

# **Born Again in the Saal Forests: A Reading of Arun Joshi's**

## ***The Strange Case of Billy Biswas***

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Regarding 'Born again', Nicodemus, the Jewish leader in the Bible has a pertinent question; he puts his question across Jesus Christ, the Master-teacher. Jesus explains to him, "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again" (St.John 3:3). Christian faith largely depends upon this fundamental statement of Jesus Christ. What Christ means of this is that one has to confess all the sins that that person has committed and should be pure in mind as a new-born baby. The underlying idea is that when one feels truly penitent, that person is absolved of his / her sins and is instantly freed of his / her weighing guilt. Elsewhere in the Bible, it is mentioned that we are all born sinners. God alone is sinless. However a sinful man can redeem himself from his sins by expiation. In other words, if a truly penitent sinner confesses his / her sins to the mighty powers above and truly feels sad for all his / her misdeeds and misgivings, the lovable God in heaven will forgive and accept that person as His own child. This is Christian theology. Billy Biswas in Joshi's novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is not a saint. He is an ordinary man and goes on committing sins after sins, but a day comes when he feels sad for all his sins and disappears into the Saal Forests of the Maikala Hills. He does so because the forest with the primitive people in it with plenty of flora and fauna can keep him out of the sinful track and also the mighty spirit of Nature can heal him of his ills in both his psyche and physic. The experience that he undergoes in the jungle is nothing short of a spiritual regeneration akin to the Christian born again experience. Instead of going into a church and standing before a priest and confessing his sins one by one, the penitent Billy Biswas goes into the Maikala Hills and stands before Nature Incarnate and truly feels sad and gets himself absolved of all his sins and lives a quiet life in perfect harmony with nature.

Joshi's second novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) appears to be a sequel to his first novel, The Foreigner. The protagonist of the novel, Billy Biswas, does not find any

meaning in his life either in America or in the upper-class Indian society. Wherever he lives, whether in Harlem in New York or in India, he feels culturally isolated and leads a lonely life. He thinks he is wasting his time by living in a civilized country where people are busy in making and spending money. He becomes a split personality drawn between the “primitive” and the “civilized”. However, he comes back to Delhi and marries the daughter of a rich industrialist and begets a son. But, suddenly overcome by a compulsive “primitive force”, he runs away to the wilderness. He goes in quest of a surrounding that is in harmony with his soul. He feels that his soul responds to the voices of the forest, hills and the tribal people. They all seem to be calling him to their primitive world. Among the tribals, he feels released reaching the divine heights. He falls in love with a tribal girl, Bilasia, and the tribals believe that he is an incarnation of their God. In the novel, Joshi believes that real peace, pleasure and perfection can be obtained only in the company of men and women who live in a primitive atmosphere and not in the modern sophisticated urban setting.

The novel presents the protagonist’s restlessness and anxieties. The atmosphere in which the protagonist, Billy Biswas, finds himself is loaded with the same sense of failure and frustration as in The Foreigner. Billy pursues “the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end . . .” (8). He is totally dissatisfied with what he finds both in India and America. To him, “India is a land full of uncertainties” (27) and “White America . . . was much too civilized” (9). The novel presents the theme of man’s restlessness in modern materialistic life and his futile attempt to escape it. As O.P. Mathur observes: The novel is “concerned with the crisis of contemporary civilization in the upper-class Indian society in particular and the modern world of industry and commerce in general” (139). Billy hates the artificial and the frightening surrounding both in America and India. They are totally unsuited to his temperament and “soul,” which as observed by Lokesh Kumar, “is aching to come out” (48). On reaching India, Billy finds no difference between the social atmosphere of India and America. It seems merely a change of theatres, the show being the same. For instance, Simla, the tourist centre in North India, is a pleasant place to many. But to Billy, Nature there is in her tooth and claw. He hears the thunder ever rolling, storms breaking out as often as possible and snow covering the mountains all the time. Billy seems to dislike both the climate and seasonal changes in India and the people who show their love for them.

