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Ecological Romanticism and the Critique of Civilization in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract— *This paper argues that Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas represents a reductive image of the otherwise complex and plural community of Indian tribals. The novel promises its reader an intellectual foray into the world of Indian tribals through the narrative of its protagonist Billy Biswas; but Biswas's voyage as mapped by Joshi lacks serious, rigorous, analytical depth. The novel emulates colonial anthropology and popular culture of early postcolonial India in creating/ consolidating the notion of noble savage and a false civilized/ Hindu- adivasi binary. Our study critiques Joshi's insistence on the separateness and otherness, his exoticization of the tribal world, and his failure in presenting a fuller, complex view of the lives of those who still remain on the periphery of modern India.*

Keywords— ***Tribal, India, Arun Joshi, Indian English Novel***

Arun Joshi's 1971 novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is primarily read as a quest for identity for its central character. In such a reading, the protagonist Billy Biswas, enraged and disenchanted with the shallowness of civilization, its severance with nature and reality, takes a plunge into the unknown, the saal forests of the Maikala hills in Chhattisgarh, Central India. He appears, quite suitably in the words of Carl Jung, a modern man in search of a soul. In fact, nothing summarizes the theme of the novel as the opening epigraph which is a line from Matthew Arnold' s 'Thyrsis' that goes: 'it irked him to be here, he could not rest'.

Most critical studies explore the causative factors behind Billy Biswas's counterintuitive foray into the tribal hills wherein the plot/ action is regularly interpreted as movement away from alienation and existential angst to self-realization. For instance, according to Vachaspati Dwivedi, 'the despondency of its protagonist Billy is the result of his disengagement in modern society and civilization that forces him to take refuge in the world of tribals' while the narrative revolves around 'the theme of alienation for finding perennial question' (54). In the words of Urmil, the journey of Billy Biswas explores 'the inner world of modern man and the way in which the self tries to carve out a pattern to save itself from disintegration' (44). According to Jingle and Georshia G 'the awareness of rootlessness and consequential anxiety is the keynote of Joshi's existential vision of the plight of modern men. Then search for identity is one of the main motifs of Arun Joshi's novels'(2641). In this vein, most critical accounts limit their analyses to existentialism angst and alienation of Billy Biswas and steer away from a discussing problematic representation of the tribal. While Arvind M. Nawale reads this novel as the protagonist's 'longing for natural mode of existence' and invokes Rousseau to draw attention to the 'ideal world-view' of 'the tribal life of Maikala hills', at no point in his essay does he conclude the representation of the tribal man to be unsettling. Ironically, in an essay, Natarajan et al. identify the representation to be 'idealistic' but go on to define it as 'positive' and therein lies the trouble in the appraisal of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. As we argue in this paper, Arun Joshi's gaze toward the tribal is problematically reductive and oversimplified and is rather akin to the portrayal of the tribal in popular Hindi cinema of previous decades like *Nagin* (1954) and *Madhumati* (1958) where the tribal was often the illiterate, uncorrupt, carefree,

erotic 'other' to the suave, educated, complicated protagonist of the films. This means that the author who is frequently dubbed as one of the significant authors in the tradition of Indian English fiction did not have the courage to question and ditch simplistic mode of imagining the *adivasi* in the narrative imagination of his times. In this final analysis, the author appears to be afflicted with the blinkered approaches of colonial anthropology wherein the tribal was registered as different or even opposite to the modern/ caste Hindu mode of living notwithstanding his knowledge and deep connection with India. One may argue the futility of scrutinizing a novel written five decades ago along its representation of a group of people very much neglected in the mainstream imagination, literary or otherwise even today. Yet, our endeavor seeks to contribute to the understanding of the construction of tribal identity in one of the important novels within the tradition of Indian English writing, a concern which may be of recent vintage but has the potential to illuminate the ideological process of 'othering' of a community which continues to remain on the fringes.

