
Arun Joshi's Strange Case of Billy Biswas and the Interplay of Indian Culture and Aesthetics

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Abstract

Indian Aesthetics originated in and around the art of drama by philosophers like Bharatmuni, Anandvaardhan and the like. The paper is an attempt to study the sense of Indian aesthetics with a special focus on Arun Joshi's novel 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas'. It also attempts to examine how the novel's aesthetics contribute to the leading character's development.

Mostly studied for its Indian understanding of existentialism and ideas of alternative ways of living, the work of the award-winning author, taken into consideration, also helps provide the readers with an ethereal depiction aesthetics of India.

Joshi's novel, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971) has been studied. The paper thus discusses how, while exploring the theme of 'self-discovery' and the absurdity of life, Arun Joshi has also been successful in fulfilling the aesthetic sense of a reader's mind. The author of the paper has also tried to prove that the settings are not just places, but with their vivid descriptions, they also come out as secondary characters, helping to take the story forward. The paper is a study of the novel under the framework of Indian aesthetics and art of visualisation.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Indian culture, Indian aesthetics.

Introduction: How is the Character of Billy Biswas Strange?

The strangeness of the Protagonist, Billy Biswas, is apparent in the very beginning of the novel when Romesh Sahai alias Romi, the intimate friend of Billy and the Narrator of the story, remarks-

“As I grow old, I realise that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to understand. The attempt to understand is 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 unravelled sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such and extraordinary obsessions." (Joshi,7)

Arun Joshi's novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a profound exploration of cultural identity, the conflict between modernity and tradition, feelings of alienation, and the search for spiritual fulfilment. The novel delves into the inner struggles of its protagonist, Billy Biswas, as he grapples with the contrasting pulls of materialism and a primal, spiritual existence in pursuit of a deeper, more primal connection with life, rooted in the primordial world.

"In the Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Arun Joshi has carried his exploration of the consciousness of helpless rootless people a stage further, and has revealed to our gaze new gas chambers of self-forced misery." (Iyengar 8)

Arun Joshi's portrayal of Billy Biswas in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is deeply rooted in Indian philosophy and aesthetics, too, exploring themes such as alienation, self-realisation, and the tension between modernity and tradition. Billy Biswas emerges as a character embodying the Indian philosophical quest for a deeper, more meaningful existence, transcending the superficial allure of materialism. Like an ascetic, he is in constant quest to explore his inner being.

"If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretention but in those 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 know of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous threat of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake." (Joshi, 8)

Elements of Indian Aesthetics in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

The Indian aesthetics, rooted in concepts such as *rasa*, *maya*, *moksha*, and *samsara*, provides a rich lens through which to interpret Billy's journey and his ultimate quest for transcendence. This paper explores the elements of Indian aesthetics as manifested in the novel, shedding light on its themes of existential yearning, cultural dissonance, and the pursuit of the infinite.

In Indian philosophy, the concept of *rasa* (emotional essence) and the pursuit of the sublime or spiritual experience are central (Gupta). Billy's dissatisfaction with urban life and his pursuit of a deeper truth echo the aesthetic ideal of seeking transcendence. His immersion in tribal culture serves as a metaphorical journey to discover the eternal truths of existence, akin to the Indian spiritual tradition of renunciation (*sannyasa*).

The Dichotomy of *Samsara* and Renunciation

Billy Biswas's life is marked by a profound tension between the materialistic world (*samsara*) and his yearning for spiritual liberation (*moksha*). As a member of a wealthy Indian family and a promising academic from the United States, Billy is ensnared by the trappings of material success. In one of his letters to Tuula Lindgren, his Swedish girlfriend, he tells her how the materialistic world, which includes his family and loved ones, does not feel familiar to him, which explains his slow progression towards the ascetic form of life he later chooses (Joshi 97).

However, he feels an inexplicable pull toward a simpler, more primal existence that aligns with his spiritual inclinations. Tuula, while explaining about this gravitational force to Romi, says-

“a great force,..... Urkraft, primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it....”. In the same letter, she further explains how the force is stronger than his will and is going to pull him ultimately (Joshi 23).

This duality reflects the fundamental conflict in Indian philosophy between worldly attachments and the pursuit of transcendence.

The novel's turning point occurs when Billy renounces his privileged life to live among the tribal communities in central India. This act of renunciation mirrors the Indian ascetic tradition, where individuals abandon *samsara* to seek higher truths. By rejecting the material world, Billy embarks on a journey to reconnect with the essence of existence, echoing the Indian aesthetic ideal of achieving unity with the infinite through detachment and self-realisation (Gupta Ashish).