In India, Billy’s inner self, which craves for a simple society untouched by any kind of make-up from outside, gets no satisfaction. He finds the upper crust of Indian society to which he belongs is devoid of spirituality and humanitarian concerns. People have started to

emulate the norms of the Western society. He calls the Westernized Indians “children of kings condemned to exile” (143). Billy’s mind suddenly turns to the primitive side of life and he begins to feel within him “a great force, *unkraft* . . . a primitive force” (23). As R.K. Dhawan writes:

All of a sudden, Billy is seized by a phantom which makes him anxious to leave the so-called civilized world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. On one of his anthropological excursions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh, Billy mysteriously vanishes. His love for the primitive life makes him leave his wife, his only child and his aged parents. Ignoring family responsibility, filial expectations and societal obligations, . . . (“The Fictional World” 32)

Billy Biswas, knows no pretensions. “He was one of those rare men who have poise without pose” (11). He favours a simple life without ostentations – “a life which has no cravings for money or ambition” (Saleem 65). But, unfortunately, he is growing up in a degenerate society which is bent upon destroying all his innate and inborn virtues. The life he yearns to lead is the primitive innocent life of his Swedish girl friend, Tuula Lindgren, and Bilasia, his tribal wife. Bilasia lives in Maikala Hills, a world beyond corruption and topsyturvy values. As Harish Raizada remarks, the novel shows “the impingement of the civilized on the primitive World” (83). Billy opts for the tribal world of innocence which as D.R. Sharma says “operates in a simpler and clearer manner” (“The Fictional World” 3). The desire to be away from the madding crowds enhances his sense of alienation and dispossession and he runs away into the woods. The members of his family and the whole mechanism of the government are “brought against Billy Biswas, who, by his act of rebellion, has put the civilized society to shame” (Ghosh 87). In the encounter that follows, Billy is shot dead by a *Havildar*, one of the members of the “bastardly” (The Strange Case 233) civilized society which can never find in it an “equivalent” (236) of Billy Biswas who is “like rain on parched land, like balm on a wound” (236).

The protagonist fails in all the choices he makes because the society where he lives is a “phoney society” (185). He is sent to America by his father to get an engineering degree. But he exercises his freedom of choice and switches over to the study of Anthropology. After getting a Ph.D. degree in it, he chooses to be a committed explorer in his field of study. He makes it clear to his room-mate Romi: “All that I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out the aboriginals of the world” (14). Then he

chooses to be a teacher at the Department of Anthropology of Delhi University. It is here that he becomes restless and mixes very freely with the tribals and begins to explore their lives. He chooses to marry Meena but continues to have an adulterous affair with Rima. With the passage of time “the misunderstandings between the husband and the wife gets the form of the crisis of character” (Shankar Kumar 100). The broken relationship gives Billy a chance to escape into the tribal shelter.

Billy is “strange” and a “case”; the two key words of the title have “thematic significance” (Pandey 7). He is “strange” because though born in a materialistic world, he opts for the primitive life of the tribals. His ‘case’ is an “interesting psychological study” (87). Billy’s search for meaning . . . is conducted in “a very hostile atmosphere and he has to pay a heavy price for it” (R.S. Pathak “Human Predicament” 119).

It may be remembered that Joshi for a brief period in 1957 worked in a mental hospital in the United States where his uncle was a psychiatrist dealing with chronic schizophrenics. One is left to guess that the strange cases he had seen there might have helped him create characters who suffer because of a schism in their souls. Joshi’s belief is: “Life’s meaning lies not in the glossy surface of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever” (The Strange Case 8). His interviewer Sujatha Mathai has said that Joshi “sees, lives as labyrinths – hopeless mazes . . . (“I Am A Stranger” 142).