Even though there is very little we know about Joshi by way of facts, it can be easily affirmed that the author does not have any natural or intellectual association with the Adivasi community of India. Arun Joshi came from an upper middle-class Brahmin family and was raised in Varanasi where his father was the vice-chancellor at the Banaras Hindu University. Coming from a family of established scholars, he was well educated and financially more than secure. Like the protagonists of most of his novels, Joshi was from the anglicized upper middle class that came to replace the white rulers in free India. As the ruling elites of the postcolonial nation happened to be the brown sahibs who grew up in an intellectual and cultural atmosphere that was supposed to cater to the needs and desires of the white colonizer, a later generation of artists and thinkers, analyzed and expressed the alienation and hollowness of their being that emanated from their severance with their cultural moorings. Arun Joshi, as has been registered by many, writes around this alienation in most of his works using psychological realism which could have been the result of a turn toward interiority in fiction and poetry in India as modernism made inroads in Indian literature. While one can find a good number of essays on him, the readings are overwhelmingly from Indian academics, and little to no attention has been paid by Euro-American authors which, given the way things are, affects the author's reach, coverage, and quality of criticism. It is no wonder then that despite the captivating, pacey narration Joshi remains unread and unheard of, except an occasional entry here and there in the syllabi of Indian universities. There are repeated exhortations on the part of critics that there is a need to engage and re-engage with the high-quality works of Arun Joshi and why he must be given his due place in the canon. And yet nothing comes to rescue the eclipse of this author.

As we see it, the neglect could also be due to Joshi's failure to write a quirky allegorical account of the nation which in the words of some observers all third world literature is. Joshi's moneyed, privileged protagonists fighting existential angst in a country ridden with mind boggling poverty where the average man fights to survive do not represent the nation at all. Why then a reader outside of India may take interest in his works if they do not strive to enact the role of guidebooks to the state of the nation? The problem could be aesthetics too. Joshi's novels often may appear to have parallels with Anita Desai who practiced psychological realism in the tradition of Virginia Woolf and Henry James. But, in contrast to the modernist, lyrical, languid orientation of Anita Desai, Joshi's aesthetics are not avant-garde and are much more within the realistic tradition and do not bring much formalistic novelty. There is a certain incongruity to Joshi's approach in that while exploring the psychology and existential angst of its trapped urban middle class protagonists he retains a much more conventional mode of narration at a time when a certain self-consciousness and experimentalism had begun to occupy the Indian art scene. Such formal discussions aside, another failure in Joshi's approach- seen from a contemporary view- is his reliance on received, clichéd ways of viewing the other, the tribal.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas elicits curiosity of the reader from the get go. The reader expects an unspooling, an excavation into the strangeness of Billy Biswas, the protagonist as the title of the novel suggests. But the subsequent lines suggest that 'the attempt to understand is…futile'. This is not an incidental narrative machination. In most of Joshi's novels we encounter a curious, enigmatic protagonist. In fact, it can be argued that the narratological success of his products hinges upon creating intricate, somewhat opaque characters about whom the reader's interest is piqued early on in the novel and keeps him hooked. There is a popular, noir, whodunnit character to his art. The introduction to the protagonist is as much an exercise in mystification as it is an exercise in revelation. Consider the first entry on Babu Khemka in *The Foreigner*: 'They uncovered his face and I turned in spite of myself'. Babu Khemka is dead and the subsequent unfolding of the narrative is about the causes and consequences. In *The Last Labyrinth* which is a first-person account, the narrator affirms in the first sentence: '…I have a score to settle. I forget nothing and forgive no one'. The reader is compelled to find out more about the 'score' from the get go. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the wish to understand is an

