantly Billy is staying somewhere around there. It is a world where the discussion is different from that of the civilized world, ‘the price of foodgrains or new seeds or roads or elections and the stuff like that’ (113) are a non-issue here. Issues are obviously of no interest to the sophisticated world. Discussion would center around ‘the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, and moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing and sex.’ (113) and presumably in that order. Billy got himself totally involved in the discussion and the life in general. The first night with the tribals accomplishes far-reaching repercussion in Billy.

Billy was slowly able to get some insight into his core, which stood divested of its civilized trappings. The tribals too noticed changes being effected in their midst with the arrival of Billy. A singular and obvious thing occurred in the night when Billy joined the group-Chandtola came alive. According to the tribals legends, Chandtola stopped glowing when the tribals were deposed from their thrones. Now when Billy come to them, they grow
returned. They consider everything about Billy kindly. For the tribals, the king and the priest are a single individual. Dhunia says him priest and believes that Billy is capable of extraordinary power for which two incidents are corroborate enough. Once, when a formidable tiger threatened the village and nobody dared to tackle him, Billy coolly sent it away by his mere presence. On other occasion Billy brought back to life Dhunia’s own grandson who had been ‘dead for two hours.’ (159) He himself would dismiss any attempt to attribute supernatural powers to him as baseless and a part of fanciful thinking. However, the novelist himself is non-committal. He, rely records and desists from the judgment. That is what an ordinary herbal treatment does not stand to reason. An analysis of Billy's curing of Situ's migraine would show that it was not. On that day, after enquiring about Situ’s illness Billy leaves Romesh’s bungalow in the usual way with a promise to return around midnight.

Billy presents the two different cultural and geographical location embody. The combination and the conflict of two cultures reveal the spiritual uprootedness of the Indian upper crust and the utter falsehood of its superficial glamour and refinement. The novelist through Billy also presents theme of alienation. His predicaments result from his bi-cultural situation is the authentic problem of a perceptive young man belonging to the Westernized Indian society that has lost its spiritual anchorage. He suffers from discontent, a sense of irrelevance of life and a ‘constant blurring of reality. The hero of this
novel voices the moral confusion prevailing in the post-independence Indian society:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values...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 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 go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty years-old tune.  

This novel despite its harsh indictment of the material concerns and spiritual degeneration of the upper-class Indian society is undoubtedly positive about the need for a guiding vision, whether mystical or moral, to encounter the contemporary confusion of values. Joshi said that it was that vision that ignites the imagination of his non–conformist hero and enables him to look critically at the root of the decay that corrodes our culture from within and without, to see what has been lost and how it can be regained. The struggle between two cultures is presented beautifully. The antagonistic relation between man and his environment is reflected in the plot of this novel. That derives its dramatic tension from a confrontation of two conflicting forces. The psychological conflict is presented in the character of Billy Biswas. He becomes the prey of his inner conflict. It reaches the height of the tragedy because Billy’s attempt to stand up against his society results not from simple
error of judgment or lack of insight but from his genuine concern about the precipitate erosion of the traditional values of the society.

Joshi presents his hero Billy Biswas with Romi (Romesh Sahi) as narrator. Romi, like Conrad’s Marlow in ‘Heart of Darkness’ becomes the narrative voice of the novel but his function is to disguise the very thing that the book, like other novels is about its subjective, spiritual, autobiographical journey. He needs Romi to provide some distance from the real events, to maintain an air of objectivity and to mitigate some of the inner flame that burned his hero. Indeed the events related in this novel would be hard to believe, were they not presented in the matter-of-fact down-to-earth fashion. Unlike Sindi and Ratan, who are more or less victim of circumstances Billy is a rebel. He makes no dastardly compromises, never fumbles and suffers from self-pity. He is never given to introspection and despite his anxieties, he is not a drifter. He is a man of conviction and has the courage to translate his vision into a reality. As a result he is capable of facing the crisis of his life courageously and with absolute self-confidence. This novel is highly praised by various Newspapers as:

A most unusual novel, the events narrated would be hard to believe, were they not related in such a matter of fact, down to earth fashion. ³
Billy’s extraordinariness is brought into sharp contrast with the banal and meaningless life around him. The first section of this novel deals with Billy’s social and intellectual background and offers insight into the strong primitive urges in him, which impelled him to leave the civilized society. The second section concentrates in the transformation of Billy through his contact with the organic life in the primitive world of central India. Joshi presents the differences of the primitive life embodies in the respective geographical locals. It is an attempt to make Billy’s character as well as the spiritual decay of his environment and make his strange case appear convincing. It prepares the ground for his rejection of the values of the civilized society. Romi meets Billy in New York while searching for a room. Billy offers to share his apartment, which is situated in one of the worst slums of New York City, with Romi.

