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CONCEPT OF VANVASA AND BILLY'S DILEMMA: A CRITIQUE OF *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Arun Joshi's novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, by exploring the protagonist's transition from a life marked by hollowness and materialism to spiritual illumination through the concept of *Vanvasa*. Within the narrative, Billy, an erudite anthropologist, embarks on a journey that leads him to disengage from his past life and adopt a primitive mode of existence. The central focus lies in his relentless pursuit of purpose, his rejection of materialistic values, and his immersion in the tribal societies residing in the Satpura Hills of Madhya Pradesh. The term *Vanvasa* serves as a pivotal motif, symbolizing Billy's shift from a *Tamasik* state to a *Sattvik* existence. This transformation is scrutinized within the backdrop of Indian mythological traditions and philosophical constructs, including the concepts of Purusha and Prakriti.

Key Words: Spiritual Enlightenment, Self-Realization, Tribal Culture, Materialism, Identity, Indian Mythic Tradition.

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INTRODUCTION

Arun Joshi's second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is primarily the case history of a man in quest for peace and enlightenment. The novel, in fact, explores a fictional odyssey which shows man's exaltation of his soul through the practice of Yoga. The protagonist is a highly educated anthropologist who is apparently well settled in life. However, he realizes that his life is empty, bereft of any real meaning. Disdainful of materialism, he embarks on an adventure that is redolent of the Indian mythic tradition known as *Vanvasa*. The novelist explores how he breaks away from his past and begins life anew amidst the tribals that live around the Satpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh.

Billy, a man of extraordinary obsessions hailing from the upper crust of society chooses to live in Harlem. It is here that we have the first glimpse of Billy's dislike for conformism of accepting the values of a materialistic society. What is so fascinating about him is that he vehemently denounces the culture out of which he has grown. The rejection is total and he argues:

I know 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 ... All that left was loudmouthed women and men in three piece suit dreaming their little adulteries (128).

However, he does project how he came by his own sense of values and perceptions. He thinks he would forever hold himself in contempt for what he did to Riwa Kaul. The fact that he seduced her weighs heavily on his mind. He realizes how a tremendous “corrupting force” had overpowered him:

It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that other thing that it had been clamoring for. Here, you survive, if you haven't the guts to break away from this filth, well, then, I am going to wallow in it until it makes you sick (129).

He further asserts that the “other thing was, and is, after all, what my life is all about.”

The novel revolves around the concept of “other thing.” What is he seeking? Billy is aware of his degeneration yet he fails to break away term “this filth” (129). With the passage of time, he realizes his responsibility towards his soul is more than towards the family:

It was like a warning signal. It was as though a master mind has arranged the whole things to give me preview of what awaited me if I continued to defy its calls (129).

In fact, he seems to be consumed by *Tamasik* desires. Lord Krishna has warned against a life lost in physical pleasure only. Lord Krishna explains the qualities of a person who has transcended the modes of nature:

- XIV: 22 प्रकाशं च प्रवृत्तिं च मोहमेव च पाण्डव।
 न द्वेष्टि सम्प्रवृत्तानि न निवृत्तानि काङ्क्षति॥
- XIV 23 उदासीनवदासीनो गुणैर्यो न विचाल्यते।
 गुणा वर्तन्त इत्येव योऽवतिष्ठति नेङ्गते॥
- XIV 24 समदुःखसुखः स्वस्थः समलोष्टाश्मकाञ्चनः।
 तुल्यप्रियाप्रियो धीरस्तुल्यनिन्दात्मसंस्तुतिः॥
- XIV 25 मानापमानयोस्तुल्यस्तुल्यो मित्रारिपक्षयोः।
 सर्वारम्भपरित्यागी गुणातीतः स उच्यते॥

The Supreme Personality of Godhead said: O son of Pāṇḍu, he who does not hate illumination, attachment and delusion when they are present or long for them when they disappear; who is unwavering and undisturbed through all these reactions of the material qualities, remaining neutral and transcendental, knowing that the modes alone are active; who is situated in the self and regards alike happiness and distress; who looks upon a lump of earth, a stone and a piece of gold with an equal eye; who is equal toward the desirable and the undesirable; who is steady, situated equally well in praise and blame, honor and dishonor; who treats alike both friend and enemy; and who has renounced all material activities – such a person is said to have transcended the modes of nature (*Bhagavad-Gita: As It Is*, 622-623).

Billy, in fact, wants to transcend the modes of nature. That is why his disappearance into the Saal forest of the *Maikala* hills in Madhya Pradesh is actually his discovery of true life. The loud calls of the primitive world ask Billy to join, explore and merge with it into *Sattvik* state:

Come, Come to our primitive world that would sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you. Come, they cried, it is with us that you begin and with us that you will end. Come, come, come, come... Why do you want to go back? This is all there...on earth. This and the woman are waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come. Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night (120-21).

That is why Billy realizes: “Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moon light” (121). It would not be wrong to suggest that his renunciation represents his transformation from *Tamasik* state to *Sattvik* life. His escape - in other words – his *Vanvasa* – ends the period of the torment of his life. He realizes that the tribals are innocent and simple hearted people who understand the meaning of suffering. They are not hypocrites. He tells Romi in clear cut words

What kept us happy, I suppose merely the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from Mahua, an occasional feat/ a lot of dancing and love-making, and more than anything else, no ambition, none at all (148).