'impossible' wish. This is before postmodernism. Might as we try to understand Billy he will still be beyond us. He is after all a man of 'extraordinary obsessions'. He cannot be fully grasped. And yet we go on to grasp as much as we could. The novel reads like Billy Biswas' biography. Romi Sahai, Billy's close friend and the narrator of this predominantly first-person account tells us that Billy Biswas is 'engineer, anthropologist, anarchist' member of the 'upper-upper crust of Indian society' (9). Born into an influential, wealthy Bengali family of a supreme court judge, Billy has gone to the US to pursue Engineering but is reading for a doctorate in anthropology. What makes Billy unique is the possession of '*urkraft*…a primitive force' which engenders in him a certain restlessness, a certain hunger to connect with that which lies beyond the periphery of civilization. The author uses many props to underscore this. For instance, we first meet Billy in a rundown building in Harlem, an Afro-American ghetto. His room has Jazz music, pornography, biography of Van Gogh, and a number of National Geographic magazines (12). The author has made careful use of props to accentuate Billy's deep connect with nature, his difference. Jazz music does not conform to set codes; in contrast to the rigid and coded Western classical music it is fluid and flourishes in improvisation. The presence of pornography indicates a ready acceptance of sexuality in all its animal savagery, an assault on bourgeois values. Van Gogh stands for madness and schizophrenia. The National Geographic magazine and an acute interest in anthropology signifies intellectual forays into distant, untouched zones. There is a clear effort here to present Billy as someone predisposed to having a unique, perhaps more comprehensive view of reality which is inclusive of all that which is anarchic and unacceptable, that which is brushed aside or relegated to the fringes. In another instance, as foreshadowing, Billy relates to Romi the story of a man who visits Congo from New York and goes crazy because of primitive music (10). Writing in and around the same time when far away in a distant land French historian of ideas Michel Foucault was formulating his theory of madness and civilization, Joshi shows remarkable affinity to Foucault by postulating madness as a social construct, a product of intellectual and cultural discourse of the so-called rational, modern times. As the plot moves forward we find Billy back in India after he is done finishing his Ph.D in Anthropology to once again meet Romi who is now a government administrator. Both friends get married to settle down in to the conventional role of bourgeois breadwinners. With his degree Billy becomes a professor of Anthropology in Delhi University where his disillusionment continues, this time with the way Anthropology is studied and practiced in India. As the narrative progresses further there are suggestions of Billy becoming more and more disenchanted with his world, which consequently leads to his sudden plunge into the unknown of the Maikala hills on a university anthropological expedition. For the local administration and his family who are in a state of shock, he is missing, but after a decade when most have lost all hope of his second coming, he makes a reappearance to tell his story to his friend Romi Sahai who now happens to be the collector of the seemingly godforsaken barren land of the district that contains the forest. It is in this section we get an opportunity to capture Billy's problematic myopia; his limited, twisted understanding of tribal culture which ultimately seduces him and pushes him to suddenly forsake his bourgeois existence.

Billy conjures up for Romi, and to his reader, an outlandishly romantic image of the tribal which is unidimensional and relates his submission to the attractions of the *Adivasi* culture in almost erotic terms. The subaltern *Adivasi* in his narration comes out to be infantile, hypersexualized, irrational, and decadent. One can see similarities between this narrative construction of the other and the British orientalist approach toward native cultures of the East, with the important difference that the discourse of benign and emancipatory conquest is absent here. Billy does exoticize and eroticize the tribal but his aim is to celebrate the difference, his simplicity, and not open ideological pathways for subjugation. In this manner, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, otherwise considered to be an important work of elite, high art, elicits comparison with the worst in popular Hindi cinema where 'the tribal identity is marked by a standard set of attributes—an organic goodness, an unspoilt spontaneity, an innate simplicity—the sum of which typically leads to tragedy or some serious trouble' (Chattopadhyay). Early on in his telling, Billy establishes difference between the 'Hindu' materialistic, acquisitive culture of the north and the simple, unambitious culture of the tribal, where nobody is 'interested in the prices of foodgrains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that' and where they only 'talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing' (82). He harps on this nature-culture, mind-body binary by foregrounding additional differences in tribal culture where sex and inebriation runs supreme. His sober, intellectual life of an academic in Delhi is marked in stark contrast to the everyday 'dancing' and incessant talk of 'women and sex' and of 'liquors and aphrodisiacs and women' (83) a wonder all-day party place where all you do is 'dance and drink and probably make love' (86) and that 'nothing except death stops our dancing and drinking and our love-making' (86). Billy uses the metaphor of orgy to describe his hungry and captive audience the erotic energy of ritual tribal dancing.