Maya and the Illusion of Modernity

In Indian philosophy, *maya* refers to the illusory nature of the material world, which obscures the ultimate reality. The stark contrast between the urban, materialistic world and the tribal, spiritual world in the novel illustrates this concept of *maya*. Billy's disenchantment with modern, urban life underscores this concept. Despite his education, wealth, and social standing, he experiences a deep sense of alienation and emptiness. He perceives the civilised life of wealth and privilege as a façade, unable to provide the spiritual fulfilment he craves. His rejection of this life reflects his recognition of its illusory nature as:

“I sometimes wonder whether civilisation is anything more than making and spending money. What else does the civilized man do?” (Joshi 97).

Billy perceives the tribal way of life as more authentic and aligned with the rhythms of nature, free from the deceptions of modernity. This dichotomy highlights the novel's critique of contemporary society and its emphasis on superficial success, which blinds individuals to deeper, spiritual truths. His rejection of this illusory world is an act of breaking free from the bonds of *maya* to seek a more authentic existence, rooted in the timeless and eternal truths that Indian philosophy celebrates.

The Evocation of Rasa in Billy's Journey

Indian aesthetics places great importance on *rasa*, the emotional essence or flavour evoked by a work of art. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* masterfully evokes a range of *rasas* that shape the reader's engagement with Billy's journey. The *karuna rasa* (pathos)

dominates much of the narrative, as Billy's inner turmoil and eventual rejection of societal norms evoke a profound sense of compassion and empathy. His discontent with the urban world stems from its inability to evoke these deeper emotional and spiritual responses. The tribal life, by contrast, offers a harmonious balance that resonates with his inner being.

Billy's connection with the tribal world introduces elements of *shringara rasa* (romantic and aesthetic love), as seen in his relationship with Bilasia, a tribal woman. Their bond transcends physical attraction and symbolises Billy's union with a deeper, more primal aspect of existence:

“Desire was too mild a word for what I felt at the moment. It was closer to madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his god. It was that passing moment that rarely comes in man's life, when he feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others.” (Joshi 142).

The narrative also gestures toward *shanta rasa* (tranquillity), particularly in moments where Billy finds solace in the simplicity and spirituality of tribal life. These *rasas* collectively underscore the emotional and spiritual dimensions of Billy's journey, enriching the novel's aesthetic appeal.

The Inner Journey is symbolic of the Soul's (*Atman's*) Journey

Billy's journey is comparable to the archetypal hero's journey described in Indian epics like the *Mahabharata* or the *Ramayana*, where the protagonist undergoes a process of self-discovery and transformation.

His rejection of societal norms and his immersion into the tribal wilderness are symbolic of the *atman's* (soul's) journey to realise its true nature, free from the constraints of ego and social constructs.

Desire (*Kama*) and Its Transcendence

Desire, or *kama*, is a recurring theme in the novel, reflecting the tension between worldly attachments and spiritual aspirations. Billy's relationship with Bilasia represents a shift from materialistic and superficial desires to a more profound, spiritual connection. He recalls his feelings on meeting Bilasia:

“As I stepped forward I had the distinct, if somewhat confused, feeling that I was facing not merely a human being but also the embodiment of that primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these hills, perhaps this earth, since time began and that, our proud claims to the contrary, still lay in wait for us not far from the doorstep of our air-conditioned rooms.” (Joshi 226).

Indian aesthetics views the transcendence of *kama* as essential for achieving *moksha*. Billy's journey illustrates this progression, as he relinquishes his worldly desires to embrace a life of simplicity and spiritual authenticity. Arun Joshi explains it as he writes about how Billy could finally accept his authentic identity as he went to live a life like a tribal person,

where he also met Bilasia (Joshi 116). This transformation underscores the novel's alignment with Indian philosophical traditions, which emphasise the importance of overcoming attachment to desires in the pursuit of liberation.

The Role of Compassion (*Karuna/Pida*) in Spiritual Awakening

Compassion (*Karuna*) is a central element of Indian philosophy and a recurring motif in Billy's journey. His alienation from the modern world and his inner turmoil are manifestations of *karuna/pida*, which catalyses his spiritual awakening. Through compassion, Billy becomes acutely aware of the inadequacies of his materialistic existence and is compelled to seek a more meaningful life.