In his paper "Human Predicament and meaninglessness in Arun Joshi's Novels", R. S. Pathak makes a significant point when finds in the story of Billy a fictional representation of the *Sankhya* concept of the fusion of *Prakriti* and *Purusa*:

As Billy's example testifies, if one is able to establish a rapport with the primitive forces in the world of nature, one can get rid of all problems of life. Bilasia, it is held, symbolises "the primitive culture," the untapped subterranean resources of psychic energy. It would be better to regard her as the Matter (*Prakriti*), which according to the *Sankhya* system of Indian philosophy, is "one" and eternal, not an illusionary appearance but something real. Billy might be taken to represent the soul (*Purusha*), which by its mere presence exiles Matter and illumines the process of evolution of the universe. Bilasia, we are reminded, is "the embodiment of the primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these Maikala hills; perhaps this earth, since time began." Her "enormous eyes," we are told, "poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them." In the *Sankhya* philosophy the material universe is traced to a First Cause (132).

The fact remains that Arun Joshi hints at The Concept of the First Cause in *The Last Labyrinth*. In *The Foreigner* the concepts of attachment and detachment have been creatively used. As far as *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is concerned, it becomes clear that Billy as Pususa is in the grip of the crisis of identity and his union with Bilasia - a symbol of *Prakriti* - helps him to grapple with the crisis and he discovers in her "that bit of himself that he (had) searched for all his life and without which his life (was) nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others" (142).

Bilasia symbolizes the essence of the *Prakriti* and thus she is able to enliven the *Purusha* in Billy, unlike Meena and Rim who had killed the very instinct of liveliness in him. Dhunia, the head of the tribals, is aware of the fact that *Kale Pahar*, the black rock and master of us all, has called Billy to consummate his search for self-realization. He is entirely transformed.

He wears loin-clothes, has grown beard, and is regarded as a demi-god by the local community. His "skin darkened because of constant exposure to sun. It was stretched tightly emphasizing the muscles of his body. His hair was lighter and longer" (102).

In his pursuit of true values, Billy acquires *Sattvik* qualities. *The Gita* reminds us that the *sattvik* mind looks at the harmony in the world of man and nature:

सर्वभूतेषु येनैकं भावमव्ययमीक्षते।
अविभक्तं विभक्तेषु तज्ज्ञानं विद्धि सात्त्विकम्॥ XVIII. 20.

[That knowledge by which one undivided spiritual nature is seen in all living entities, though they are divided into innumerable forms, you should understand to be in the mode of goodness.] Billy has no interest in the false and sordid aspects of modern civilization. He is deeply involved in the explorations of his inner being. Romi rightly observes:

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surface of our pretension but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call. In brief, I knew of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence of its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake (8).

Billy feels established in the primitive world where he finds his identity. When the people from the civilized world try to take him back, he prefers to die rather than succumb to their black and deep desires. His end was as certain as the end of solitary boat beating against the maelstrom.

The change of Billy Biswas, in fact, is the culmination of his journey from his lifeless *being* in the urban world to a true *becoming* in the primeval world of tribal culture. The joy of Bilasia's sensuality serves as a trigger to his imagination and as a result, his soul assumes a divine aspect - the male principle of the *Purusha* coupled

with the female principle of the Prakriti. In a way, he becomes a divine personality walking on earth, -rather- a lost king who comes back to sustain his deprived people. Dhunia, the tribal chief, tells Rumi that Billy has grown into a *gunia* - a yogi of true wisdom and power. He tells:

It is *Devi Mata* who has been his companion for five thousand years, from one life to another It is from *Devi Mata* that he gets his magic (114).

It has been explicitly explained in *Gita* that true *Vauvasa* does not mean renunciation of life. It in fact, signifies an evolution from the lower *Tamasik* level to the higher *Sattvik* level.

In the following verse, it has been pointed out how *Siddhi* can be attained by an awakened soul:

सिद्धिं प्राप्तो यथा ब्रह्म तथाप्नोति निबोध मे।
समासेनैव कौन्तेय निष्ठा ज्ञानस्य या परा॥ XVIII. 50.

[O Son of Kunti, learn from Me how one who has achieved this perfection can attain to The Supreme perfectional stage, Brahman, the stage of highest knowledge, by acting in the way I shall now summarize.]

Lord Krishna describes how one can achieve the highest perfectional stage by being engaged in his occupational duty, performing that duty for the Supreme Personality or Godhead. Lord Krishna further points out:

बुद्धयः विशुद्धया युक्तो धृत्यात्मानं नियम्य च
शब्दादि विषयाः तत्त्यक्त्वा रागद्वेष तदस्य च॥ (51)

Commenting on this verse A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupade writes in his book *Bhagavad- Gita: As It Is*:

When one is purified by intelligence, he keeps himself in the mode of goodness. Thus, one becomes The Controller of the mind and is always in trance. He is not attached to the objects of sense gratification, and he is free from attachment and hatred in his activities. Such a detached person naturally prefers to live in a secluded place, he does not eat more than what he requires, and he controls the activities of his body and mind (737).

Billy's quest for this state - the stage of self-realization of *Brahman* leads him to sojourn in the tribal world. The fact remains that Billy Biswas meets a tragic end but this is not important in his evolution from a Vegetable life to a spiritually ennobling life. Before falling a martyr to his rebellion against the soul-killing conformism of the modern civilization, Billy Biswas passes through a divine experience walking in the hills of Chandtola. The state of consciousness that Billy aspires for and tries to find it in the tribal world may, at me level, be interpreted as his *Vanvasa* from the material world. However, he remains haunted by his own dilemma.

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