Primitivism Versus Civilization

A Study of The Strange Case of Billy Biswas
Arun Joshi’s second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is dissimilar from his earlier novel *The Foreigner*. However, in many ways it seems to be a continuation of and development upon the first novel. It continues Sindi’s quest for identity and meaning of life. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the protagonist, Billy Biswas, continues his quest for cultured society which is in primitive society and leaves New Delhi for Maikala Hills in interior Madhya Pradesh. Arun Joshi himself said in an interview:

> The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away.... In a number of Indian legends and religious texts people go away to forests to heal themselves spiritually.53

The focus in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is not on the tribals but only part of Billy Biswas’s abnormal quest for a man’s primitive self which leads him to give up the civilized life and returning to the primitive society. The hero Billy Biswas, a doctorate in Anthropology from an American university, a lecturer in Delhi university, the son of a retired Supreme Court judge and the father of two children is driven to an extreme and gets transformed into a tribal leaving aside his sophisticated civilized life. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the theme is studied by juxtaposing two sharply opposed societies with antithetical ways of life, values and culture. One of them is civilized, sophisticated and westernized upper-class society of Delhi which the protagonist Billy belongs and the other is the primitive
society of the tribal’s living in the interior hilly and forest areas of Central India, remote from centers of modern urban civilization, into which Billy disappears deliberately. Billy is dissatisfied and disillusioned with the westernized society of his birth and upbringing and its values and attitudes. He feels, lonely, isolated, and even alienated. Therefore he abandons it to join a remote tribal society in which he achieves enduring solidarity, both social and human. Phrased thus The Strange Case may seem to be all about ‘primitivism versus civilization’, with its bias in favour of the earlier.

In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, the story attention is essential for the treatment of its several inter-linked themes. It tells indeed a ‘strange’ story and may appear incredible to the readers, particularly the urbanized and educated. May be to alert such as readers and prepare them for the unusual in the novel, Joshi has inserted the word ‘strange’ in the title itself. But more is suggested by the title than is apparent on the surface. Joshi always chooses meaningful titles to his novels. Before the special significance of the title of The Strange Case is examined, it seems necessary to know its story, at least in outline, to follow what is ‘strange’ in it.

Billy Biswas, who belongs to a well-connected family, is the only child of well-to-do parents. His father was a Supreme Court Judge and at one time India’s ambassador to one of the European countries. Billy has his early education in Dehra Dun in India and England, where he acquires a distinct British accent. Later he goes to America
ostensibly to study engineering but he actually studies anthropology without the knowledge of his father. It is a choice he makes on his own. This study becomes an all-absorbing passion and an obsession for him, and his entire life centers round primitivism. On returning home to India he finds himself lonely, isolated and alienated in the fashionable and westernized society of Delhi, the society of his birth and upbringing because he is revolted by its banality, superficiality, hollowness, spiritual sterility, and its philistine attitudes and money centered values of life. He feels suffocated in this emotionally dehydrated, phoney society. Even then he struggles hard for a couple of years to adjust himself to the environment though acceptance of its false values is out of the question. Neither teaching anthropology nor marriage, which he tries earnestly, helps in getting contentment in his life. He has to live without a sense of community and communion. So with a seeming suddenness but actually after long debate within himself and deliberation he abandons the civilized world and disappears following an irresistible urge into the tribal world of the Maikala Hills in interior Madhya Pradesh, deserting once for all his aged parents, wife and son. He casts no backward glances and feels no regret. Among the tribals he finds the kind of society and human relations he has been longing for. The tribals too accept him as one among them. He marries a tribal woman and has a couple of children. He finds among the tribals a positive attitude to life, well-defined and solid, simple and profound at the same time. He finds his identity there. After much speculation about his disappearance from Delhi and
careful investigation, it is concluded by the authorities at Delhi that he is dead, probably killed by a man-eater. Ten years later, during a period of acute drought, Billy who is now completely transformed into a tribal, unexpectedly comes in contact with his friend Romesh Sahai (Romi who later narrates his story) who happens to be the district collector. Romi attempts to keep his discovery of Billy a closely guarded secret, because he wishes it, unfortunately fails miserably. Billy is literally hunted after by the state police force to capture him and bring him back to civilization. But he gets killed in an attempt to escape. Thus his strange life comes to an abrupt tragic end.

Arun Joshi’s *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents a complexity of the problems. At the primary level, it attempts to depict the mystic urge of Billy, “a man of extraordinary obsession.” At the substratum, there is another strand which offers inside into the clash which ranges between the sophisticated urban culture imported from the west and the simple and innocuous culture. Yet another strand is that of man’s “impossible wish to understand and be understood.” (SCBB 7) Hari Mohan Prasad considers the novel as "an indictment of the phony, hot-shot sordid culture and as an embodiment of ‘Purush-Prakriti’ unification, particularly in the context of Sankhya philosophy." The novel articulates, for him, almost with the intensity of Lawrence and Conrad, the human craving for the primordial. In the opinion of O.P.Mathur and G. Rai, the novel represents the “universal myth of the primitive in the heart of man ever alienating him from the
superficial and polished penalties of modern civilization.” The present chapter attempts to examine Billy Biswas’ tryst with primitive life as part of his quest and how this point of contact is viewed with suspicion and animosity by the civilized world setting off unforeseen, even explosive, consequences.