According to him 'these dances *are* an orgy of sorts…a bit of lovemaking is, of course, there, but it is what preceded that is really orgiastic, the frenetic drumming, the constant footwork, the making and breaking of formations, the yelling, the fondling of the women' (100). We never really enter the minds of the orgy participators; we never get to really know how the women there see their fondling. The only woman we have some narrative access to is Bilasia, who has been sketched as the ultimate seduction queen, a fantasy figure of incalculable titillating charms the likes of which are rarely found in highbrow art, whose inspiration seems to have come from the reels of old Bollywood incapable of investing in the life of the subaltern. Bilasia, we read, was the key reason behind Billy's severance of ties with his home and family; She is described by him as the 'future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life' (83); 'Come, come, come, she called, and Billy Biswas, son of a Supreme Court Justice, went' (83). One may infer a higher, metaphysical love here, but as read further we gather that her offerings rarely go beyond the realm of the body. We first see Bilasia in 'her rust coloured lugra, her black hair tied behind her neck, her firm shoulders golden and bare, the play of the oil lamp lending a voluptuousness to her full figure' and then we are excited to notice her 'enormous eyes, only a little foggier with drink, poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them' (102). Every time Billy makes a comparison, it is in binary terms, though he endows the tribal with an innate, magnetic eroticism, and deems her to be superior to the staid, desexualized city girls. To him 'nature were cocking a snook at the Meena Biswases of the world, informing them once again how little it cared for their self-claimed superiority' (87). His conventional bourgeois wife is no match to the bewitching Bilasia who 'might have appeared to be crude, unintelligent, and childish' (85) but she is 'a whole lot more independent' (107) and with the added features of 'a proud carriage, a figure so graceful, eyes whose brightness made your pulse quicken' (107).

This sexual objectification and exotification of the tribal woman may be a rare sight in the Indian English novel whose preoccupations have largely been the urban middle class and its vicissitudes in postcolonial India, but the popular Hindi cinema has often been found to have used this trope to enhance its appeal to an audience that has little connection with the complexities of the tribal sphere. Like *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the tribal in Hindi films is never the subject but the object of the gaze of the dominant self of India, i.e., the middle class. According to Sohini Chattopadhyay 'the tribal character was a figure rarely met in Hindi cinema. Encountered, yes; met, no. We've seen them dancing and singing often enough; they usually bring terrific energy, erotic costumes and, always, their drums, to the proceedings'. Citing William Elison she reiterates that the tribal song-and-dance performance, or "tribal number," was "part of the palate of standard flavours in the masala of the Forties, Fifties, and Sixties." But after the song and dance ended, we were almost never introduced to a single tribal character as a person who might speak, think or feel (Caravan). Similarly, we find in Billy Biswas that the innocent and carefree tribals have not been endowed with a voice. Forget about any deep immersion, barring a couple of characters, we don't even know the names of the faceless crowd that constitute this sphere in whose love the protagonist claims to have drowned. This includes even Bilasiya who appears to have a barbed wire tongue but little voice or opinions. Bilasiya's character has strong parallels with the staple *banjaran* (the gypsy girl) of the Hindi films of yester-years who 'is unmistakably an exotic thing—typically costumed in a colourful skirt-blouse, with plenty of street smarts, and a sexy confidence.' In another parallel, like the exotic, colourful, *banjaran* of the Hindi films is the antithesis of the ordinary city girl, Bilasiya is not just different but even superior in her charms to the well-bred, metropolitan girl. In the account of Romi Sahai 'She had that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in our primitive people'(103). In another instance of the binary between the wilderness and civilization Romi says that 'looking at Bilasia one could well believe that these were the children of kings condemned to exile by those rapacious representatives of civilization who had ruled the thrones of Delhi and still continued to do so' (103).

