

DOES UTOPIA EXIST? A CRITICAL STUDY OF ARUN JOSHI'S *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

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Abstract:

*Despite rapid advancement towards modernity, modern People find themselves isolated, alienated and frustrated in a society suffering from various problems--the problem of existence and the loss of affinity, affection and empathy. Civilization and primitivism find diametrically opposed to each other. The Indian novelist, Arun Joshi (1939-1993) deftly records the characteristics of modern world as well as primitive society representing two different societies and cultures- one is civilized society and the other is the world of tribals representing different psyches. By juxtaposing the advancing west and primitive East, Joshi explores the problems of both the worlds in his fictional work *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. He represents sufferings as the inherent feature of the world. His characters, who hoped for the better world, end up with disillusionment, again dreams for appearance of unicorn. This paper shall question the existence of utopian world and its treatment in the Indian fiction, with particular reference to the novel of Arun Joshi. It shall further problematize the concept of utopia itself and compare and contrast the utopian world with the problem-ridden real world. The paper also answers to the questions like whether Utopia exists in the reality and it only offers hope for making the existing world a better place.*

Key words: *Utopia, dystopia, Arun Joshi, Indian fiction, civilization, primitivism.*

Utopia is a flexible and pliable concept that refers to an ideal society, but it is a topic of concern whether a real utopia can exist or not? One thing is clear that everybody wants an idealistic utopian world without thinking its negative aspect that is called dystopian society. Literary utopia generally exists in the individualistic or collective imagination and written words make it concrete. Thus, on the one hand *Thomas More* presents his *Utopia* (1516) with all its positive aspects but on the other hand *George Orwell's 1984* (1949) shows the negative aspects of totalitarian society in which central authority, that has both the power and the wisdom to administer effectively in a perfect world, subjugate the individual.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993) with the eyes of a reformer, with the tender heart for humanity and obdurate mind for purifying human intellect, feels pain when he perceives the chaotic state of modern society that promises for utopian world like fairy tales in which all the desires and wishes are fulfilled. He, therefore, embarks upon an enterprise of providing solution and presents a primitive utopian world to help a man escape from the unpleasant situation of rapid industrialization in modern society and, thereby, aims at creating a good society of happy and joyful individuals.

Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas deals with the conflict between civilization and primitive life. Joshi presents the reality of the modern world by presenting two different societies and cultures - one is civilized society and other is the world of tribals in Satpura Hills. These cultures represent two different psyches. Through the struggle of his protagonist, who is of individualistic nature, Joshi minutely represents the characteristics of modern world as well as primitive society. Billy Biswas, the protagonist, is meditating between two conflicting forces--the primitive world and the civilized society as Lokesh Kumar in this context rightly says that "Billy's inner self acts as a battlefield for two conflicting forces, the one being the money-centric society and the other being Billy's spiritual quest through primitive

passions” (48). He chooses primitive world over the civilized society. His selection of the primitive world is the result of his anxiety and suffering that he faces in his so-called utopian society. Joshi, therefore, with the two fold narratives of the novel projects the conflict between Modernization vs Primitivism. On one hand he represents a complex character of Billy who finds himself alienated from modern society and civilization, on the other hand Billy, identifying himself with the tribals, shows an ideal utopian society. He embraces his death when civilized society tries to uproot him from his 'Earthly Paradise'.

While reading *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), it can be said that Billy Biswas tries to find out a utopian world in Satpura Hills of India. He is unable to relate himself to the society he lives and finds disillusionment in the phony and civilized society. In search of an idealistic world, says Bhatnagar, “Billy ... represent the predicament of the seeker who am I? Where am I from? And they oscillate between the modern and the primitive” (Bhatnagar 42). He undergoes a gradual transformation in his journey from material and civilized present day world to the world of soul. He feels alien and foreigner in his society and tries to release the self from the world of science and technology that blow the trumpet of Earthly Paradise. Earthly paradise is an illusion and deception in the guise of science and technology. It was, therefore, not surprising that the novel opens in New York's Harlem, the black ghetto of America and ends in jungle. Billy Biswas, the protagonist, perceives modern society to be deteriorating and degenerating in the hope of finding an idealistic society. He searches a place where he may not feel socially isolated and culturally uprooted and prefers jungle to be suitable place for belonging.