The **Strange Case of Billy Biswas**, is often described as an existential novel in certain aspects. It is concerned with the crisis of self, the problems of identity and the quest for fulfillment. In one of his interviews Joshi himself admitted that he was led to writing to explore “that mysterious underworld, which is the human soul.” He writes expressing his own understanding of the world and his own true self as he replies to M.R.Dua in an interview: “My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself.” In another interview with Purabi Benarji he admits that “I have been influenced by the existentialists like Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre and Soren Kierkegaard.” Like the existentialist writes, Joshi is mainly concerned with man’s feeling of anxiety and alienation at great length. The **Strange Case of Billy Biswas** develops the theme of anxiety and alienation more effectively than the treatment meted out in his first novel, The Foreigner. It is apt to quote K.R.S.Iyengar’s remarks here:

In The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of hapless
rootless people a stage further, and has revealed to our
gaze new gas-chambers of self-forged misery.60

Billy’s mission is deeper than Sindi’s. Billy is not uprooted in
the sense Sindi is. Billy has a family. He is not “Anchorless” in the
way Sindi is. He is born and brought up in a fairly comfortable
background. He comes “from the upper-upper crust of Indian Society.”
(SCBB 9) His family has “all claims of aristocracy.” (SCBB 11) It had
originally come from Bengal. His grandfather had been the Prime
Minister of a famous Princely State in Orissa. His father, after
completing his law studied at the Inner Temple, had practiced law at
Allahabad and Delhi. He had also been the Indian ambassador to a
European country. Billy’s father had also worked as judge of India’s
Supreme Court. Billy starts his career as a lecturer in the Delhi
University, after having completed his Ph.D in Anthropology. Yet Billy,
it so appears, has little interest in the phoney, hot-shot and sordid
modern civilization. The external attractions of the so-called civilized
set-up of society do not matter at all for him. He is much interested in
the exploration of his inner being. Romi rightly remarks: He is not in
harmony with his family members. Although he lives with them, he is
all alone, isolated and alienated, a stranger in the real sense of the
term. He writes to Tuula Lindgren:

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

Billy’s awareness of the deeper layers of his personality makes him an existentialist, being estranged and alienated from the superficial reality of life. His is the predicament of an alienated personality who never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society. His is an attempt to find out possible alternatives for the most futile cry of a man in the smart society.

Romi rightly describes Billy as “a man of extraordinary obsession” and “that extraordinary sensitivity to the world that used to be the essence of Billy.” (SCBB 51) He is “an unusual person of brilliant intellect, profound sensibility and extraordinary obsession.” In all respects he is “rare”, “extraordinary” and “distinguished”. He is “one of those rare men have poise without pose.” (SCBB 10) One is bound to notice “the strong, rather British accent of his speech”, “that soft cultivated voice”, and “the words had a cadence, a compulsive quality that engaged you in spite of yourself.” (SCBB 10) Romi has much affection for Billy, and discovers: “Billy had almost inhumanity sharp eyes.” (SCBB 32) He is almost “distracted” by “the look on his face. His expression was a mixture of nearly all those emotions that one tends to associate with a great predicament.” (SCBB 33) Billy always carries a “singular air” and has a “peculiar intensity of
concentration.” (SCBB 33) Later, Romi says: “I had neither the imagination nor the obsessive predilections Billy Biswas.” (SCBB 152) He is extraordinarily sensitive. Unlike Sindi, he listens to the voice of his soul. He chooses to live in Harlem, the black ghetto of America, being “one of the worse slums of New York City”. It is “the most human place he could find” (SCBB 9). In a search for accommodation, Romi meets Billy and offers him to share his apartment which he readily accepts. The partnership develops into an unusual friendship which lasts till the end.

Billy has a dislike for an organized life. Though born and brought up in an aristocratic family, he is filled with virulent hatred for the systematized and civilized life which aggravates his problem of identity instead of resolving it. He acquires a sudden interest in his own identity and reflects thus: “Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” (SCBB 70) An evidence of his dislike for the so-called civilized world can be traced in his active preparation for his Ph.D. in Anthropology, while his father does not know about it thinks that he is doing engineering in America. He likes to learn and “find out about the aboriginals of the world.” (SCBB 12) Romi rightly sums up his impression of Billy: “it was around his interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organized.” (SCBB 12)

Billy’s predicament becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality-split between “primitive” and “civilized”. His strange case becomes “a universal myth of the primitive in the heart of
man ever alienating him from the superficial and polished banalities of modern civilization.”