At the time of his meeting with Romi, Billy is halfway through his Ph.D. in Anthropology, although his father, who had once been the Indian Ambassador to a European country and is at present a judge of India’s Supreme Court, think that his son is doing engineering. Billy himself explains his fascination for anthropology: ‘All I want to do in life is to visit the place they describe, meet the people, who live there, find out…the aboriginaleness of the world’ (14) it reveals his passion to penetrate deep into human life, not just the surface reality. At the same time, it clearly shows his deep love for the primitive men and their life had been organized. Billy is aware of a reality other than the tangible one and he has occasional glimpses of the ‘their side’
of life. His experience in the mental hospital in America where he works for some time and his arguments with his justice father about the Krishna murder case unmistakably prove his perception of the other world and of the inadequacy of ordinary human laws to judge men like himself who act under extraordinary circumstances. He tells his father:

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 ... something happens, something strange and sudden like the clerk's dream or something very gradual and you are catapulted into them. (54-55)

The intermittent feeling of unreality that Billy suffers from and his interest in people who live outside the pale of modern civilization are given central importance. In fact, as Romi says: 'there were many things...which Billy saw and which, step by step, led him to the only end that awaits those who see too much.' (39-40) Tuula is perhaps the only person who detects this mysterious and powerful urge in him, but he is not yet sure. Such a character is bound to feel restless in the superficial and hollow world around him, and Billy, a misfit in the civilized society, only waits for the final explosion. Though Billy has stayed in America for long, he, unlike Sindi Oberoi, has not lost his roots in India does not 'suffer much, except for passing spells of loneliness, from that alienation that many other Indians seemed to be burdened with.' (25) He has the advantage of a shared background while uprootedness is the
sources of Sindi’s alienation, his lack of commitment and pusillanimity. Billy trains his root in the tradition of his society and draws his strength and sense of purpose from his inner vision. He is not bothered about cultural roots that men like Sindi desperately seek. 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. He himself thinks:

I usually stood alone because I was an only son. At times my sister joined me. But the fun was the greatest when my uncle visited us during his holidays and both of us spent whole days, dropping dead tired to sleep at the end of evenings just like this. (5)

The most significant aspect of this novel is the way in which Billy's quest for the absolute merges with the quest for his personal identity. Finding himself was the finding of the absolute. This is in the best Indian tradition where both are identified. Joshi does not take resources to any borrowed metaphysics. Even as solution is not affected in terms of speculative metaphysics, it is well within the Indian philosophical framework. Hari Mohan Prasad comments:

Billy is like those saints who want to realise unity with the divine through awakening of their senses. Like the sadhakas of tantra,
Billy hankers after self-realization, the experience of identification with the cosmos, the divine. He gets a taste of it and he cannot return to Meena or Mr. Bilasia is Prakriti and he is Purush (male) and the cosmic whole can be experienced in their union. 4

Even at a psychological level Billy finds his roots. Billy’s fight to the jungle, just as it is with Eugene O’ Neills’ Brutus Jones of ‘The Emperor Jones’ or Yank of ‘The Hairy Ape’ is a progressive rejection of the trappings of a superimposed civilization. The jungle and the drumbeat are visible symbols in both the writers. They also are agents reduced to lion clothes commonplace symbols of discovering the core self. Both pay for their discovery no less dearly than with their very lives.

