

## Abstract

As a writer of  
existentiality, Arun  
Joshi tackles the  
issue of existence-

*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* :A Journey of  
Existence & Identity from Materialism to Idealism

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identity altogether in his novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. This study attempts to investigate the problem of existence and identity in the protagonist's novel Billy Biswas who forsook the western civilization and modernism and returned to his native primitivism in India. To achieve this goal, the researcher draws insights from many existentialist thinkers and attempts to discuss the way the author dealt with the western existentialist philosophy to understand the predicament of modern man's life and ultimately finds the solution and solace for his protagonist in the Hindu philosophy.

Keywords: identity, existentialism, modernism, primevality

## الملخص

بصفته أحد كُتّاب الوجوديّة، تناول آرون جوشي قضية الوجود والهوية في روايته "الحالة الغريبة لبيلي بيسواس". تحاول هذه الدراسة التحقيق في إشكالية الوجود والهوية لدى بطل الرواية بيلي بيسواس الذي

تخلّى عن الحضارة الغربية والحدّاتّة وعاد إلى بدائياته الأصلية في الهند. ومِنْ أَجْلِ أَنْ تُحَقِّقَ الدراسة الهدف المنشود، يستمد الباحث رؤية العديد من المفكرين الوجوديين، وهو يحاول مناقشة طريقة تعامل المؤلف مع الفلسفة الوجودية الغربية لفهم هذا المأزق في حياة الإنسان الحديث، وفي النهاية يجد الحلّ والعزاء لبطله في الفلسفة الهندوسية.

## Existentialism and fiction

The problem of existence and identity has been a concern for thinkers and philosophers through the ages. In the modern world, this problem becomes more crucial with human beings involved in a circle of ideologies. This has forced many philosophers, thinkers and writers to contemplate the issue of human existence and identity. They have been searching for ways to assign some implication to human existence. This has given rise to many theories dealing with both the meaning of life and its meaninglessness. Existentialism is one such school of thought that deals with the meaninglessness of life owing to the complexity of human existence and identity. Arun Joshi is an existential Indian fiction writer. His thoughts on existentialism result from his readings of the works of Albert Camus and Sartre. Their concepts and theories help analyze the existential and identity issues faced by the protagonists of Joshi's novels. The study attempts to define the key concepts and theories of 'existentialism', developed by both the theistic and atheistic existentialists, which form the background of the study. The study stresses the fact that the notion of existentialism is not limited to Western countries. It has made its route around the world. The writers of eastern countries addressed the problem of existence and identity in their works, especially in fiction. Likewise, Indian writers portrayed modern man's predicament, such as

isolation, alienation, identity crisis and spiritual barrenness, though in varied contexts. Arun Joshi, among others, also presents these problems in his novels. Although great western existentialists have influenced him, he never left behind the teachings of the Hindu religion. Joshi's family's social background as well as his experiences in India and America distinguishes him from his Western existentialist counterparts. Arun Joshi follows them in their notion of the absurdity of human life, but does not forsake his characters in this insane, awful, absurd world. He provides them with a way to deal with the meaninglessness of existence. Arun Joshi has expressed his tremendous confidence in Indian philosophy and Hindu classics such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads to discover a solution to existential issues.

#### Billy's exploration of existence

Progress in science, technology and industrialization placed modern man in a state of meaningless existence in such a way that he has lost connection with older values and his origins due to the fallacy of modernity. This rootlessness has led to an absurd situation that makes man depressed, isolated and unsatisfied. In terms of this mysterious existence of modern man, the protagonist of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* frequently tries to come out of his miserable life. Due to his feeling of disconnection with modern civilized society, he embarks on a metaphysical search for his root and origin.