Billy finds modern civilization degenerating fast as well as meaningless. He himself describes:

What got me was, superficially, 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 didn’t really get to know the others. I don’t think I have ever met a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were as dust. Intellectually, they could be 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-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. (SCBB 128)

He finds himself misfit in a world like this and is in search of a place where he may not feel-estranged, socially isolated and culturally uprooted. That is why he chooses primitivism as an inborn propensity. That is why he chooses New York to live in Harlem, a place where the Negroes live, although he could very well afford to stay in good hotels in some other area like Manhattan. But his quest for self-realization
summons him to live in Harlem which is “the most human place he could find” (SCBB 9) where he may feel a sense of belonging in the real sense of the term.

From his early childhood, Billy's case has been “strange”. At the age of fourteen, he goes to Bhubaneswar: “The first thing that hit me about Bhubaneswar was the landscape.” (SCBB 90) He finds “something much more insubstantial” about the place. One afternoon, he visits Konark. The sculptures at Konark, it seems to him, are capable of giving him a solution to his questions about the problem of his identity. He is led to understand:

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

One night, he happens to go to the tribal people with his uncle’s chauffeur. With deep interest he watches the tribals dancing, drinking, singing and making love. Extremely sensitive as he is, he feels a strange sensation: “something similar happened to men then.” (SCBB 91) He records the impression thus:
First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me”, although, mind you, there was nothing particularly erotic about the whole business except once when a boy and a girl, their arm around each other, loitered past me giggling and tumbled into the bush beyond. The shock of erotic energy was followed by the same feeling of unreality or, as I said, a reality sharper than any I had ever known. It was a bit like having taken a dose of a hallucinatory drug, something I realized many years later when I was in Mexico. I remember saying to myself, even though I was only fourteen. I remember saying “something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of.” (SCBB 91)

Since then, Billy feels restless as Som Bhaskar does in The Last Labyrinth his fourth novel after his experience in a cave. Whenever he listens to folk music or drum-beating, he feels altogether transported to the world of the primitive which is different from that of the so-called civilized society. Like Sindi he does not feel at ease in American society: “white America, he said, was much too civilized for him.” (SCBB 9)

It is Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady with extraordinary intuition who understands the dilemma of Billy’s life. It is she who knows what is going on “in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas.” (SCBB 16) Tuula, being far away from the commercial
civilization, stands as a primitive force. She has mastered hypnotism, intuition and auto-suggestion. She has an insight to see into the life of things. Billy feels at home in her company and is fond of her. She gets advanced training in psychiatric social work at Columbia in the United States. She is “strongly interested in India, especially in her tribal people, a subject about which Billy knew enough to keep her engaged not one but a hundred nights.” (SCBB 15) She tells him about the theories of Freud, Carl Jung, Adler and Kari Menninger.

It was with Tuula Lindgren that Billy had spent all those summer evening and that she was the second person who had any clue to what went on in the dark, unscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas. (SCBB 16)

With her he comes to have his first glimpse of “the other side” that summer. He explains to Tuula: ‘The other side. You know what I mean, don’t you? Most of us are aware only of the side on which we are born, but there is always the other side, the valley beyond the hills; the hills beyond the valley.’ (SCBB 15)

Tuula informs Romi that Billy is “an exceptional person” (SCBB 18) and “feels something inside him ... a great force, urkraft, a...a primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it...But it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode any time.” (SCBB 18) She finds him “obsessed with a latent quest.” (SCBB 127) Romi also feels “a mesmeric pull” that holds the audience “by its
sheer vitality” (SCBB 17) while Billy plays on a drum. It awakens dormant primitive impulse in the audience. Consequently, a little Negro girl is drawn towards him:

Soon after Billy had finished, the little Negro girl moved over next to him. She sat very close to him so that their knees nearly touched. They stayed like that for the rest of the night. I think she had been greatly moved—sexually I mean—by the drumming. (SCBB 17)

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.” (SCBB 20) Afterwards, he comes to know from Billy how he often had hallucinations, “the same odd feeling of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other times full of strange primitive people” (SCBB 129) and that “It would be like a great blinding flash during which I would be totally unaware of anything else. And invariably it left me with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with my life. I wasn’t where I belonged.” (SCBB 130) Billy frequently discusses with Tuula who tells him “in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in everyone—all art in a way flowed out of them” but she advises him that “I should not encourage them too much.” (SCBB 130)
Out of these hallucinations he comes out “very depressed and really shaken up.” (SCBB 130) He describes his condition thus: “I was so shaken up that the first thing I wanted to do was to get back home.” (SCBB 130) He comes back to India and is appointed as Professor in Anthropology at the Delhi University. His mother introduces him to Meena, a pretty young daughter of a retired civil servant. Verily speaking, he is much upset by these hallucinations: “I had grown terribly afraid of myself, some part of me. I thought terrible things might happen unless I did something drastic. Being an Indian and having been brought up in close-knit family, the only thing I could think of was to get married. So, he marries Meena Chatterjee to avert hallucinations, and it is, as he thinks, like taking out “an insurance” on “his normalcy.” (SCBB 130) He wishes to behave like a normal man. He wants to develop a sense of harmony with the surrounding, a sense of belonging. But this he does not get to engage his soul, to satisfy his inner urge. Meena is “quite usually pretty in a westernized sort of way”, “never short of words” and talks “almost entirely in English in that unique, rather flat, accent that is to be found among your ladies taught in convents,” (SCBB 28) which Billy badly needs. Though she is a pretty and cultured girl, Billy never gets solace from her company. What he comes to receive from Meena and her kith and kin is disillusionment and “depression.” Billy himself records it thus:
And the first thing I hear on entering Meena’s house is some ten-year-old American pop record braying like an ass fit to burst, and two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wiggling their lips as if that was the greatest music in the world. That certainly was not the India that I had come back for. (SCBB 44)