Brutus Jones traced his genealogy to the African tribes a point which may necessitate one to argue that Billy himself traces his genealogy to any of the original inhabitants of India or even those migrated Indo-Aryan nomadic groups. This is not stretching the argument too far; instead there are enough hints to draw up such a conclusion. For instance, Romesh says that while narrating his story, Billy paused to think many times. Billy having a different perspective from a different world was adjusting his speech lest they should converse at cross-purposes:

What he sought essentially was some forgotten landmark of our common past whose recognition might perhaps reverse the process that time had inevitable wrought and by some magical
short-cut bring the two of us together to a common plane of reference. (140)

On the other hand we find that in the second part of this novel Billy disappeared accidentally after the meeting with Romi, now he is a District Collector in Central India, runs into Billy under extraordinary circumstances. A terrible draught hits the plains of the Central India resulting in acute scarcity of food and drinking water. While visiting the worst-hit areas, Romi comes across Billy, now a completely changed person. Thoroughly trabilized, he wears only a lion-cloth. Overcoming the initial shock, Romi takes him to his bungalow and gives him the news of astonishing nonchalance. He appears to be completely out of touch with what has been happening in the world outside the forest.

It is at Romi’s bungalow where Billy narrates the circumstances leading to his disappearance, the strange mystical experiences he has undergone and his life as a primitive in a ‘flat matter-of-fact tone.’ (111) The long account of what exactly happened during the ten years of Billy’s absence from the civilized society is partly given in the first person by Billy through his memory monologues partly gathered from Dhunia, the tribal headman and partly summarized by Romi. It was a quiet afternoon in late September, Billy said:

When we camped near the river. They call it a river though, in reality, it is only a mountain stream. It runs only in the monsoons. And now that the monsoons were over, it had begun to thin down. I had four boys with me and a couple of servants. We had been
delayed for two hours at Jabalpur and now we had to hurry with our tents before it grew too dark to see clearly. (82)

At that time he told Romi about Dhunia and his daughter Bilasia. The meeting of Bilasia in Dhunia’s cottage on the night prior to his disappearance brought about a change in him. He says: it was as though, during that hour, it was not Bilasia I had been waiting for my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life. (113) in the face of this terrible change sweeping him away, he had unaccountably ceased to resist. All that he had been confusedly driving towards throughout his life and he was very near the brink and in apprehension of what was going to happen Billy wept like a child. The process of his regeneration through his mystical communion with the elemental forces of nature is wonderfully rendered in a language, which is at once poetic, hallucinatory and evocative. The call of the primitive world, which Billy had been listening within him, through faintly, since his days began, now became more articulate and strident. The entire forest, the moonlit night, the multitudinous objects of variegated and living nature were calling him to join them, and to merge into the primitive world. It was a call to end his life-long quest: Come, now come. Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night. (121)

In this sense we can say that Billy’s quest is more thoroughgoing and comprehensive for a solution ranging beyond the philosophic-religious texts of
the Upanishads, yet Indian and spiritual through and through. Billy withdraws from the meaninglessness and triviality of life in the sophisticated society, which fail to sustain him and fulfill his primitive urge, for a meaningful life, for the realization of his identity and for integration with the organic and vital forces of nature that will heal his truncated self and lead him to a higher and intenser plane of experience. It is for him a movement from his feeling of alienation from civilized society to a sense of communion with primitive life. It is difficult, therefore, to accept the remark of R.K. Dhawan:

Billy renounces a life of hypocrisy and deceit to take to a life noble savageness. In this novel the protest against the dehumanizing tendencies of he civilized society does not give rise to a plain escapism, a nostalgic yearning for a simple mode of living and a cult of he noble savage. ⁵

Joshi not merely portraits his protagonist's search for identity but also his uncompromising quest for self spiritual destination. Asia Week praised Joshi as:

Arun Joshi ranks among the leading Indo-Anglian writers …he takes subjects that are portentous and deals with them in an unpretentious manner. ⁶

Billy’s primitivism is not degenerate like that of Kurtz. While reaction against the sterilized dehydrate and deceptive culture took ‘the form of an uncompromising revolt against the civilization itself accompanied by a strident
call for an uninhabited release of the Dionysian instincts and an irresistible desire to through off the burdens of social restraint. Billy’s revolt against the civilized society is motivated by an urge to realize the meaning and the purpose of life and to recognize his true identity in the context of a reality, which alone is considered authentic by him. It is a transition from disorder to order, for Billy’s life as primitive reveals a kind of order and stability, which the so-called civilization deplorably lacks. Billy ignored the important role and his self-realization of his native wife Bilasia in his life.