Billy is also a victim of parental alienation. He belongs to an aristocratic family. His grandfather had one time been the Prime Minister of a famous princely State in Orissa. His father, “after completing his law studied at Inner Temple, had mostly practised law at Allahabad and Delhi” (12-13). When Babu was in America “he was a judge of India’s Supreme Court” (13). Against the wishes of his father who wants to make him an engineer Billy studies Anthropology in America as he wants to learn and “find out the aboriginals of the world” (14). Billy’s predicament becomes a strange case as he turns to be a split personality – split between the “primitive” and the “civilized”. As advised by his mother, he marries and tries to avert his hallucinations and behave like a normal man. But his wife, Meena, fails to engage his soul and satisfy his inner urges. He feels terribly sick of the so-called upper-class shallow city societies of Delhi and runs away into the Maikala Hills and gets himself thoroughly tribalized. He lives with Bilasia, a tribal woman, who is the right woman to satisfy his soul. But his father, the Chief Secretary, Rele, the Police

Superintendent, Meena, Situ and others turn against him and try to bring him back. In their effort to catch him alive they kill him mercilessly.

Billy Biswas is concerned with his search for the “Other Thing”. “That Other Thing was, and is, after all”, in his words, “what my life is all about” (189). Billy becomes a primitive to be spiritually aware of the meaning of life. It is this “search” (189) that ultimately drives him to the doors of death. Joshi, through Romi, describes Billy’s quest. He says: “In brief, I know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trials of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake” (8).

Joshi’s hatred for the “phoney society” is seen in this novel. He expresses his contempt for money and wealth through Billy, who says:

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does 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 solution, throw light, as they say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money. (96-97)

Billy loves and admires Tuula who treats “money for what it was: a whole lot of paper” (177) and hates the world that hangs “on this peg of money” (97). In fact, Billy belongs to an upper-class well-to-do family, the members of which are living “in great style” (49). “They had old crystal chandeliers in the drawing-room, a thing rather uncommon in private homes . . . they were in some way connected with the rajahs of Burdwan” (49). Joshi’s belief is bordering almost on our Hindu beliefs 176. He believes:

. . . to survive man needs a minimum of goods which must either be given to him by society or he must receive exchange to procure them. This minimum, however, is very, very low, much lower than people imagine, and, except in times of great calamity, like war or famine, easily available. Once the society or your profession ensures this minimum, you should devote all your energies to the full exploitation of your gifts . . . (176)

In Joshi married life does not offer much solace to the questers. Many a time, the husband and the wife are not true to each other. There is very often betrayal on the part of one and eventually disharmony and discord become inevitable in married life.

Joshi's Billy marries Meena who is extremely beautiful; she is also a member of "the modern phoney society" (Lokesh 49). Billy marries hastily so that he may not have his hallucinations which make him feel very depressed. Billy marries Meena Chatterjee because "she was obviously, like Billy, of Bengali extraction" (The Strange Case 36-37). Billy thinks that the marriage is "ill-conceived, ill-fated" (133), and they are always "quarrelling" (76). He adds "...the most remarkable thing about her was that she was never short of words" (37). The result is Billy is drawn to Rima Kaul, a beautiful Bombay girl. Rima has pity for Billy for all the sufferings he has at the hands of his wife. It is "pity" that creates havoc in the life of the protagonist. The passage quoted below makes this very clear:

. . . I used frequently to go to Bombay to help my aunt. I saw quite a lot of Rima on these trips. I had known her ever since she was a little girl. She lived close to my aunt's place. We were alone quite a lot. As the strain between Meena and me increased I noticed a peculiar turn in my relations with Rima. An element of self-pity started to colour whatever I said to her. (The Strange Case 187)

Billy "seduces her" (187).