In this novel, the author Arun Joshi projects two different societies representing two different modes of life: one is a primitive society demonstrating old values of Indian culture and tradition, and the other is a

modern civilized society signifying wealth worship, artificiality and illusion. Through the psychological struggle of Billy Biswas, Joshi cleverly juxtaposes primitivism and modernism. These two ways of life appear as two struggling principles that form the protagonist's being. Mr. Biswas is trapped between the two until he finally chooses primitivism as the only way of authentic existence. Lokesh Kumar remarks, "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" (204: 48). Responding to his inner voice which has been tormenting him since childhood, Billy firmly decides to reject the artificial life of the civilized world and become part of the more authentic existence he finds in the primitive world.

Biswas, a man of strange obsession, was born and brought up in a wealthy family. His father had been an Indian ambassador in a European country. Billy practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. Later he was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of India. He goes to America for higher studies. There, he develops an early interest in the primitive culture of the tribal communities. His fondness for the tribals obliges him to study anthropology. So, by disobeying his father's wish, he completes his Ph.D. in anthropology. The novel opens in Harlem, the black ghetto of New York, and ends in the Satpura Hills. These two geographic locations are presented in contrast to the upper crust of the American and Indian societies to reveal what civilized society has lost in pursuing worldly pleasure. Although Billy comes from the upper class, he prefers to live in Harlem instead of Manhattan which is a colony of elites because he finds a place to nurture his primitive self without any interference of civilized

society. Selecting Harlem to stay in indicates his distance from the civilized Americans on the one hand and a sense of belongingness with Negroes on the other. He finds Harlem “the most human place” (Joshi, 2010: 9) to live and gets a glimpse of primitivism in the company of Negroes. Despite this momentary fulfillment, an urge to live a primitive life with the tribals lingers in his subconscious and keeps him restless. During his stay in America, he expresses his fondness for anthropology in a formal conversation with his friend Romi. Pointing towards the piles of books in his apartment, he asserts, “All I want to do in the life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginals of the world...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” (Ibid: 14).

Romi, the witness narrator, first meets Billy at a dinner party, and the two become good friends. Romi quickly realizes that Billy is a peculiar man with unusual behavior. He notices his abnormal conduct in his every move, which develops a sense of curiosity about him. Romi becomes aware of Billy’s ontological concerns very immediately after meeting him. He explains that Billy’s decision to stay in Harlem and subsequent abandoning of the civilized world results from a repeated signal he has been receiving in the “dark mossy labyrinth of the soul” (Ibid: 8).

### Simplicity and spirituality

The protagonist’s life passes through different stages. In his childhood, he sensed the primitive urge, but the agents of modern civilization immediately suppressed it. The desire remained alive within

the protagonist as the most covert part of his personality started gushing out during his stay in America. Finally, after returning to India, he decides to explore the primitive self that keeps him restless all the time. Thus, his life may be divided into two stages. In the first stage, Billy has lived as a member of the civilized community in America and India; in the second stage, he abandons the civilized world entirely to fulfill his innermost desire and settles down with the tribals in the Maikala Hills. His desire for primitivism is not a superficial desire but an inborn quality deeply rooted in his personality. He has started to experience intimations of his primitive urge at fourteen during summer vacation in Bhubaneswar. As a boy, he once stayed in his maternal uncle's bungalow, situated on the outskirts where Adivasis frequently visited for one or the other reason. He was fascinated by the exotic place and the people over there. The landscape did not only attract him but also ignited a strange sensation within him. He felt a kind of transformation as something strange was happening within him. Describing his feeling, he says, "It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake" (Ibid: 122). He could not figure out what was bothering him exactly. Exposure to the world of nature gave him a glimpse of the 'other world' which made him curious about his existence and identity. He asked himself, "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (Ibid: 122); this curiosity about his identity prompted him to explore the hidden part of his primitive self. One afternoon when he visited the temple of Konarak, he felt that Adivasis had answers for his existential queries. He informs, "If anyone had a clue to it, it was only the adivasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark inscrutable faces" (Ibid: 124). Later, he gets exposure to the tribal

culture while enjoying a fun fair, where he closely observes stalls, tribal games and dances. Moreover, he had a glimpse of his deeply- rooted unconscious desire, wherein he could connect with the tribal culture. One tribal couple sauntering hand in glove near the stall captivates his mind. The sight ignites his unconscious urge for primitivism. In this fair which has a primitive ambiance, his unconscious desire makes an upward surge towards his conscious mind for the first time, "First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me . . . It was a bit like having taken a dose of a hallucinatory drug...This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of" (Ibid: 125).