He was a young person who talked like Sir Anthony Eden. He seemed sad and bored like the rest of his staffs and when he talked, rather than look at me he kept his gaze fixed on a portrait of Mahatma Gandhi on his desk. (177)

Joshi portrays in this novel how a man of extraordinary obsessions is destroyed by his absurd meanderings away from civilization. His story parallels the equally absurd one of the young king who staked his life in the hopeless attempt to sculpt the face of God, the episode echoing the one in ‘The Foreigner’ where Sindi, in the agony of the battle raging in his soul between the good impulse of sympathy for Sheila and the rational anger at her father's dishonesty, walking the streets of Delhi too early in the morning, when confronted by a patrolling policeman's question, “Are you looking for something, sir?” ruefully replies: “Yes,. . .Have you seen God ?” (208)

The more Billy’s order monologue draws near the climatic moment, the
more he becomes pensive and begins to fumble for words. Although the narrative never loses its control and fails into melodramatic bog, it now borders on something ‘traumatic’ (133) and hallucinatory. The mystical experience of spiritual renascence which involves a sort of psychic death, a sacrifice of the old ways of life and surrender to a new one, is to an extent, akin to that of the White lady in ‘The Woman Who Rode Away’. But while Lawrence resorts to a highly symbolic description to recreate ‘the flight of a human soul into the unknown’ (Hough, 142) and revivify the process of psychic renewal, Joshi depends almost entirely on the resources of his narrative and his evocative language. His apparently meandering but superbly controlled style succeeds in bringing to life Billy's process of psychic integration. The experience is ineffable and what the narrator succeeds in doing is to give a summarized version of Billy's disjointed, jerky and labyrinthine monologue.

As the hours ebbed away, Billy began to lose his self-confidence and he made a last desperate attempt to rein his ‘runaway imagination, bordering on hallucination’ (128) and convince himself of the underirability of the primitive world. He hugged the magazines and the newspapers dumped in a corner of his tent ‘as though they were talismans, certificates of normalness.’ (131) But it was a futile attempt. The urge for reintegration was too strong for his to resist until, at last, the magic talisman, the straw he clutched, broke into pieces and he made the decisive leap into the cosmic world.
The tribal dance in moonlit night marked the transformation of Billy and the rediscovered his primitive self through the merging of his consciousness with that of the tribal folk. Like them he began to wait in a trance-like immobility (137) for the rising of the moon. As if that was the very reason of his being alive on that night. Sitting there, amidst the ‘ebullient chatter of half-drunk tribal,’ (137) he clearly felt the change that was occurring in him. He had a terrible premonition that it might not be possible for him to go back. The dance and the liquor brought about the explosion of his senses and Billy Biswas, ‘a refugee from civilization,’ (140) underwent, as he watched the orgiastic dance, his ultimate transformation, getting down to his unadulterated primitive self. He confronted a reality that almost ‘blinded him with its elemental ferocity.’ (141) The ‘tumultuous drums chiseled away the edifice of his past’ while he sat in a trance-like mood and listened to the seductive and over-mastering call of the elemental forest and the primitive dancers. He lamented the belated discovery of his identity. For long he had wandered away from the purlieus of the mysterious and forbidden region, because he ‘had been afraid and foolish, squandering the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization.’ (141)

The pristine nature with all its mystery, grandeur and ferocity was lying before him, and Bilasia who ‘at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called [him] night after night, year after year’, (142) led him to that enigmatic world. It was through her that he received ‘the truest
perceptions of life’ (142) which were elusive and communicable only in the
language of vision and dream. It was not merely the satisfaction of sexual
desire which he sought in Bilasia whose ‘enormous eyes…poured out a
sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them.’
(141) It was something deeper than that something ‘closer to madness, the
terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds
himself in the presence of his God.’ (142) He discovered in her ‘that bit of
himself that he [had] searched for all his life and without which his life [was]
nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others.’ (142) Bilasia was, as
if his missing self and the union with her made him whole. This is wholeness
of the personality through the physical union of man and woman of the Jugian
idea of the integration of split of missing selves through the idealized union of
‘anima and animus’. But Joshi is, perhaps, suggesting the union of the male
and female (the masculine and the feminine principles) in the ultimate
embodiment of the human spirit as laid down in the Sankhya system of Indian
philosophy. The validity of such an interpretation is provided by the fact that in
The Last Labyrinth, too, Joshi alludes to a similar concept while describing the
relationship between Som Bhaskar and Anuradha. Bilasia like Anuradha
symbolizes the life spirit in woman (Gargi, the deaf-mute god-woman refers to
Anuradha as Som’s shakti’). (121) She represents the Feminine principle of
the Sankhya system which postulates two ultimate realities- Purusha (Self)
and Prakriti (Primordial Nature) and the manifestation and evolution of the
human spirit in the union of the two. As ladylove, she plays a momentous role in the Billy's life by helping him to know himself. Describing his meeting with her, Romi writes:” What was Bilasia? What is the playful effervescence of a mountain stream? What is sunlight filtering through a glade? What is the thunder of the volcano or the hardness of granite?...I had the distinct, if somewhat confused, feeling that I was facing not merely a human being but also the embodiment of that primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these hills, perhaps this earth, since time began and that, our proud claims to contrary, still lay in wait for us not far from the doorstep of our air-conditioned rooms.” (225-26)