Billy “feels” and gets annoyed at the core of his heart. Once in a picnic party arranged by Meena, he almost goes mad when he hears one of the boys passing remarks that “all banjaras were thieves and their women no better than whores.” (SCBB 45)

As a matter of fact, Billy fits into the world of tribals. He is almost a stranger to the civilized world. Romi gets an opportunity of observing the strangeness of Billy when he finds him defending before his father about the child-sacrifice by a clerk “to propitiate the Goddess Kali in order that the clerk’s young son, suffering from leukemia, should get well.”(SCBB 32) Very strongly he remarks: “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 volumes. Look up the court records of any of the tribal agencies, and you will know what I mean.” (SCBB 40) In great earnestness, he tells his father: “It is only after it happens to oneself that one comes to believe” (SCBB 40). He even asserts that “there are words at the periphery of this one, above it and
below it, and around it, of which we know nothing until we are in them.” (SCBB 40)

He feels terribly sick of the so-called upper-class “Shallow” (SCBB 128) city societies of Delhi. He tells Romi:

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. (SCBB 128)

In one of his letters, he writes to Tuula:

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.” (SCBB 69)

He develops a hatred for the so-called civilized people:

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 kernel of dogs yawning (their large teeth showing) or snuggling against each other holding whisky glasses in their furred paws.” (SCBB 69)
The imagery of dogs with large teeth and furred paws shows Billy's utter dislike for the elite class and its character. To him, modern civilization seems to be telling upon the health and hygiene of the contemporary man. Billy is seen reflecting:

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, through light, as they say, on complication caused by this making and spending of money. (SCBB 69)

Billy, like Wordsworth, expresses a deep sense of sorrow at the people's sheer money-mindedness and thereby degradation of their soul:

The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers; Little we see in Nature that is ours; We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon.63

He loves and admires Tuula who treats "money for what it was: a whole lot of papers" (SCBB 127) and hates the world that hangs "on this peg of money." (SCBB 70) He is like Mathew Arnold's Scholar Gipsy. He is happy living with the primitive people who live closer to the ways of nature. His wife Meena says, "Why he is always annoyed
with me, I can’t understand why he is so unhappy.” (SCBB 56) She reflects thus: “God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day.” (SCBB 54) She complains that Billy has turned out a changed man. He is no more the man she had married. Romi, too, notices the change in Billy and says: “I had never felt so strange with Billy Biswas” (SCBB 51) that “He seemed duller than most dull men that I usually, met.” (SCBB 51) Romi further remarks:

> 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 humor. He had either turned banal, something that I had seen happen often enough, or, unknown to us, he was turned upon some obscure segment of himself, ferreting out a bitter secret, settling an old score. Whatever it might have been, the Billy Biswas I had known was finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain. (SCBB 51)

His sensibility gets almost blunted. His married life turns into a miserable failure. He tells Romi: “my own married life so quickly went to pot” (SCBB 129). It is “ill-conceived”, “ill-fated like a ship that gets smashed up in a gale.” (SCBB 133) He confides to Romi that the marriage:
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 not have. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society—all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more I tried to tell her what was corroding me, bringing me to the edge of despair so to speak, the more resentful she became. (SCBB 133)

All this result into Billy’s turning an introvert. He forsakes his responsibilities towards his family, his wife and his son. He cares only for his responsibilities towards his soul: “I had greater responsibilities towards my soul.” (SCBB 133) In the words of H.M.Prasad, “He (Billy) is a pilgrim of the spiritual world.” He is self-centered. His tortured soul terribly needs application of some balm by someone who can share his suffering. With a view to getting the right kind of solace that his injured soul needs, he meets Rima Kaul, who has been loving him passionately since the day she met him. His trips to Bombay take him closer to her. She, he is sure, has much of that “rare degree of empathy” and “sufficient idea of human suffering” which Meena lacks. Billy himself remarks:

I came to like it even more than I liked the sex part. I felt happy not when I took her but when he said, “Oh, how misunderstand you are, my poor boy. I know how you feel. Those who harass you should be put to death
straightway”. It was this that I was really looking for.

