



Strange Elements in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: A Review

Rekha Nair

Assistant. Professor

Vivekananda College, Puttur, DK

rekhanair.nair16@gmail.com

Abstract

A text for intensified intellectual thought, Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* has many times been reviewed, but never forgotten to be re-reviewed and get imprinted in the very thoughts of true literary lovers. Published in 1971, Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is worth your time, soul and conscious. Having re-read it for the fifth time and feeling Billy, feeling for Billy very often, without further reading, let me confess, Billy is one of the rarest characters created ever by a novelist. Few in-completions in the novel, yes, but the character of the protagonist, Billy is more or less complete. Created then, it has all the quintessential characteristics of the modern century's most discussed, thought about subjects. Racism, Romance, Humour, Friendship, Politics, all in one plus, one of the few characters you would read who does justice to himself, who listens to the cries of his soul, forgoing his family, his social network, realising what actually he wanted to do, where exactly he belongs to. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the immortality of man's desire to be known and identified in a place where he exactly belongs to, irrespective of the class he belongs to. This paper examines the different elements of strangeness in Billy Biswas which could be a mere reflection of an extra ordinary man's moral realisations and justifications, which may not be exclusively termed 'Strangeness.'

Key words: quintessential characteristics, realizations, modern, racism

Billy Biswas, the US based (Harlem, for reasons he explains) Anthropologist returns to his homeland in Central India having sensed his intuitions without letting anyone to intrude, without expecting anybody to understand him. Young and rich, he chooses to live a tribal life in the Saal forests, leaving behind his family, creating an impression of being killed by a Tiger. All he chased throughout was the meaning of things which he sees through, hear through, clear and well-defined. There could be a question on his sense of moral responsibilities towards his wife and son, but as he himself explains to Romi, his friend, on questioning on his responsibilities towards his wife and child:

'But don't you think you had responsibilities towards her, towards your son?'

'I have greater responsibilities towards my soul!' (Joshi, 2008.)

The way he looked at the Whites of America, his own super rich Father who's a Supreme Court judge, his wife Meena who's after money, what friendship actually meant to him, his views on Justice and Politics are specimens of what we see around. Being one among the aristocratic, rich class of Delhi, his mind and soul always was with the ordinary, uncivilised tribals of central India. He dreamt different, thought different, dressed different, spoke and smiled different, acted different and hence became 'Strange.' The way Joshi explains

Billy's eyes and his grin, his typical British accent, his child like behaviour...anybody would fall for him. 'Hello old chap,' the way he greeted Romi remains at the tip of the reader's tongue and later gets deposited into their minds as a fixed one.

The second half of the novel is sensational as the novelist explains the commotions surrounding Billy's disappearance, how he reacts to the call from within, from Nature. His obsession with the primitive world is very obvious when he falls victim to all those strange hallucinations. Sitting on the rock of Saal forests, he had that vision, every element in nature kept calling him, his very belonging kept calling him:

"Come, come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come, we have waited for you." (Joshi, 2008.)

"Come, come...Why do you want to go back? This is all there's on earth. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been. Take us until you have had your fill. It's we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night." (Joshi, 2008.)

Hair raising illustration of the Tribal woman, Bilasia who becomes Billy's wife later in this life, as she was in the previous, a lot of beliefs around superstitions, how Billy happens to meet Romi, the collector, in the collector's bungalow, ten years after his disappearance, his justifications and explanations for his actions, the metamorphosis the Doctor Anthropologist undergoes, are wonderful illustrations to be remembered forever.

New definitions to the word friendship are sought towards the concluding chapters. Even after Billy asks Romi not to reveal about his presence to anybody including his very family, circumstances pull Romi to act otherwise and as Billy warned, what havoc it created with his life there! Billy's father, with all his political influence tries to find Billy out through his civil servant friend, Romi, and Romi resists and hesitates. Soon things go beyond his control and the search for Billy Biswas turns into a man-hunt. Romi's cold blooded attitude towards Mr.

Biswas and Meena Biswas when they reach his quarters after collecting information about Billy's existence from Situ, Romi's wife, doesn't justify his character. Nor does his rude approach to the Superintendent of Police, Rele, who assumes superiority over the Collector touch an emotional reader, rather the reader keeps asking for a true friend's dutiful attitude. But yes, the frustrated call Romi gives out to save the life of his dear friend, standing on top of the hill echoes in our minds.

Bilasia's questions to Romi and his answer less face haunts a true reader. The terrified face of Billy's younger son and the intelligent, the shrewd face of Billy's elder son with a hint that he would become like his father is a positive note before the novel ends. As Billy mutters 'You Bastards!' whatever pathos is left in the readers' mind reaches its heights. A thought over, wasn't that for the entire bureaucracy? That spear with which Billy stabbed himself, goes deep into our blood, into our flesh. As Billy meets with the inevitable end, the emotional heart of the reader too floods up. The words of Dhunia are what's left over to pacify our emotions:

"He's like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since our last kings passed away." (Joshi, 2008.)

Thus, a character completes in almost all the senses, the reader would often wonder about another possible end to the novel. Perhaps, that end could satisfy the soul of an ordinary reader, not the elite. Billy with his strangeness has become a part of a reader's sensible thought. Still, a thought persists in the analytical corner of our mind, was Billy really extra-ordinary to be labelled as 'Strange?' Don't you see him in you and me? Were his humanistic, friendly attitude ever valued by the contemporary class? A lot of questions to be tossed over...yet, Joshi has left deeper roots in his single character, Billy Biswas. Are you going to accept the call of your soul? Hope he becomes a member of your intellectual library. Humanity is calling you!

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