She was the ‘strange woman' (97) that had crossed Billy's dream time and again, the ‘Devi Mata' of the tribal folk-lore. Billy's union with her suggests his communion with Prakriti that enabled him to find his true self, achieve the fullest perception of reality and realize his own potentialities. But it is doubtful whether Billy achieves, or intends to achieve, the sort of complete liberation from the illusory world attachment to which gives birth to pain and suffering. Such a liberation is known as Kaivalya in Sankhya philosophy and is alluded by H.M. Prasad. (1985:46-60) According to Sankhya, when the self achieves freedom as well as perfect knowledge of reality, it ceases to be affected by the vicissitudes of the body and the mind and rests itself as the disinterested observer of physical and physical changes, a state of consciousness which is called Kaivalya. But Billy, even after his self-realization, does not remain a
mere witness to the affairs of the external reality as is evident from his deep concern for the degeneration of Romi (229) and it is his effort to help Romi that ultimately brings about his tragedy.

Bilasia, thus, symbolizes the primitive ethos, its subterranean resources of psychic energy. It is only natural that she could enliven Billy’s soul as Meena Biswas and Rima Kaul had repelled and deadened it. There is not the slightest streak of sophistication in Bilasia. She is an inextricable part of the integral and rhythmic life of nature around her and an embodiment of the elemental and invulnerable forces that rule the primitive world: “She had untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people. It was as though nature were cocking a snook at Meena Biswas of the world, informing them once again how little it cared for their self-proclaimed superiority.” (143) Her graceful eyes exude ‘a grief so tragic that it might well have brought tears to the eyes of a stone-bed.’ (143) This knowledge of suffering and deep empathy together with her lack of refinement and material concern enable her to heal the lacerated soul of Billy. Bilasia is akin to Tuula Lindgren and Anuradha in The Last Labyrinth insofar as she possesses a sympathetic and instinctive understanding of what Billy really needs. As she is in harmony with the rhythm of organic life, she is the epitome of health and wholeness. Money has no value for her and, though she is independent, she has no ambition.

After the tremendous volte-face in his life, Billy settled down in the primitive society which was characterized by innocence, peace and a vital
personal relation with the natural world: “We lived at the subsistence level... what kept us happy...were the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from the mahua... a lot of dancing and love making, and, more than anything else, no ambition.” (198)

He was least interested in economic matters and indifferent to things which provided sustenance to life in civilized society. There was no hurry in his life. His earlier restlessness was gone and was replaced by a serenity which itself was a measure of the great change that had taken place in him. What the novel achieves is not a mere sentimental extolling of primitive life but an artistic and convincing realization of an alterative mode of living which is at once a critique of the materialistic society utterly void of any sense of purpose, direction and values, and a justification for rebellion against it. The story lives through a dramatic tension between these two opposite views of life and, thus, articulates Joshi’s message in the novel.

But all this process of becoming a primitive was, for Billy, only a means to an end. He was concerned with the quest for something beyond simple primitivism. It was a search for the realization of potential divinity in man. He was seeking, like Indian sages, a god-head and “Becoming a primitive was only a first step, means to an end.” (189)

He is in search of divinity, like the seers in Indian legends and scriptures who also want to the forest to heal themselves spiritually and to attain the highest state of self-realization and sainthood. This is, perhaps, what Joshi
had in his mind when he wrote ‘The Strange Case’ and ‘The Foreigner’ “are primarily concerned with religious issues—the problems of an essentially Hindu mind.”