Billy becomes bewildered by the tribal activities around him as they stimulate his primitive impulse, which he fails to understand. Sometimes, he goes into a trance- like state. His mother suppressed his longing for primitivism during his childhood. She got furious when she learned that he had spent the whole night with the tribals. The chauffeur, who had taken him to the fair, was dismissed right away and his mother scolded him as if he had committed a blunder. She warned him, "I absolutely forbid you to step out of the house without my permission. If you don't, I shall write to your father" (Ibid: 125- 6). The longing for the primitive life did not die out entirely within Billy; it instead remained alive in the deepest layer of his unconscious mind and kept coming to his conscious mind from time to time in different forms. During an evening walk in Simla, Romi notices a glimpse of Billy's deeply rooted unconscious impulse. He notices a strange look on Billy's face when the voice of a singing girl reaches his ears from a cottage. It is not the first time that Romi notices a fascinating effect of music on Billy. He finds him in that condition at a melody

celebration in George's flat when he starts beating a drum for a short period of time, and everybody there feels a compelling pull of the music. The effect of this drumming on Billy was that his "face ran with perspiration and he looked exhausted as though he had returned from a long and difficult journey" (Ibid: 21). Billy's fascination with biographies, particularly Van Gogh's biography and Jazz Music, symbolically indicates his inclination towards the primitive urge he encounters in different art forms.

#### Hallucinations and dreams

The other channel through which Billy gets a glimpse of the otherworld is a hallucination he has experienced from a very early age. The recurring hallucinations after the event of Bhubaneswar kept him restless. It seemed that his suppressed desires started coming forth in the form of hallucinations. He becomes excited whenever he sees a glimpse of the other world, and his monotonous civilized life with all its splendor fails to engage him. Expressing his experience at the age of fourteen, he asserts, "It flared up especially whenever I heard the sound of drums at night...I could actually see the field in all the detail, smell the smoke from the fires, see the dancers, feel the displacement of air as the boy and the girl, laughing, went past me once again. (Ibid: 92).

Hallucinations torment his soul and increase his estrangement from his social surroundings. He feels as if something wrong has gone in his life. He is not in the right place to nurture his true self. He is in search of something which can make his life meaningful. If worldly matters attract him for a while, the recurring hallucinations remind him that he does not



belong to this world. Sharing his experience of hallucinations with Romi, Billy expresses his feelings, "It would be like a great blinding flash during which I would be totally unaware of anything else. And invariably it left me with the old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with my life. I wasn't where I belonged" (Ibid: 181). He discussed the matter also with Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady who was receiving brilliant drill in psychiatric social work. She knew what was burning inside him, which might explode any moment but she assured him that it was only a suppressed quest. Billy got afraid that something terrible would happen as he felt that it was hard to deal with the position.

Through the hallucinations and dreams, Billy got access to his innermost self. He received the continuous sound from the invisible place where reality existed. Everyone gets this call as Tuula affirms, but they are blind to see the truth within and get distracted by deceiving themselves with worldly matters. Billy lives in a world where people live according to society's demands, compromising the essence of their beings. This detachment from their true selves results in a life of bad faith, an inauthentic and false life full of pretensions and illusions. Realizing his mistakes in delaying listening to the call of his true self, Billy shows his rebellious nature and refuses to follow the conventional path by responding to the call of his soul. Instead of treading along the common path, Billy prefers to pursue a strange course of life no matter how elusive and rationally unconvincing it is. He chooses to go along "the tenuous thread of existence" (Ibid: 8). Billy asserts his individuality and true self by rejecting to conform to the social norms. Explaining individuality, Richard A. Ball depicts that, "Opportunity for some to free themselves from

traditional constraints and to soar to the heights of individuality depends upon the social subordination of others who were denied such visions” (Ibid: 26).