(SCBB 135)

But here Billy is mistaken. His passions lead him astray and his romance with Rima Kaul is degraded into seduction. One afternoon he takes her to Johu, hires a room in a third-rate hotel and “like any common rogue,” (SCBB 135) seduces her. But very soon he understands that his relationship with Rima is nothing but his degradation. He remarks: “After it [seduction] was over I locked into her clear trusting eyes, and I had a first glimpse of my degradation.” (SCBB 135) Unfortunately, he fails to find a way out of it. He does not have “the guts to break away from his filth.” (SCBB 135) He points out:

The worst of it was that in spite of this knowledge of my degeneration, I continued to behave as before, I continued to whine and lie and sham, I found that I could not stop. I met her three or four times after that. Each time I would determine to be honest-with her, with myself-and each time I would start to play the part as soon as I got the chance. You have no idea how ridiculous and fraudulent it became. I offered to divorce Meena and marry her even though Rima herself never even hinted at such a thing. I agreed to start living with her as soon as possible. And all the time I knew that I intended no such thing. (SCBB 135)
Thus, Billy reaches the climax of hypocrisy in his way of working. He develops deep into corruption, and affirms: “It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied for so long that other thing that it had been clamoring for.” (SCBB 135) He now rests assured that no woman of this “phoney society” can satisfy his soul. Frequent hallucinations and visions of woman still hunt him. He once writes to Tuula:

A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for rich man’s house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Benares. And once I saw her, her face with sulphur on a siding in one of our eastern ports. Yes, this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand. (SCBB 162)

This time, it is not a hunger for sensual satisfaction, “It is a quest for self-realization, for a union with the missing part of his soul.” Sitting outside his tent on a particular “fateful night” (SCBB 136) he hears “two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay” (SCBB
136), knowing that “the price of making such choices is terrible” and that “the price of not making them is even more terrible.” (SCBB 136) Almost always “an enigmatic impression of Billy’s life” (24), as Romi rightly remarks, is noticeable. As Arvind M. Niwale notices:

There is a conflict between his present identity in the civilized world and his soul’s longing for ‘Return to Nature’. All the phenomena of nature – flora and fauna – seem to be waiting for him and calling him to join them. 66

He is in search of surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. He listens to the calls of the hills, the streams, the trees; the forests and the tribal people. They seem to be calling him:

They all schemed to be waiting and watching and starting at me. It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and father of a handsome child: it was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth’s first night – “Come”, it said, “Come to our primitive world that would sooner or later overcome the works of man.” Come, we have waited for you-“Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? –This is all there is on earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. 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.” (SCBB 88)

Billy is so much fed up with the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, hollowness and hypocrisy and feels so much drawn towards the primitive in life that he leaves his wife, his only child and his old parents. Once he gets an opportunity to take his students on an anthropological expedition to the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh and gets so much fascinated by the intense beauty of the hills and their inhabitants, particularly women with graceful figures and bright eyes that he disappears into the “saal” forests of the Maikala Hills. With the Bhils and their leader Dhunia, he eats, drinks and waits for the rising of the moon and “he could for the first time see clearly the change entering him. While he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back.” (SCBB 99) An enormous search is launched by the police to find Billy out. When they fail to find him out, it is presumed that he has been killed by a tiger prowling in the area.

Romi is posted as Collector in a district of Central India (Madhya Pradesh). Once on a tour of the Maikala Hills and “the plains of Central India-ravaged by a terrible drought”, he suddenly sees Billy wearing “a lion cloth and nothing else.” (SCBB 75) He takes him to his bungalow and spends the whole day and night in his company
listening to the story about his life after disappearance. He comes to know about the so-called civilized society that has wrought havoc upon his hypersensitive mind. Billy is thoroughly tribalized. He wears a lion-cloth and looks like a primitive man with his long beard. He is lead to the tribal uninhibited drinking, dancing and the open orgiastic love-making. The reason why Billy chooses living with the tribals is that “nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, and rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, and singing. And we talk – a lot about women and sex.” (SCBB 83) He is also driven to the forests with a sudden interest in his own identity. Money has no place in the life of tribals as they have conquered wants. Even if they suffer from a severe drought, they do not forget singing, dancing and love-making. Billy tells Romi that they live at the subsistence level:

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

With a skillful weight of the details, Joshi manages to explore the protagonist’s psychological instincts. Billy’s “enigmatic” behavior can be understood in terms of certain psychological and
anthropological facts at work with reference to Jung’s theory of the collective unconscious. In addition to the immediate consciousness, which is thoroughly personal in nature and which we believe to be only an empirical psyche, there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give a definite form to certain psychic contents. “But if we consider the tremendous powers that lie hidden in the mythological and religious spheres in man the etiological significance of the archetype appears less fantastic”. He only expresses something which millions of the people before him have believed. The phantom that Billy once saw and has described to Tuula is vividly objectified and visualized in Bilasia, the tribal girl with beauty and dignity.67