After undergoing the regenerative process himself, Billy comes out in a new role, that of a healer, a priest and a magician who cures dying children, wards off tigers, and helps the primitive people with their worldly problems and spiritual troubles. To the primitive folk, he appears “like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound.” (159-60) Dhunia even looks upon him as the reincarnation of the tribal king, who passed away thousands of years ago, and upon Bilasia as that of his wife, Devi Mata. He narrates to Romi the legend of the mythical king who was an excellent sculptor, and ideal lover, a magician and a saint. The king wanted to build a temple that would excel all others in the world. He employed the best sculptors of his country to build the temple, the carvings and the sanctum sanctorum, and decided to make the chief idol himself. He worked day and night, abjured his kingship and neglected his duties and health to finish the idol. For ten years he had struggled to chisel the hard granite into the desired shape. On the last night of the last year, under a full moon, the king produced an idol so beautiful that God (157) decided to enter it. The idol became alive. So pleased was God that He told the king to ask for a boon. As the saintly king had nothing to ask for, God gave him a day to think over it. The brothers of the king came to know of this divine benediction and out of jealousy poisoned him. The king’s wife immolated
herself on his pyre, prophesying that she would return when her husband returned to the forest and reunion with her husband, Chandtola, the white cliff, would glow again on moonlit nights. Dhunia is convinced that Billy is their dead king after whose return to the forest and meeting with Bilasia, the cliff has started to glow again. When he is asked by Romi why Billy had made that decisive leap, Dhunia says,"When the Kala Pahar calls you, Collector Sahib, there is nothing you can do not 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." (160) And the call of ‘Kala Pahar’ is a call to know one’s identity: ‘Just so that he may know who he was.’ (163)

It is interesting to note that a slightly different version of the same story is given by Billy to Romi when they visit the ruins of the temple amidst the forest. According to Billy, the mythical king worked night and day without any rest. He grew emaciated, his hair became long and white, and he turned mad. But the chiseling did not stop. One morning the citizens came and found him dead at the feet of the idol. It was an exquisite piece of sculpture:” No artist has ever infused such life and stone figure...But the figure had no face...The king could never make the face of his god.”(171)

The image of the faceless god, perhaps, suggests the imperfect nature of art. The sculptor-king, with all his dedication to his work, could not make the face. It may also imply the hopeless and futile attempt to achieve perfection. Joshi’s heroes suffer from a sense of discontent and imperfection and make
sincere endeavor to attain fulfillment. But none of them, the partial exception of Billy notwithstanding, succeeds in completely satisfying this hopeless longing. The God’s image, itself a symbol of perfection and wholeness, appears faceless in their highly subjective vision. The tribal king’s failure to chisel the face of the god may be regarded as a symbolic expression of Billy’s own failure to complete the quest he had started by forsaking civilized society.

The primitive world becomes credible because it is not elusive and insubstantial but something solid, based on a very well-defined concept of life. This primitive ethos is brought into focus through the contrast of Meena and Rima Kaul with Bilasia and Tuula. Tuula Lindgren is a remarkable woman character is Joshi’s fiction. At once educated and humane, she exerts great influence on Billy. She is an introvert girl, ‘very elusive’ (175) and, in spite of her friendliness, she has a way of detaching herself from others. Tuula is pretty and good in her job but she is absolutely devoid of self-consciousness of exhibitionism. Unlike Meena and her class and like Bilasia and the primitive people, Tuula has a ‘total disregard of money.’ (176) She is the first person Billy meets in his life for whom money has no value and who treats money for ‘whole lot of paper.’ (177) She has a simple philosophy of life which borders on ‘Hindu beliefs.’ A man according to Tuula, needs a minimum to goods in order to survive. Once this is ensured either by society or by his profession, a man should devote himself to the fullest exploitation of his inborn gifts of endowments and ‘in the process contribute as much to the society as [one]
can.’ But what affects Billy more fundamentally is Tuula’s belief that the search for truth is a lonely business:...“you had to be prepared to go it alone if you really wanted to be honest to yourself.” (177) With her deep empathy and extraordinary intuition she can detect Billy’s ‘unkraft’ and his obsession with a latent quest. The hallucinations that Billy suffers from, occur, according to her, in everyone in a mild form. Such hallucinations are the matrix of creativity: ‘all art in a way flowed out of them.’ (181)