### Primitivism versus modernism

Billy searches for a place as an alternative to develop his real identity. Therefore, he suffers from a psychological struggle between his inner longing for primitivism and his outward civilized modern self. This conflict between modern and primitive mode of existence creates havoc in his life. He faces an existential crisis because he neither accepts modern life with all its artificiality and materialism nor rejects it for quite some time. Thus, he lives in a confused state that makes his life unpleasant and dissatisfied. He becomes a case of “split-personality... split between primitive and civilized” (Pandey, 2000: 70). Billy dislikes the bourgeois society he is definitely a part of because the people of the modern civilized society have distanced themselves from the primitive culture and lived a life of hypocrisy. Despite being born in the upper cast of the Anglicized society, he fails to identify with his surroundings. Therefore, he remains alienated in the sophisticated environment and feels a mysterious pull for primitive life. Although he is very much part of modern civilized life, his soul remains detached.

Despite having his moorings in India, he also feels alienated in Indian society for its shallowness. He stayed in America but aspired to know the ancient Indian culture and tradition. He wanted to travel to the remote regions of India where he could get to meet the tribals known for carrying primitive culture in its purest form. Billy tells Romi, “You have no

idea what fascinating societies exist in India” (Joshi, 2010: 14). He, therefore, shows a zealous involvement with anthropology. He has strange desires in life. Nobody knows the other side of his personality except his two friends Romi and Tuula. Others find it difficult to understand what is going on in the inner recesses of his soul. Tuula knows Billy’s urge for primitivism. She desires to know about Indian tribes, their culture and traditions and keeps Billy engaged as he knows enough about them. The primitive life, free from sophistication and artificialities, is the other world that Billy was searching for. With time, he develops a feeling of anxiety as he wants to withdraw himself entirely from the civilized world. He, therefore, renounces this world of materialism and deceit to make his life meaningful and authentic. He chooses to fulfill his urge for primitivism

Billy chooses to reject the society in which he took birth because of growing artificiality, snobbery and hypocrisy. Expressing his hatred for the materialistic society, he says, “I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending money. What else does the civilized man do?” (Joshi, 2010: 96). His disinclination towards civilized life generates a sense of alienation from his surroundings and makes him aware of the ‘other world.’ To get a glimpse of the other world, he lives in Harlem, the slum of America. He affirms, “Most of us are 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” (Ibid: 18- 9). He longs to penetrate the true nature of human beings to find “something radical missing in life and tries to regain it” (Urmil, 2001: 46). Searching for his missing self, he moves onwards to find “an alternative space where he

may not only come to terms with his inner chaos but also, in the process, authenticate both his being and becoming” (Rekha and Anup Beniwal, 2010: 42). His estrangement from civilized society and the consequent restlessness and anxiety drive him to go on a quest for an authentic life and his true identity.

Tuula knows about the latent force which lies suppressed in Billy’s personality and tries to manifest itself time and again. Tuula knows that Billy is not strong enough to subdue it for a long time. Moreover, she informs Romi that primitive force is strong in Billy and he should not encourage it. She says, “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” (Joshi, 2010: 23).

Billy finds himself misplaced in the American society. Therefore, he returns to India to change the place after completing his Ph. D and joins Delhi University as an assistant professor. Similar problems awaited him in India that he encountered in America. He finds that the civilized societies of India and America are not different. Alienation has controlled his soul, making him “a fish out of water in the westernized Delhi society and among its members” (Ghosh, 1996: 74). Therefore, he alienates himself from the materialistic society because he cannot identify with them. Civilized people live a distracted life. If Billy continues to live and mingle with them, he, too, will be lost. He, therefore, needs to overcome

each impediment if he wants to pay attention to his motive, that is to say, to find his true identity and essence of life.