Literary utopias can be classified into two broad categories. One group proclaims that materialistic changes that bring all the comfort in the life of human being will form a realistic utopia and others proclaims that philosophical or moral changes give birth to an idealistic utopia. Rejecting all the materialistic comfort that leaves a man spiritually barren from within, Billy Biswas presents the reality of that cozy life that science and technology provide to each and every individual. He never feels at home in the modern bourgeois society because he listens to the voice of his soul and expresses his disapproval for the organized and civilized society. In modern world he thinks that money is the center upon which everything rests. In the rat-- race of life, man has become estranged from the self, the family and the society. In one of his letters, Billy angrily criticizes the civilized society that “I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else do the civilized men do” (69)? Billy condemns the elites of Indian society for aping the western materialistic society. He does not conform to this dominant trend of the civilized world and he, therefore, becomes a foreigner in this civilized world.

Billy's life, therefore, may be divided into two distinct stages--the first stage deals with social and intellectual life in America and New Delhi that establishes his character and gives an insight into his primitive urge while the second stage deal with his fulfillment of his desire in the tribal world. Billy's deep love for primitivism is not an abrupt eruption rather it is his inborn proclivity. Intimations of his primitive self were received for the first time in the landscape of Bhubaneswar when Billy was a boy of fourteen. He had gone to meet his maternal uncle in the company of his mother. Billy was totally free from the burden of Dehradun School and he read some magazines of his uncle. One day when he was in the garden of his uncle's bungalow, he saw one servant going out. Upon asking he replied that he was going to see a dance in the neighboring village. Billy expressed his desire to see the dance and so he set on the carrier of that servant's bicycle. The villagers welcomed them warmly. It was a kind of fun fair. Billy saw different stalls, games and dances. Billy felt extremely happy in the company of those tribal. He saw one young girl and boy arm in arm moving near the stall. Billy saw them several times and it appealed to the primitives self of Billy. An unconscious seeds of desire are sown in his mind that he must have the same type of tribal life and desires for fellow tribal men. It was his longing for the primitive that gushed out abruptly:

First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me . . . 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. (91)

But his inner urge was suppressed by his parents in his childhood and sprouted up in the form of his love for Anthropology in America, when he gets a chance to identify his self. His active preparation for Anthropology, though disliked by his father, is a proof of his quest, to overcome the conflict of identity. He asserts his urge that “. . . I would like to travel. Travel, travel, travel. A little bit here and there, but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India”(12).

He starts doing Ph.D. in Anthropology neglecting the wish of his father to study engineering from an American university. Billy's going against the will of his father, who wanted his son to be an engineer, indicates his immense love for primitives and tribal life. He dedicates himself to the fulfillment of inner urge and therefore, exercises his freedom of choice in selecting Anthropology. He does not want to remain in the dystopian society following the instructions of those who are his superiors. He suffers from anxiety in the sophisticated modern society and prefers to live in the Satpura Hills by choosing the path that he thinks better for him by taking full responsibility for his actions.

His love for primitivism is also reflected in his choice of Harlem, a black Ghetto, instead of Manhattan. Therefore, he prefers to live in the black colony of America where civilized people do not like to go and mingle with them. Billy's selection for Harlem makes it clear that he is not made for this civilized world. So, he searched a place for residence in which he could feel comfortable and happy. There he finds “the most human place” to live and feels a sense of belonging in the company of the Negroes. Although he lives with them, a desire for the primitive world always lingers in his subconscious and feels alienated and isolated due to his suppressed desire of utopian society.

Billy's unpleasant situation “becomes a strange case as he turns out to be a split personality between “primitive “and “civilized” (Mukteshwar Pandey 70). Billy is torn between the mysterious pull towards primitive force and his rational self. Siddhartha Sharma in *Arun Joshi's novel; A critical study* says that “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” (Siddhartha Sharma, 38). He lives with the modern society but he belongs to the primitives. He finds himself misfit in the spiritually barren society which makes him socially isolated and culturally uprooted. Billy thinks that modern civilized world is becoming worse and meaningless as he delineates:

What got me was the superficiality, the sense of values. I don't think all city societies are as shallow as ours. I am, of course, talking mainly of the so-called upper classes. I 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 dry as dust(128).

He revolts against the civilized world to realize the meaning and purpose of his life. Extremely disgusted by the sophisticated materialistic society, Billy abruptly enumerates the flaw of his surroundings and later explains the reason for being so harsh to the society. He tells that they have been senseless and do not know the value of love and affection in the pursuit of earning money. In America he befriends Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady who, being a trainee in psychiatric course, understands the dilemma of Billy's life. She tells to Romi:

Billy feels something inside him, but he is not yet sure. Sometimes he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it. [. . .] 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 and me. It can explode any time'(18).

