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SITUATING TRIBALS OF INDIA

(Culture, Language and Self)

Edited by : Santosh Kumar Sonker



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The Theme of Contrast in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

Vinita S Virgandham

Tribals living in the remote areas are till date cut off from the technological development that is taking place rapidly. Urban development and the ethnicity of tribal life are two contrasting developments human being is always confronted with. On one hand it is the civilized society and on the other hand it's the rustic, primitive and age old customs of worship and other things that these tribals strictly adhere to. Sometimes it may be considered as superstitious too. But not always might the case be. The understanding of such occurrences in the life of the tribal and the reasoning behind them can prove beneficial in awakening and exposing them to the opportunities that lay ahead of them without preaching their way of living life.

After 1950s the Indian novelists began to delineate the private and the public spheres both. They began to explore the individual's quest for the self in all its varied and complex forms along with his problems and cries. Most of these writers renounced the larger world in favour of the inner man and engaged themselves in a search for the essence of human beings in their works. Novelists like Anita Desai, Arun Joshi, and Nayantara Sahgal have altered the face of Indian English novel and their works contain seeds of future development. Their works mince a maturity in the choice and treatment of themes, plot construction, delineation of characters and logistic improvisations. The Indian novels earned honours and

distinctions and carved out a niche for itself in the broader context of the World literature.

The colourful mosaic of the tribal culture, their exotic customs and rituals, their dressing patterns and adornment, their songs and dance have been the centre of attraction for the eminent writers of India. Nevertheless, from Sambara, a hero of *Rigveda*, to Ekalavya and Matangaka, Adivasis have proved themselves brave, adventurous, courageous, stout, devoted, loyal, integral, honest, free, unintentional, innocent, skilled and well organized. John Melcom, a 19th Century writer, verifies and makes a statement more convincingly when he writes about the tribals: "they are faithful, honest, active, capable of great fatigue, devoted to their master, quick and having a kind of instinctive sense of danger and are full of art and evasion." And this is what the author of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi tries to ignite in the mind of his readers. The present research paper aims to bring out the contrasting ideas of a civilized society and a tribal life to understand lives at two extremes; one over laden with technology and the other with traditional knowledge. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* has contrasted the tribal world with the civilized world there by exposing the evils of urban life and highlighted the attractions of tribal life which draw the attention of the rebels of the sophisticated life. The novel seeks to provide an alternative to the futile cry of the sensitive individual in the modern world. The narrator voices out this condition in his novel:

I realise that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile. If, in spite of this, I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understood him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi smart society there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions. (*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 7)

Billy Biswas, the protagonist of the novel plays a crucial role in living life, both as an urbanite and as a tribal. A rebel at heart and living sophisticated life, Billy had always desired to run into the wild. Externally he is cultured by virtue of his birth and the atmosphere in which he was brought up but somehow internally he is drawn more to the tribal world. Towards the end of the first part he had already lived a life of civilized world and he develops disgust with the superficiality and materialism of the civilized world. The tribal society which has been intact and away from such evils had always fascinated Billy since childhood.

With the passage of time Billy's interest in tribals intensifies. Obtaining a Ph. D. in Anthropology from the University of New York doesn't lift Billy's spirit for living an urban life. A normal married life proves of no interest for him anymore leading to an internal conflict arising in the subconscious level. Confronted with a philosophical question of 'to be or not to be', Billy decides to leave the materialistic life and wanders into the wild. This is the first case of contradiction that the writer wants his readers to understand the conflict of an inner self which confronts everybody at some point of time in life.

The company of tribals gives him a chance to learn many things which he would have remained ignorant throughout his life if he had not left the sophisticated society which values money over everything. His complete identification with tribal ethos leads to his initiation into such fields as astrology, astronomy, witchcraft, magic, etc. His words illustrate his knowledge of astronomy: "Watch these two sets of stars during the next four weeks. They will move towards each other, then coincide at the end of twenty-eight days. That is when it will rain" (SCBB 87).

Bilasia, a tribal whom Billy meets on his voyage to understand tribal life, is an embodiment of tribal culture. She represents the entire class of tribal women and a wide range of tribal values. Her life reflects the realities of tribal life just as the life of Billy's previous wife, Meena, reflects the realities of the civilized modern

world. Comparing Bilasia with the girls of civilized society, Billy says to Romi "Girls like Bilasia are a whole lot more independent than our own girls" (*SCBB* 107). Besides being beautiful and virtuous, Bilasia is surprisingly intelligent. The narrator says: "Had she been an ordinary woman, she would have immediately capitulated. But she was the child of the mountain, and the cold hardness of granite returned to her face" (*SCBB* 165). The comparison between Meena and Bilasia expresses the author's support to Billy's decision of his choice as these two characters symbolize a civilized and a tribal culture; two variations of which the latter seems to have fascinated Billy, the protagonist. An Joshi's portrayal of such a stark difference in simple and subtle manner keeps the reader interested throughout.

Tribal world and life is depicted as symbolic of the elemental life where nature and the absolute are considered as separate entities. Objects in all their totality are conceived, identified and invested with divinity. The escape of Billy into the tribal world is a haven for him; a place where divinity, superstition and magic converge. To Billy it is a place where happiness doesn't come from desires but from desirelessness. As he puts forth his thoughts:

What kept us happy, I suppose, were the same things that kept all primitives happy through the ages: "The earth, the forest, the rainbow, the liquor from Mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love-making, more than anything else, no ambition at all." (*SCBB* 117)

Life in tribal world helps Billy to move from a modern, superficial, and materialistic to a natural, primitive world. The simplicity of tribal life is an escape from the harsh realities of civilized society and an identification of his inner self with tribal culture which eventually elevates him to the position of a saint, leading him to enjoy spiritual experience and bliss. Had he not taken a decision to move away from the modern civilized society, he would have been deprived of all the beauty of tribal and primitive culture that he once dreamt of.

With the help of fictitious characters and incidents, and characterization the novelist has drawn a conclusion that life can be even lived happily with simplicity. The sole purpose of Billy's life is the realization of truth and this endeavour of searching for truth prompts him to shift to the tribal world.

The novelist brings another factor of economy to which Billy's answer is a straight forward one. He says that the tribals are not interested in hoarding money but there are many other things which are more interesting to them. The mysterious underworld in the human soul is unearthed by the author explicitly.

Rarely a few writers have given a thought of writing about the tribal life. There has been a conspiracy of silence against the tribal life occupying a significant space in Indian literature and the attempt of the author to bring to the prominence the marginalized leading a life in periphery is commendable.

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