Billy's abhorrence for the civilized world instigates him to make certain decisions to change the course of his life. He had selected Harlem to keep himself away from America's sophisticated and modern world. He returns to India to find the solution to his miseries, but his home makes him more restless. He tries to adjust to the sociocultural system of India. He tries to connect with the religious order by visiting temples but soon realizes "that the god who awaited me now was one to which no temples could be built. What awaited me now, I realized was Fate" (Joshi, 2010: 98). Though he feels some connection with his home and people, he fails to determine any meaningful relationship with his family, religion and society. He remains a restless and alienated soul and a sense of nothingness surrounds him. His mind is all the time occupied with the question of identity. Incompatible relationships with his family members highlight Billy's problem. His marriage with Meena Chatterjee makes his life even more unstable. He marries with the hope that marriage will bring normalcy to his life. He desires to develop cordial relationships with society but soon realizes that he has committed a big mistake. His illusion of marriage turns out to be a confusing because Meena failed to bring him out of his existential crisis. He tells Romi, "My married life so quickly went to pot" (Ibid: 179). He was not at peace with his wife Meena. Observing his behavior, Meena once said, "Go to your cannibals, if you find me so intolerable" (Ibid: 80).

He runs away from social responsibilities because he thinks that duty towards the soul is more significant than any other responsibility. He thinks that the materialistic world and familial obligation are meaningless maelstroms that annihilate him day by day. His outward appearance and behavior is radically altered due to his constant inner conflict and mental anguish. When Romi meets Billy after a disconnection of three years, he instantly notices a visible change in his personality. Dissatisfied with his marital life, Billy starts losing his hold on himself and becomes perplexed in action and behavior. Damaging effect of marriage begins to appear in the form of confusion in his mind. He starts expressing his discontent by losing his temper on minor issues. His wife complains, "He sulks around, then starts snapping at everybody. He snaps at me, at the child, at the servants, until I can't stand it and butt in, and we have a full scale quarrel" (Ibid: 77). Billy's strange behavior and absence of sexual intimacy troubles Meena to the extent that she presumes that he has an affair with another woman. She confesses to Romi about Billy's changing behavior day by day. These domestic quarrels on trivial issues make him more alienated, disoriented and unusual, which is reflected in his behavior with the people around him. Despite all his efforts, Billy has failed to identify with the kind of life they led. Realizing the futility of marital life, he becomes disillusioned and breaks away from all the restrictions and obligations imposed by the institution of marriage. Being extremely frustrated, Billy indulges in an extramarital relationship with Rima Kaul, a girl from Mumbai. She consoles him and gives him a kind of pleasure that provides him with momentary relief from the monotony of his married life. Rima's

soothing words make him happier than indulging in an intercourse act with her.

Her empathy attracts him so much that a thought comes to his mind that he should divorce his wife and marry Rima. Billy is aware of his moral degradation when he commits adultery. He realizes that it happened due to wasting time in an undesirable existence. The life he is subjected to live is not in continuity with his primitive self. His indecision and unnecessary delay in taking action increase his anguish and restlessness. He feels that he has started doing something which he disapproves of others. Commenting on Billy's relationship with Rima Kaul, Urmil writes, "Seduction of Rima Kaul is the last warning signal to Billy which gives him a preview of the corrupting force which awaits him if he continues to defy what his soul longed for" (2001: 52). His seduction alienates him from his true self. Billy finds himself not only morally corrupt but distanced from his true self. The feeling of degradation increases his anxiety. Arvind M. Nawale informs that "[Billy's soul] soul pinches him to fly away from the civilized world, which is responsible for his degradation" (2012: 99). Billy puts all the blame on the society for his degraded condition. He lives in bad faith as he does not take responsibility of his action and fails to make decisions in life. His downfall appears to be due to his nonresponsive behavior towards his inner voice and ignoring its signals for a better world. He asserts, "It dawned on me ... my soul was taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for...if you haven't the guts to break away from this filth... I am going to wallow in it until it makes you sick. (Joshi, 2010: 189).