Bilasia, Billy understands, is the right woman to satisfy his soul. Meena deadens his sense, Rima corrupts him and the material civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who causes explosion of sense—the proper medium to reach soul. Billy renounces the civilized world and its symbols in Meena and Rima. From Meena to Rima and from Rima to Bilasia is not a mere trifling in Billy’s life, it is a development from sex to sympathy and from sympathy to sublimation. H.M. Prasad opines:
In Bilasia the physical and the element meet. She is both Laurentian and Blkeam. Bilasia, to use Jungean concepts, is his missing self. Arun Joshi’s protagonists are Pirandello cluster of identities in search of wholeness. In terms of psycho-analysis, Billy and Bilasia are two selves of the same personality.68

His first look at her in Dhunia’s hut is captivating. The oil lamp there is “lending voluptuousness to her full figure until the whole hut seemed to be full of her and only of her.” (SCBB 85) Her presence transforms him altogether:

It was I who had changed. Or, rather, quite suddenly and unaccountably I had ceased to resist what was the real in me. All that I had been confusingly driving towards all my life had been crystallized, brought into focus, so to speak, by what I had gone through during the interval between this visit and the time I had first met Bilasia. (SCBB 85)

In his search for Billy, Romi proceeds to meet Bilasia as it is obvious to him that “the only hope of resolving the crisis lay through her.” To him, she looks “not merely a human being but also the embodiment of that primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these hills, perhaps this each, since time began.” (SCBB 161)

Billy undergoes “his final metamorphosis” (SCBB 102), realizing that until now he has been “squandering the priceless treasure of his
life on that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization.” (SCBB 102) To him, Bilasia has “that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people.” (SCBB 103) Joshi describes the beauty of Bilasia with an unforgettable lyrical fervor fusing myth and nature. Bilasia’s sensuality lures Billy. She is exceedingly attractive sexually:

Her hair was loose. Just behind her left ear there was a red flower. The necklace of beads glowed a little in the darkness. Her enormous eyes, only a little foggier with drink, poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them. Come, come, come, she called, and Billy Biswas, son of a Supreme Court Justice, went. The top of her Lugra came down. Her breasts, when he touched them, were full. (SCBB 102)

His union with Bilasia is not only a union of the two separate bodies as in the case of Meena Biswas, or a union of flesh as in the case of Rima Kaul, but is a union of a split self to realize the whole.

Bilsia, he feels, is the essence of the primeval force: “Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year.” (SCBB 103) Now, his love for primitivism becomes a realization. “Something grave and decisive happened during those thirty-six hours.” (SCBB 104) He relates to Romi the story of his complete metamorphosis: “I arrived at the fork in
my life that, without being conscious of it, I had waited for all my life. I took the turning that was as irrevocable as it was awesome. Why all this happened to me I do not know, and even if I knew, I could not put it into words.” (SCBB 104)

Now Billy knows what he has been really wanting and what he has practically realizes. He knows that he is “the primitive pilgrim” and it is primitivism that will lead him to his spiritual awareness, his realization of the soul, his existentialist quest for meaning and values in life, as it is clear from the following dialogue between Billy Biswas and Romi Sahai:

“That Other Thing was, and is, after all, what my life is all about”.

‘you mean your desire to become a primitive’?

He hesitated.

‘I don’t want to sound too pompous, old chap. Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. Of course I realized it only after I ran away. I realized then that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else’.

‘What is that’?

He seemed to be thinking.

‘God’? I prompted.

‘There,there, old chap, that is too big a word’.

‘Something like that’?

‘Yes, something like that’ (SCBB 135-136)
This search for meaning is the doomed existentialist’s search that ultimately drives the protagonist to the doors of death, the final tragedy.

Like the ‘sadhas’ of ‘Tantra’, Billy hankers after self-realization, the experience of identification with the divine. He gets a spiritual pleasure out of his ‘sadhana’ and therefore, cannot think of going back to “the bourgeois filth”\(^{70}\) of the materialistic civilization.

According to the ‘Sankhya’ system of Indian Philosophy, evolution takes place when “Purush” and “Prakriti” come into contact. Bilasia is “Prakriti” and Billy is ‘Purush’. ‘Prakriti’ needs ‘Purush’ in order to enjoy and also to obtain liberation (‘apavarga’). ‘Prakriti’ is called ‘Shakti’. Bilasia is ‘Shakti’. Bilasia is ‘Shakti’ for Billy as Anuradha is for Som Bhaskar in The Last Labyrinth. Only when Billy meets Bilasia and unifies himself with her, he realizes his self and becomes whole.