He seeks order and stability in his life that the superficial society deplorably lacks. He continues his quest for a utopian society throughout his life and finds a glimpse of it in the primitives. Tuula, the Swedish lady, stands as a primitive force for Billy who feels at home in her company and shares with her his feelings

for the society. She has interest in Indian tribes and he engages her talking about Indian tribal people and their cultures. In her company he comes to have his first glimpse of “the other side”. He explains to Tuula:

The other side. You know what I mean, don't you? Most of us 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 (15).

The aforesaid statement makes it clear that Billy is a foreigner in the civilized world and does not give any value to money and feels suffocated in the company of those who are busy in hoarding of money. Billy hurls blistering attack on Anglicized Indian society and its money-oriented value system. The animal-imagery he used to describe the society reflects his deep-rooted hatred for elite society. In one of his letters which Billy left behind before going into jungles, he writes:

I see a roomful of finely dressed men and women seated on downy sofas and while I am looking at them under my very nose, they turn into a kennel of dogs yawning or snuggling against each other or holding whisky glasses in their furred paws. (69)

Billy realizes that his love for primitivism is the only way that will lead him towards his ideal world. Bilasia attracts him by her simplicity and primitive eroticism. While simplicity of the tribals beckoned him to Nature, Bilasia helps him to search his identity by himself. Birendra Pandey rightly observes that “Billy's aloneness with Meena and Rima gives him the central vision in his attachment with primitive Bilasia” (Birendra Pandey 34). He comes into contact with nature in her company and in the company of those who belong to the natural world. He receives a sense of affection in the tribes and they think that he is an *Avatar* of god. Dhunia tells that he has certain magical powers. He receives immense love and affection from the tribes that he lacked throughout his life among the so-called civilized people. T. J Abraham in *A Critical Study of The Novels of Arun Joshi, Raja Rao and Sudhin N. Ghose* observes that “(H)e was perfectly at ease with the tribal life, and as against the civilized world which dubbed him as obsessed, the tribal world represented by Dhunia, addressed him as his *mahaprasad*, great friend. (T.J Abraham 23)

Billy's abrupt meeting with his friend Romi after an interval of ten years centre around the encounter between modernity and primitivism. Romi who has now become a collector in Madhya Pradesh, confronts Billy in the Maikala Hills where he started living with the tribals and started wearing lion clothes and walking barefoot like tribals. Billy reveals to him the mystery of choosing the primitives over family life. He also asserts that money does not have importance in the primitive lives; rather their life style revolves around nature. He also emphasizes the simplicity of the tribal lifestyle devoid of depression and desperation. They suffer from a severe draught but their dancing and singing do not give any kind of glimpse of tension. Unlike the people of the problem-ridden civilized world which is full of desperation and severe ailments, the tribals never forget to sing and dance even in the critical condition.

Joshi not only brings the nature oriented lives of the tribals but also emphasizes the importance of herbal plants in curing diseases which modern scientific medicines cannot alleviate. The incident of curing Romi's wife, Situ who was suffering with migraine brings Billy in contact with the civilized people. He cures Situ with herbal medicines. After recovering from pain, she becomes curious about the person who cured her. In the beginning Romi does not take her queries seriously but in the end he tells her about the whereabouts of Billy. Unfortunately, Romi's wife Situ informs Mr. Biswas and Meena Mukherjee about Billy Biswas that he is alive. Mr. Biswas, with the help of higher authorities, starts searching and ultimately Billy is killed by a 'havildar'. Thus ends the quest of Billy's utopia. Instead of understanding, they attack on him. They think that his rebellious attitude was a foolish step that he has taken for escaping his responsibilities.

Joshi has given the true picture of the post-Independent India. The post-Independent India is on the way of development and competing with the developed nations. These developments have affected the

lives of individuals in many ways and consequently alienated them from their own nears and dears. A major effect of urbanization and westernization is that India has lost a lot of things and, most importantly, it has lost its roots, history, culture and ethics. The protagonist, Billy Biswas is not against civilization or the development, but he is against the consequences that these developments bring with them in the form of deception, treachery' hypocrisy and anxiety. In short, Arun Joshi in the first part of the novel presents a complex character of Billy who finds himself alienated from society and civilization .In the second part he finds his identity in the uncultured society after abjuring his materialistic society. He embraces his death when civilized society tries to uproot him.

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