He wants to come out of the domination of bad faith by making decisions on the call of his soul. He is faced with two choices. He affirms, "I had two clear choices: I could either follow this call, this vision, whatever the cost, or be condemned to total decay" (Ibid: 190). Such a dilemma demonstrates the anxiety of an existential being. Most people do not dare to make decisions because they do not want to take responsibility for their actions. Billy asserts, "Deep down we are afraid that the price of making such choices is terrible, not realizing that the price of not making them is even more terrible." (Ibid: 190)

Billy detests the society where empathy, emotion and values are frustrated and people are captivated by material concerns only. His effort to "search for a meaningful life and to find his true identity is constantly blurred by his contact with the debasing materialist and emotionally dehydrated society" (Vatsa, 2001: 69). Realizing his degradation induces Billy to reject this materialistic world and take refuge in the primitive system. In the beginning, he takes anthropological expeditions with his students to keep away from the civilized culture and spend his time in the natural, pure and natural environment of the tribal life in the forest. When he returns from his excursions, the time he spent with the tribal people becomes the memories he appreciates. It is the primeval life of the forest that he longs for. He expresses his feeling in a letter to Tuula that he is a "visitor from the wilderness to the marts of the Big City and not the other way round" (Joshi, 2010: 96). Billy strongly feels an instinctive and original connection with this world during these expeditions. While he tells the students about the tribals' origins, geographical details, and livelihood, he experiences a strange sensation. He feels that he is one of them, thereby



acting as a spokesperson of the tribal community, giving every minute detail of their culture that is otherwise impossible to envisage for an outsider.

During one such expedition, he decides to renounce the civilized world. These expeditions form his urge and prepare him to take decisive action in life. On his last expedition, before disappearing into the forests of Maikala hills, Billy discovers himself in a world entirely different from the civilized one. Sitting alone on the stone outside the tent, Billy undergoes a profound transformation during nighttime in the depth of the forest. He relates, "Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling into the moonlight" (Ibid: 121). He feels as if he is not Billy Biswas, an assistant professor of Delhi University and the son of a Supreme Court judge but "the first man on earth facing the earth's first night." (Ibid: 120). He finds himself a new man who has left his past behind to create his own identity and has started leading an authentic life. In search of his true self, he finally vanishes into the primitive world and leaves no trace behind. With the help of the government, his father and wife try to trace him for a year, but all prove useless. They believe that an animal has eaten him. He withdraws from the sophisticated world that fails to help him create his identity. Commenting on Billy's withdrawal, Urmil asserts, "This Withdrawal is for the realization of his true identity and for integration with the vital forces of nature that will lead him to higher plane of experience... Billy Biswas is determined to carve out his own identity" (2001: 54). Commenting on Billy's withdrawal, Urmil asserts that "This withdrawal is for the realization of his true identity and integration with vital

forces of nature that will lead him to higher plane of experience. It is an effort to integrate with the real primitive self". (2001:54)

His withdrawal from civilized society was an urgent need because the social order he lived in failed to solve his problems. He does not care what others will think about him because he obeys his inner consciousness. Some critics criticize Billy for evading familial responsibilities, declaring him an escapist. Nevertheless, Muktehwar Pandey defends his escapist nature by comparing him to Lord Buddha, "His is not an escape from reality but an escape into reality on the lines of prince Siddhartha" (1998: 84). There are different narratives of Lord Buddha's life. In one of them, Lord Buddha left his house searching for truth at the age of twenty-nine and attained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. He preferred to sleep under the tree leaving behind the comforts of the palace. He renounced all worldly pleasures for the highest truth. Likewise, Billy leaves his house and disappears into the *saal* forest, searching for truth. After ten years of disappearance, Billy deliberately comes into contact with Romi and enlightens him on the simple and blissful life of the primitive world. He wanted to share his experience of the other life before he died. His sole motive is to bring reformation to the world order he has left behind.