Meenakshi Mukherjee rightly remarks: “Renunciation has always been an Indian ideal of life.”\(^{71}\) The story of Billy resembles the life of prince Siddhartha, who, afterwards, became famous with the name of Gautam Buddha. Like Siddartha, Billy is born and brought up in a royal family. His mother mentions an incident from Billy’s boyhood of having “run away from home” (SCBB 38) at the age of fourteen. He gets “stranger and stranger with every passing day.”(SCBB 54) Like Siddartha, he sees that the life in the world is
continuous suffering. Likewise, he makes a final renunciation of his wife and son in pursuit of spiritual perfection from darkness to light with a view to rising up as the Buddha, the Enlightened One. If one gets rid of avidya (ignorance), one will get ‘bodhi’ (enlightment).

Billy’s withdrawal from the world is like a reflex-action. He withdraws in order to preserve himself from “those rapacious representatives of civilization.” (SCBB 103) As jasbir Jain remarks “Long before his physical disappearance into the saal forest of the Maikala Hills, he had ceased to belong to the world.”72 His is not an escape from reality but an escape into reality on the lines of Prince Siddartha. It is an onward movement from darkness to light. He gets self-realization when he meets the tribal girl Bilasia. “He feels that he has suddenly discovered a bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others.” (SCBB 102-103) As Joy Abraham quotes:

It is interesting to note that the union of Billy and Bilasia can be taken as the human soul’s longing for reunion with the divine as symbolized by Krishna, the union of “Jeevatama” with “Paramatama”. Billy, like Sindi, is in search of a world of meaningful relatedness which he can find neither in white America nor in the upper-class Indian society. That was the beginning of his quest to understand himself and the nature of reality, something
beyond oneself. Becoming a primitive is the first step, a means to an end and in the second stage he is still seeking something 'else'.....this again is not an escape from order and form into reckless freedom, for, interestingly enough, in this second phase as tribal we see order and from a different kind.73

Billy renounces the world, practicing the “discipline of deliverance”. Meena is already aware of “Billy’s dark mood” (SCBB 52) and sense, the resignation ('Anasakti') in his voice. Billy becomes, as he himself thinks, “some sort of a priest.” (SCBB 137) He comes to experience some sort of godhood. He is a kind of man god, an “avatara” to the tribals and faith of this kind is in nature with the Indian tradition: “The East is trying to see God in man (hence the avataras or incarnations) while in the West the difference and distance between God and man is unbridgeable.”74 He comes to have certain spiritual magical powers. Dhunia takes him to be the mythical sculptor king who comes alive with his queen Devi Mata and a priest who looks after them. Dhunia tells Romi: “He [Billy] 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.” (SCBB 115) His return signifies the end of their miseries as Chandtola, the white-faced cliff of the village has come to life again and has begun to glow when Billy goes there with Bilasia as predicted by Devi Mata. He is a man having great healing powers as the manifestation of ‘Kala Pahar’s will.
Dhunia sees him sending a tiger away who had been roaming the jungle for a week killing their cattle and bringing back his grandson to life who “had been dead for two hours.” (SCBB 114) Billy cures Romi’s wife Situ of her agonizing chronic migraine by giving her some herb to smell and touching her with a metallic rod. This incident costs Billy his life and gives the story a tragic turn. Billy warns Romi not to disclose his whereabouts to anybody but Situ comes to know the whole of the story and lets Meena and Mr. Biswas know about Billy’s being alive.

Much against the wishes of Romi, Mr. Biswas, a retired ambassador, sets the whole government machinery moving to trace Billy with an idea to drag him up to Delhi by force. Mr. Rele, the Superintendent of police, zealously carries out the search. During one of the raids on the tribal, a constable is speared to death by Billy. This irritates Mr. Rele, who is bent upon nabbing the culprit dead or alive. Despite the Collector Romi’s best efforts to avoid the tragedy, Billy is shot dead by a ‘Havildar’. Romi is deeply grieved at Billy’s “end so unbearably tragic” (SCBB 173) and he reflects, “Gradually it dawned upon us that what we had killed was not a man, not even the son of a ‘Governor’, but some one for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we had killed one of the numerous mangods of the primitive pantheon,” (SCBB 169) Thus ends the existentialist quest of Billy for values and meaning of life in the mad, bad, absurd world where none tries to understand his problem even
after his death. Meena, Mr. Biswas, the Chief Secretary, Rele along with his men, Situ and others are only the representatives of a society which, in its middle-class mediocrity, bracketed men like Billy with irresponsible fools and common criminals and considered it their duty to prevent them from seeking such meager fulfillment of their destiny as their tortured lives allowed. None of these persons could understand that Billy was making a “search for truth.” (SCBB 127)

The protagonist ultimately, has to pay price with his life for not conforming to the so-called civilized society and for daring “to step out of its stiffing confines” (SCBB 172) and “The Strange Case of Billy Biswas had at last been disposed of. It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.”(SCBB 172)

Billy’s death “should not be taken as the death of as isolation but as the triumph of his ideals and principles.”75 The civilized world is all out to destroy him. Even Romi, his trusted friend and the only link from civilization that Billy keeps, ultimately betrays him. He betrays the confidence reposed in him and fails to protect Billy as things get beyond his control when his wife Situ discloses the secret to Billy’s father and wife. On the other hand, the tribal world seeks to perpetuate the memory of the man-god by offering him shrine. Billy’s dying words “You bastards” (SCBB 167), watching his close friend Romi approaching him, are significant and meaningful. According to C.N.Srinath:
It is at the same time a direct abuse, an expression of anger at the betrayal of friendship and meaningless assault of the civilized world on his creative privacy.\textsuperscript{76}

As Billy uses the expression thrice in the novel, it is his finally confirmed verdict on civilization which is not but bastardly. In \textit{The Foreigner}, it is Sindi who infringes the society and in \textit{The Strange Case of Billy Biswas} it is the society that is responsible for the tragedy of Billy.