It is specifically these things which Meena lacks and, thus, she can never understand her husband. As Billy tells Romi,”It [their marriage] might have been saved if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering.” (185) But Tuula possesses these qualities, as do Bilasia, and Anuradha in The Last Labyrinth. They can animate the buoy up the tormented soul of Billy and Som Bhaskar in a way that women like Meena and Leela Sabnis with all their sophistication and rationality never hope to do. Billy could never communicate his problems to Meena. To Romi’s question, “But, don’t you think you had responsibilities towards her, towards your son?” Billy's answer is, “I had greater responsibilities towards my soul.” (186) And he discarded familial obligations and filial expectations to answer the call of his soul. It was a moral conviction that had led Billy to ignore the commonly accepted standards of right and wrong in response to a more deeply founded moral imperative. It was the call of his conscience addressed to his inauthentic self that was dominated by the
accepted standards of his society and entangled in concerns that had come to
determine instead of being determined by it. It reflected Billy's own deepest
self-awareness. What was at stake was Billy's self, his struggle to exist as the
individual he knew he ought to be. In reply to Romi's question if his choice of
leaving the civilized society was not a drastic one, Billy says: “Any choice
worth its name is drastic.” (190) The price is not making such choice is, Billy
knows, corruption and degeneration which his seduction of Rima made clear
to him. The Rima episode was like a warning signal of what might happen if
he made compromise with the counterfeit values of his society and delayed to
follow his inner voice. Rima had crystallized the alternatives. He arrived at the
fork in his life and, before it was too late, ‘took the turning that was as
irrevocable as it was awesome.’ (144)

It was to flee from the corrupting influence and moral confusion of the
civilized society and to lead an intensely rich and meaningful life in a
sanctuary of peace that Billy, like Arnold's ‘The Scholar Gypsy,’ decided to join
the company of ‘wild brotherhood.’ Romi, Billy's only link with the civilization
that he had shunned, has deep sympathy and admiration for him. He tries
hard to save him from the retrieving clutches of the insensitive society. But the
irony is that notwithstanding his appreciation, Romi is after all, a part of that
corrupt, unprincipled society and becomes its instruments in the final tragedy.

It is this respect that Romi's character and his role as a narrator achieve
an added significance. He is at once a representative of the sick and
disoriented society and a recipient of Billy’s confidence and his vision of primitive life, a sort of mediator between two diametrically opposite way of life. Romi started as a passive observer and a dispassionate narrator. But, with the progress of the novel, he becomes more and more involved and at the end when Billy is hunted down by the Police, he totally identifies himself with him: “I felt now that it was not merely Billy Biswas but Billy and I together who were being hunted down.” (208)

Billy’s death accentuates the contrast between the ephemeral authority of ‘the so-called organized, civilized society’. Romi represents the primal and invulnerable force of Billy’s world, its weird unintelligibility and inexplicable glory. The contrast overwhelms Romi so much so that he suffers from self-doubt and almost feels like giving up his job. This change in Romi adds an extra interest to the novel.

Billy’s renewal of contact with Romi is not at all accidental but a deliberate act of decision. Billy is deeply worried about his friend and his corruption. The law and order situation in the district deteriorates in the wake of the terrible drought and Romi resorts to strict measure to restore normalcy. It is not very difficult for him with the help of a trigger-happy, sadistic Police officer like Rele. But what is significant is that Romi realizes his own moral descent. A change sets over him who hardens his heart and he has a vague feeling that he is losing his sense of moral values. In the face of Police atrocity, he feels nothing but indifference. Billy intervenes to protect Romi not
free from the violent and hungry crowd but from himself, to prevent him from killing other people. He knows the risk he runs, but he is worried about the insensitivity of his friend. Moreover, with his healing touch and knowledge of herbal medicines he cures Situ, Romi’s wife, of a painful migraine. Things go beyond Romi’s control when his nagging wife compels him to divulge the secret and passes on the information to Billy’s father and Meena. They come to reclaim Billy and put tremendous pressure on Romi to reveal his whereabouts. The more Romi tries to convince them of the undesirability of the effort in view of Billy’s drastic break with civilization, the more ‘they converted the story...into a stereotype childish escapade which was all that their ordinary minds were capable of.’ (206) Romi, however, is not surprised by their incomprehensibility: “They were only the representatives of a society which, in its middleclass mediocrity, bracketed men like Billy with irresponsible falls and common criminals and considered it their duty to prevent them from seeking such meager fulfillment of their destiny as their tortured lives allowed.’ (231-32)

The entire authority of the government is brought against Billy Biswas who, by his act of rebellion, has put the civilized society to shame. Ironically, Romi becomes, much against his wishes, the paw of this authority. A terrible ‘witch-hunt’ (218) begins to retrieve Billy, and in the face of the direct encounter between Billy’s world and the instruments of the organized society. Romi feels alarmed and the search leads to the final tragedy. Billy, who spears
down a Police constable in order to wrench his freedom, is shot dead:

‘Billy,’ I Cried. ‘Billy.’