### Embracing primitivism

Billy answers the call of his soul and becomes one of the primitives. His quest finally comes to an end in the primitive world- the jungle of Maikala where he is warmly welcomed by the primitives as though he has always been a part of them. He is treated as one of the avatars of God. In

sharp contrast, Billy is an outcast in the civilized community on the pretext of his strange and rebellious nature. He remains an outsider for them as the most hidden side of his being conforms to the primitive mode of existence, not to the ideals of the modern civilized world. He becomes a part of the pure and natural life in the jungle, untainted by the artificiality of the so-called civilized society. The tribals, unlike modern people, are not as ambitious as they do not have any false aspirations in life. They live in the present having plenty of time for singing and dancing and least bothering about past and future. As Billy informs, the primitives do not appear to be curious about anything that informs an urban life, such as the rising price of grains, construction of roads, development in science and technology, politics, or anything else. On the contrary, they discuss the elemental forces of nature and the supernatural phenomena.

Primitives welcome Billy; give him shelter and all the other accommodations he was searching for in modern civilized society. He wins the heart of Dhunia, head of the village, within a short span of time. He cures Bilasia, Dhunia's niece, when she suffers from severe fever. He chooses to live with Bilasia who is the symbol of primitivism. She represents the primitive world and Billy finds in her what he could not find in Meena and Rima. Bilasia helps him rediscover his missing self and replaces his restlessness with tranquility. Explaining Billy's union with Bilasia, Romi illuminates, Billy "discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life... Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called him night after night, year after year" (Ibid: 103). She helped him unburden himself from his past bearings. He finally

freed himself from his connections with civilized society with all its pretensions and aberrations.

His hallucinations stopped now; he began seeing everything clearly and directly which he had envisaged through hallucinations. He starts living with Bilasia and finds peace of mind and spiritual tranquility in her company. Bilasia satisfies the thirst of his soul while Meena and Rima increased it. Billy finds his missing self after coming into contact with Bilasia. His union with Bilasia completes him. His union with her brings integration of his split selves. Bilasia's submission to Billy's urge and her union with him brings him back to life. He feels as if he has taken a new birth in the forest of Maikala Hills. He witnesses here the life in its most authentic and purest form.

His union with Bilasia paved the way for his true identity. Commenting on his union with Bilasia, Tapan Kumar Ghosh asserts, "Billy's union with her suggests his communion with Prakriti that enables him to find his true self, achieve the fullest perception of reality and realize his own potentialities" (1996: 82). It seems that it is not only Bilasia who represents the original nature but the forest that becomes alive after the arrival of Billy. They started to glow again as they used to when the mythical king of the primitives was alive. Primitives consider Billy an incarnation of the dead king. After coming into the lap of nature and being united with true nature, Billy is awakened from slumber. One needs to liberate oneself from the pretensions and illusions of the civilized world. Life in its most original form can be realized in primitivism.

The origin of man can be traced back to the pre-civilized times when primitivism was the only condition of human existence. Primitivism got suppressed after the emergence of civilization. The lives of Adivasis and other tribal communities in India are akin to the primitive life that follows no restraints imposed by the so- called civilized society. Bilasia, one of the heroines who refused to live in shackles, truly represents the spirit of primitive life. She has deserted her husband after two children for her freedom and to live her own life. When one of the men asks her how many lovers she has now, she replies, “More than you can count, but none of them is without teeth, dada” (Joshi, 2010: 114). She neither regrets her past doings nor shows any kind of dilemma for moving ahead. She is an independent woman who earns her living by collecting wood in the jungle. Throughout the novel, Billy appears to be an architect who rebels against the established order when he fails to identify with it. He has the ability to overcome the situation in which he finds himself trapped and makes his life terrible. Firstly, his decision to live in Harlem, a slum in America, is the voice of his soul as he finds it the most humane place in America. Secondly, his beating of a drum in George’s apartment indicates his desire for freedom and liberation from the burden of societal norms. Likewise, other incidents of his life show his rebellious nature. His estrangement from the society intensifies his search for his identity.