In the title of the novel, the words “Strange” and “Case” have thematic significance. Billy’s case “Strange” because in the materialistic world where everybody is mad after civilization and its comforts, he being Professor of Anthropology at the Delhi University, the America-educated anthropologist and a member of the sophisticated class of Delhi, opts for the primitive life of the tribal. His “case” is an interesting psychological case-study for psychoanalysts and psychiatrists. His predicament is psychologically concerned with the inner psyche and “those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul” (SCBB 8). Unlike Sindi in \textit{The Foreigner} who is assisted by others in his quest, Billy’s experiences are mainly psychic and he remains all along a lonely quester.

To Meenakshi Mukherjee, \textit{The Strange Case of Billy Biswas} is “a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth and folklore to reiterate its elements concerns.”\textsuperscript{77} As per the oral tradition of
story-telling, the novel is a great success as the narrator and the audience both share a common mythology. It is interesting to note that the union of Billy and Bilasia is taken as the union of “Jeevatma” and “Paramatama”, the union of “Purush” and “Prakriti”. The novel fits into the scheme of Indian classics which are nothing but the collective unconscious of the whole nation. P. Lal rightly remarks: “Without an absorption in the myths of the lands of one’s fore-fathers, it isn’t even possible to live a meaningful life.”

In using myth as a structural pattern, there is a mythical situation underlying the entire texture of the novel. All myths are used with a view to bringing out Billy’s experience on the pattern of the ‘Rishis’ and ‘Mahatmas’ of the rich Indian heritage as Joshi himself admits that “the influence of our religious thinkers is, of course, there” in the novel which is “primarily concerned with religious issues—the problems of an essentially Hindu mind.”

The two stories, the story of the narrator Romi and the story of Billy Biswas, run concurrently in the novel forming an interesting structure of parallelism and contrast. Both the stories are linked together as most of the events in the life of the protagonist have a direct bearing on that of the narrator whose main purpose is “to relate Billy’s story” and to highlight his character. Thus, both the stories add glow and glory to the figure of the protagonists in the novel and the view that he is only a shadowy figure without any significant place in the structure of the novel, decidedly, far from the truth. He does
have a place as significant and important as that of the narrator Romi and, at times, more dominating in the sequence of events in the novel. B.G.R.Krishnamma rightly says that the novel is “dominated by the complex, dynamic personality of Billy Biswas.”

In short, Arun Joshi in this novel offers a dramatic presentation of the complex character of Billy who in the first part of the novel finds himself rootless and alienated from individuals, society and civilization as such. There is every possibility of his breaking down. In the later part, he takes refuge in the world of tribals only when there is no option left. It is in the tribal world that he finds his identity, his roots. There he feels “established”. When certain external forces try to uproot him from there, he prefers dying to succumbing to their “black and deep desires”. The so-called civilized world destroys him by all means, the tribal world “guarded him as his own” (SCBB 173) until his reappearance from “the sanctuary of the great god of the primitive world.” (SCBB 172-173) Thus, the novel stands as a bitter commentary on the tyranny of the forces of phoney civilization that crushes man’s desire for self-existence and kinship with nature. To sum up with Manohar Bandopadhayay:

There are however few examples in the realm of Indian fiction where such themes have been powerfully exploited and given sustained treatment to match its world counterpart, when a new ground was broken by Arun Joshi in 1971 with his second, and so far the best novel,
The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, a censorious war had sparked off damning the author for display of escapism and defeats alienation. Of course, the critics could not disagree for its gripping tale, absorbing study of tribal life and the moving story of male-female union in the ‘final embodiment of the human spirit’. And quite recently there has been a positive renewal in Indo-English fiction. In this novel Joshi picked up the theme of the maladjusted hero and rather added a new dimension to his work in portraying his hero’s struggle not merely for his quest of identity but also for his uncompromising search of “self-spiritual reality”.

However, Billy’s case is a tragedy but all is not lost. As long as men are like Billy on this earth who, instead of overlooking the malaise, try to pin down, make sincere attempts to resolve them and are prepared to make a decisive choice, however painful the consequences, may be, there is still hope for humanity. All of them may not have the vision of Billy. Only knowledge of human suffering and loss, an honest and humble penitence as well as determination to follow the problem to its logical end at any cost, can redeem man from contemporary corruption and confusion of values.