That said, ironically, when we enter the tribal land the novel becomes intensely sociological, even anthropological in which the tribal is only an object of study and wonderment. The tribal characters do not contribute to the shaping of the narrative. Yes, they and their (mis)reading of culture is indeed a catalyst for profound transformation in the protagonist, but they do not become the subjects. Compare this with D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* (1913), which had already shown more than a century back how the life of the underclass should not be limited to a sociological/ anthropological study but can branch out as a narrative rendering them flesh and blood human characters in possession of immense psychological complexities. Even in India English writing we have examples such as Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable* (1935) and *Coolie* (1936) widely considered a sociological/ anthropological novel where we get to delve deep into the psychology of the subaltern subject – the subject is neither eroticized nor exoticized but rendered in nuanced details. In this way, Billy Biswas's narration reads like a deliberately juicy, overly spiced up set of superficial observations of a sex obsessed middle aged man who is masquerading as a trained anthropologist producing objective truths. It smacks of the bias and

prejudices we discerned in colonial cultural anthropology in which the white fieldworker often studied non-white cultures as repositories of all that was taboo in the civilized west. According to Linda Nordling the field of Anthropology 'grew out of the European colonial project and was part of an overarching effort to not only understand and describe the people Native to the regions that Europeans annexed—but also, in some cases, to dominate and exploit those people and their lands'. According to André Beteille much of early Anthropology established disjunction between the idea of 'tribe' and 'civilization' as it originated in Europe where such a disjunction actually existed. However, in the old world such as India and China rather than standing opposed, tribe and civilization 'had co-existed for centuries if not millenia, and were closely implicated in each other from ancient to modern times' (301). Arun Joshi, in a similar vein to the noted colonial anthropologist Verrier Elwin, views the Maikala tribe at a certain stage of human evolution. He does not tell us how this tribe is radically different from the Hindu society outside of it. This becomes markedly emphatical when we realise that the tribe in question has lived coterminously with the so-called Hindu civilization. That they are not as self-contained and remote that Joshi is making them out to be. As Ajay Dandekar writes: 'this endeavour to label communities in (separate) categories was largely a part of the discourse of the then anthropology of the west. Indeed, anthropology, primarily an academic discipline, became an instrument of colonial domination. It presented an oversimplified depiction of the cultural 'others' and, based on it, developed a perspective that made them appear as 'the opposite' of civilized British folks.' While in the last few decades there have been efforts to decolonize the discipline by 'incorporating scholars from the regions under study' we can read *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* as a fictionalized piece of anthropology within the colonial tradition given the western moorings of the observer and even the listener, i.e, Romi Sahai who is a deracinated IAS officer educated in the US. Ironically, this postcolonial novel, perhaps inadvertently, essentializes the *adivasi* in the same manner as the ruling British elites essentialized the native through orientalism. The gaze of the middle-class narrator is imperialistic, which is to say that it employs the same knowledge-power dynamics to create and regulate the discourse around the native other which was used by the white colonizer. Even if on the outside the view may be 'positive' it reinforces a false divide between an uncontaminated civilized 'self' (the controlled, productive, nation- building middle class) and its pristine 'other' (the oversexed, out of control noble savage) and can serve to delegitimize the other even if the author wishes otherwise. Joshi's novel does not showcase the vulnerabilities of the tribal community, their fragile socio-economic livelihood, poor quality of governance, widespread poverty, illiteracy, absence of safe drinking water and sanitary conditions and ineffective coverage of national health and social security. One may argue that the construction of such mythologies of the tribals, though seemingly harmless, can have serious policy and political implications.

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