Joshi points out in his novels that Post-Independent India is withering and wilting "under the impact of unprecedented technological avalanche, dark forces of animosity, mutual distrust, violence and apathy . . ." (Shivani Vatsa and Rashmi Gaur 63). At present in India, materialistic aggrandisement and self-delusion rule the roost. The modern man here is without faith and enlightenment and he remains in a self-centered vacuum and he is unable to breathe the refreshing air of a liberating truth. Arun Joshi's heroes who incessantly search for reality and meaning in the present day world face untold problems and sufferings. They never give up their effort to find an edifice on which they can stay and find rest and comfort. His heroes, who suffer from spiritual uprootedness, cynicism, evils of materialism, loss of faith and human values under the dual forces of native ethos and Western training, are ever in search of a peaceful socio-cultural situation that may be an answer for their crisis of alienation.

Joshi's fiction is an expression of a distinctly Indian voice where one finds the richness of traditional Hindu values of simplicity, honesty, fairness, self-fulfilment, right action, a feeling of oneness with the elemental forces and others around. Joshi's leitmotif in his novels is quest. We see how he works out the hopeless longings that drive all his heroes.

In Billy's jungle village, people live a single life without any ego and division. Their needs are limited. Nothing except death can stop the "dancing and drinking and...love-making of the people" (The Strange Case 118). The women sway from the waist and dance, the drummers jump into the air and give a wild yell and move upon the girls. Their bodies seem to have some "changing plasticity" (139). The primitives do not bother about changes that take place in the civilized world. Nobody there is "interested in the prices of foodgrains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that" (113). They have "no ambition, none at all . . ." (148). They have no value for money. Money means to them "a whole lot of paper" (177). The people there are ". . . the children of kings condemned to exile by those rapacious representatives of civilization . . ." (143). The villagers need "a minimum of goods" (176). The girls are "more independent than our own girls" (148).

It should be noted that in Joshi the primitive society totally changes the character and behaviour of Billy. Billy also learns the importance of humility. "He wore a loin-cloth and nothing else" (The Strange Case 102); eats roots, and drinks country-made liquor. He becomes "simple enough" (176). Billy himself talks about his "metamorphosis" (121), "new transformation" (139) and "final metamorphosis" (141). Tapan Kumar Ghosh says: "It was a strange process of regeneration . . ." (79). After undergoing the regenerative process, Billy begins to play a new role, that of a healer, a priest and a magician who cures dying children. He wards off tigers, and helps the primitive people with worldly problems and spiritual troubles. To the primitive folks, he appears "like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound" (59-60). He also interferes with the collector on behalf of the primitives when they rise up in revolt against the collector. (167).

Romi, the collector, marvels at the intimacy between Billy and Bilasia and calls it "the intense beauty of . . . human relationship . . ." (The Strange Case 143). Bilasia is also called in the novel *Devi Mata* (158). In other words, she is *shakti* – wife of Lord Shiva – the Feminine Principle which is responsible for productivity and creativity. In elevating Bilasia to the level of *shakti*, Joshi follows the *Sankhya* system of Indian philosophy according to which evolution takes place when "*Purus*" and "*Prakriti*" come into contact. Bilasia is

“*Prakriti*” and Billy is “*Purus*”. “*Prakriti*” is called “*Shakti*”. Bilasia is Billy’s “*Shakti*”. It is only after Billy’s union with Bilasia that he realizes his “self” and becomes whole. As Joy Abrahams says: “. . . the union of Billy and Bilasia can be taken as the human soul’s longing for reunion of ‘Jeevatma’ and ‘Parmatma’” (191) the union between man’s “self” with God [the Over Soul] from whom he has come. Billy is worshipped as a godman. Attainment of divinity through sexual experiences is not alien to Hindu philosophy and religion. It is found in many *puranas* [legends] and epics. As Siddhartha Sharma comments: “Like Indian sages, he [Billy] was seeking divinity in man, a god-head” (51).

Joshi condemns the adherents of progress and civilization. In Joshi the civilized people involved in the killing of Billy are his wife Situ, his father, Rele, (the Superintendent of Police), the constables, the *havildar* and even Romi, Billy’s best friend. It is Situ, Romi’s wife, who reveals the secret about Billy’s presence in the hills to Mr. Biswas and Meena. Being highly influential people, they pressurize government to search out Billy in the jungle. In this venture, Billy is shot down by the *havildar*. It is interesting to note that Joshi calls these civilized people “irresponsible fools and common criminals” (*The Strange Case* 231). The irony is, Billy who becomes a primitive is killed by the most civilized people. The quest for meaning and self-realization through the adoption of primitivism fails because of the infringement of the dehumanized civilized society on the uncivilized and innocent primitive societies in remote areas.