The novel portrays compassion not as an end but as a necessary step toward self-realisation. Billy's decision to leave his privileged life and immerse himself in the tribal world is an act of courage born out of his *pida*. This aligns with the Indian aesthetic understanding that *compassion* can lead to transformation and the discovery of higher truths. "They all seemed to waiting and watching and staring at me. It was as though I was not Bimal Biswas, a graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas and father of a handsome child, it was as though I were not all this but the first man on earth facing the earth's first night....'Come' it said. Come to our primitive world that would sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come, We have waited for you..... Come, Come, Come. Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on the earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of the hill." (Joshi 120).

Conflict Between *Dharma* and *Adharma*

Billy's struggle reflects a larger tension between *dharma* (righteousness) and *adharma* (unrighteousness) in Indian thought. For him, the modern, materialistic world represents *adharma*, while the tribal way of life embodies *dharma*—a life lived by natural and universal laws.

Renunciation as a Rebirth

Renunciation (*vairagya*) is a recurring theme in Indian philosophy. Billy's rejection of his former life can be seen as an act of renunciation, leading to a metaphorical rebirth. His transition from Billy Biswas, the affluent son of a judge, to a tribal villager symbolises a shedding of ego and societal identity to achieve spiritual liberation.

The Interplay of Fate (*Prarabdh*) and Free Will (*Purushartha*)

The tension between fate (*prarabdh*) and free will (*purushartha*) is another significant element of Indian philosophy reflected in the novel. Billy's actions and decisions are shaped by his inherent nature and his past experiences, yet he exercises free will in choosing to abandon his societal obligations and pursue a different path. This interplay underscores the complexity of his character and his journey:

Indian aesthetics acknowledges the dynamic relationship between *prarabdh* and *purushartha*, emphasising that individuals have to shape their destinies while remaining bound by the consequences of their past actions. Billy's journey reflects this duality, highlighting the challenges and possibilities of navigating the labyrinth of life.

Nature (*Prakriti*) as a Spiritual Force

Indian aesthetics places great importance on living in harmony with nature, often depicted as sacred in ancient texts. Nature plays a significant role in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, serving as a source of inspiration and a symbol of spiritual purity. The tribal world's close connection with nature contrasts sharply with the artificiality of urban life, reflecting the Indian aesthetic ideal of harmony with the natural world as seen in ancient texts like the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Billy's escape from the modern world to the natural tribal regions reflects this aesthetic ideal (Gupta). His attraction toward tribal life symbolises his desire to reconnect with this primal, uncorrupted existence.

“Becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end. Of course, I realized it only after I ran away. I realized then that I was seeking something else. I am still seeking something else.” (Joshi 189).

The tribal community he chooses represents an embodiment of *prakriti* (nature) and *satya* (truth), values often celebrated in Indian philosophy. The simple and collective lifestyle of the tribal people reflects the aesthetic ideal of *sahaja*—spontaneity and naturalness: “What kept us happy, I suppose were the same thing that have kept all primitives happy through the ages; the earth, the forest, the rainbow, the liquor from the Mahua, and occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love making, and, more than anything else, no ambition at all.” (Joshi 148).

The novel's depiction of nature also resonates with the Indian philosophical concept of *prakriti* (the natural world) as a manifestation of the divine. By aligning himself with nature, Billy reconnects with a deeper, universal truth, underscoring the spiritual significance of this divine force in Indian aesthetics.

Conclusion

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a profound exploration of the human condition, deeply rooted in the principles of Indian aesthetics and philosophy. Billy Biswas is a modern representation of the Indian philosophical seeker, grappling with the eternal tension between the material and the spiritual. His journey reflects core Indian aesthetics—an emphasis on simplicity, transcendence, and harmony with nature. Through Billy Biswas's journey, Arun Joshi critiques the alienation caused by modernity and materialism while celebrating the Indian aesthetic values of simplicity, spirituality, and harmony with nature. The novel serves as a reminder of the enduring relevance of these values in a rapidly changing world and poses questions about the true essence of happiness and fulfilment in life.

Ultimately, the novel affirms the importance of transcending worldly attachments and reconnecting with the spiritual essence of existence. By engaging with the timeless elements of Indian aesthetics, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* provides a compelling narrative that resonates with universal themes of identity, fulfilment, and the search for the infinite. Through the character of Billy Biswas, the novel delves into themes of *maya*, *kama*, *samsara*, and *moksha*, offering a rich tapestry of emotional and spiritual experiences.

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