He opened his fast-glazing eyes for a moment and appeared to look at
me.

‘You bastards,’ he said hoarsely. Then he dies. (233)

This is Billy’s final verdict on the civilized world society which is not
natural but ‘bastardly’ and which has put an end to his quest. Only a handful
of ash in a mud pot is all of Billy that reaches the civilized world, and his
‘strange case’ is ‘disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society
knows of disposing of its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.’ (240)

The ‘humdrum society’ is afraid of Billy Biswas who hold up before it a
mirror on which it sees its distorted image. Billy, with his vision of a glorious
and meaningful life, could never rest in the dwindled stream of existence. So
he made the difficult and painful choice with full knowledge of its
consequences. Instead of getting lost in the labyrinth of reason and loop-holes
of compromise and contemplation, he was guided by the logic of his soul. He
knew that “nothing but blind blundering vengeance, howsoever camouflaged,
awaits all those who dare to step out of its stifling confines. It is a
confrontation whose outcome is as certain as the end of solitary boats beating
against a maelstrom.” (240) He was also ‘aware of the impossibility, in the
world that he had abandoned, of saving men from themselves’ when he
‘stepped out of the sanctuary of the great God of the primitive world’ (241) to
save the soul of his only friend in the civilization. This is exactly what makes
him a tragic hero and wins our sympathy for him.

Richard B. Sewall has defined the 'new tragic hero' thus: “The measure
of the new hero is his capacity for sensing the problem, the dynamic of his
searching it out (the risks and the suffering), and the awareness of partial
truths gained. This new tragic hero has not the satisfaction of a clear and
potent opponent-an unjust deity, a plague stricken city, ungrateful daughters,
an oppressive social or religious code, or a Moby Dick. 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, events to a great extent shape him... But to the
extent to which he senses the dilemma and its full implications, takes positive
action of somewhat sort, follows it to the end (accepting the consequences in
suffering and loss) and in so doing gains new insight into his own being and
the human condition, he still a tragic hero.” (110) Billy’s case is a tragedy in
this sense. But all is not lost. So long there are men like Billy on the earth
who, instead of overlooking the malaise, try to pin it down, take sincere stock
however painful the consequences, there is still hope for humanity. All of them
need not have the vision of Billy; only knowledge of human suffering and loss,
an honest and humble expiation as well as a determination to follow the
problem to its end, whatever the cost, can redeem man from contemporary
corruption and confusion of values.
‘The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’ is yet another variation on the paradigmatic pattern of the doomed existential quest for values in a mad, bad, absurd world. It holds forth the added attraction for the dark, mysterious forces of the universe like Bilasia the tribal girl and the moon rising out of the dark night that magnetize the protagonist and drive him to the doors of death—the last labyrinth that life holds for man in the existential vision.

Thus on the other hand we find that ‘The Strange Case of Billy Biswas’ dealt with Billy’s estrangement from a hostile and uncongenial reality that stifled his sensibility with its material concerns, lack of mystery, and cultural uprootedness. Billy was a survivor of the deluge of materialism that overtook the post-Independence, anglicized Indian society, and his survival took the form of a revolt against an individual who suffers the agony of the soul not due to his escapism or rebellion but due to his conformity to, and victimization by, a crooked and corrupt society. Indictment of materialism has already occurred in the first two novels. But it is in the third novel that this condemnation comes into importance giving the book a wider social relevance.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. The Strange Case of Mr. Billy Biswas, Oriental Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1971, P. 186.

2. Ibid. P. 178.


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1 The Strange Case of Mr. Billy Biswas, Oriental Paperbacks, New Delhi, 1971, P. 186

2 Ibid., P. 178.
3 The Hindu, September 18 1985.

6 Asia Week, 1985.