Joshi laments the vanishing sense of values and the progressive rampancy of corruption in every walk of Post-Independent Indian life. He highlights in his novels the basic contradictions of the Post-Independence Indian society with its scientific and technological progress, growth of materialism, spiritual degeneration and confusion of values. His novel deals with the problems of Westernized Indians who have lost their traditional and spiritual mores and suffer from all kinds of strange sickness – cynicism, alienation from the community and alienation from one’s own self and intellectual doubt and crisis of faith. His novel also deals with institutionalized corruption, general moral decline and erosion of values. Tapan Kumar Ghosh points out that during his interview with Sujatha Mathai, Joshi has admitted that he is “concerned about the values and attitudes of the young today” (183). He adds that while commenting on the significance of Billy Biswas’ death he has told Purabi Banerjee: “Billy’s death is metaphorical. The modern Indian city is disoriented that kills sincerity . . . . This kind of killing goes on when the social organism does not know its values. We only understand the values of money and power” (183). Joshi is painfully aware of



people's shortcomings. The deep moral earnestness and the religious sense of the past is now gone. Most of the people are now living like butterflies on the surface of life. Joshi, therefore, feels the need for moral regeneration of the present humanity through spiritual education. In short, as in Greene, religion becomes in Joshi a handmaid to put a strong emphasis on the humanist values of life.

In his novels, Joshi tries to redeem a sinner and bring him back to humanity. The first person he employs to do this is Tuula Lindgren who is educated and humane. Unlike Meena and her ilk, she has a "total disregard of money" (The Strange Case 177). Billy is greatly influenced by her 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). She tries to give him a Hindu mind.

A great change comes upon Billy when he reaches Dhunia's hut and sees Bilasia there. The Hindu mind acquired from Tuula suddenly vanishes and Billy gets totally enamoured of Bilasia's sensuality. She pours out a sexuality that is nearly as primeval as the forest. Abdul Saleem says: "His love which has remained unspelt and inarticulate so far now blows with the wild breeze" (75). H.M. Prasad, observes "Meena deadens his senses, Rima corrupts him and the material civilization kills his innate natural instinct. It is Bilasia who causes explosion of senses – the proper medium to reach soul" (Arun Joshi 46).

Among the primitives, Joshi's Billy is seeking divinity in man. Like Greene's Whisky Priest Billy also heals himself and heals others and attains the highest state of self-realization. Like the Whisky Priest, he too, moves from place to place helping people and performing miracles. In other words, he becomes a humanist who works for the welfare of the people. Billy's tragic death is highly deplorable. He is killed like a common criminal. Romi, Billy's friend makes a revealing comment on Billy's death highlighting his essential human qualities: "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 man-gods of the primitive pantheon" (236). Billy has to follow "the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end" (The Strange Case 8).

Joshi's Billy is a sinner-turned saint. His raping of Rima Kaul and his relationship with Bilasia prove that he is primarily lustful. Joshi makes a *yogi* and an *avatara* [incarnation of God] of such a man and endows him with miracle-making powers. He moves from place to place healing people, performing miracles and serving the suffering and the needy. Billy

serves people in the most humble way. In doing such a selfless service he is happy and contented. Joshi reposes more faith on humanity than on a conventional and orthodox religion. Billy's tragic death in the hands of a foolish constable is just a sequel to his earlier sins. Billy compromises to his abrupt end and closes his eyes without the pangs of death. Living under the divine influence of Mother Nature, and filled with the wealth of spirituality and having been guided by a divine spirit, Billy is not at all afraid to face any eventuality.

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