Billy realizes that his urge to live a primitive life is the first step to solving the problem of his existence and identity. On the one hand, the simplicity of the tribals invites him to live in the lap of nature, on the other; Bilasia’s simplicity attracts him and helps him in his metaphysical quest. Birendra Pandey observes that “Billy’s aloneness with Meena and Rima

gives him the central vision in his attachment with primitive Bilasia” (2000: 34). He develops a connection with nature in her company which gives him the strength to use his potential to be true to himself. Tribals take him as an avatar of god. They shower him with immense love and affection that civilized society failed to do. T. J. Abraham observes that he is “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” (1999: 23).

Billy does not care what others will think about his decisions but wants to be true to himself. Billy does not ignore his choice as he knows if he does not make a choice himself, others will choose for him. He makes a decision and starts living with the tribals. Now, Billy turns his attention from the outer world to the inner world. He affirms, “I have greater responsibilities towards my soul” (Joshi, 2010: 186). He examines his inner voice and asserts, “All that I had been confusedly driving towards all my life had been crystalized, brought into focus, so to speak, by what I had gone through during the interval between this visit and the time I had first met Bilasia. I had changed, I knew that” (Ibid: 116).

The religious sphere is the highest and final stage in which an individual becomes a stranger to society. His actions seem outrageous but justifiable as he has made his connection with God. Billy himself confirms that “Becoming a primitive was only a first step [towards the religious sphere]” (Ibid: 189). After meeting the tribals, especially Bilasia, he gets rid of his inauthentic outward self and starts realizing his potentiality to be true to himself. He comes to know by his inner urge that he wants to be

primitive, and thus he identifies with his true self. He does not care whether his created values and the values of civilized society fall into the same category or not. Moreover, he acknowledges that it is the primitive values that his inner self identifies with. The vision that haunts Billy is not new; oracles, mystics and visionaries have experienced in all ages. Longing for primitivism is the rejection of the artificiality of life which has engulfed modern society. His rejection of the family and society and selection of the forest for spiritual healing and for knowing his identity is evocative of Gautama Buddha as already referred to. Billy follows the path of Lord Buddha but his journey towards divine truth remains incomplete due to his sudden death. His brief stay with primitives offers him to attain spirituality, though partially. He becomes a doctor who cures a child, a priest and a prophet who holds off the tiger from their village. He helps the primitives in their difficult times without taking anything in return.

Joshi has shown the picture of post independent India where people are making efforts in science and technology and helping the nation compete with other countries. These developments have apparently positively impacted men's lives but have alienated them from their roots at the same time. The major impact of urbanization is that Indians have lost their origin, history, culture, tradition and values. Joshi is not against development, but he is against the negative outcome of the development witnessed in the form of treachery, deception, anxiety and hypocrisy. In short, the novel presents the problem of alienation and restlessness in the modern world on the one hand and peace, tranquility, affirmation, fulfillment, and completeness amid primeval forces of nature on the other. In other words, when the civilized world fails to ease the sufferings of

Billy's soul, he goes to the primitive world, seeking self- affirmation and spiritual realization. Thus, through this novel, Joshi makes man aware of the existential problems caused by materialism, artificiality and falsehood in the modern world and suggests the way to adopt an alternate, simple but meaningful existence sought in the primitive world.

### Conclusion

The study shows how deeply concerned the writer is with the issues of identity and existence in the modern world where artificiality and materialism have taken the centre stage. Joshi portrays modern man's mental and spiritual sufferings due to unbearably painful life experiences, resulting in rootlessness, estrangement, anxiety and alienation. The writer shows serious concern about the chaotic state of modern civilization, which is the outcome of selfishness, egotism, greed, the disintegration of socio- moral and religious values as well as a logical frame of mind reigning supreme. Joshi presents the problem of identity and existence in India and abroad. In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Joshi's foreign educated protagonist returns to India to find peace of mind and soul that he did not have before. His protagonist returns from a western country to India in search of his identity, as western civilization could not provide the solution to his problems as per the existential, metaphysical, and phenomenological issues are concerned. The author has established himself as an Indian existentialist writer excellent in providing solution to modern man's existential predicaments, identity crisis and spiritual hollowness in his novel.



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