

The Predicament of Indian Woman in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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ABSTRACT

Arun Joshi with five published novels to his credit occupies a significant place in the history of Indian English Literature. He rose to prominence as a novelist with the publication of his first novel 'The Foreigner' in 1968. In his novels he has artistically depicted the themes of rootlessness, social and racial tensions and prejudices, the conflict between tradition and materialism, faith and reason, search for one's self and painful experience of exile and alienation. 'The Strange Case of Billy Biswas' presents the predicament of Meena Biswas as a by-product of her husband's quest for self. Marital discord, husband's disappearance and death, and last but not least the responsibility of looking after her aged father-in-law & male child make her life a tale of untold miseries and excruciating experiences. Being an Indian woman, she patiently and ungrudgingly bears her misfortunes with no deviation from the established standards of Indian society.

Keywords: *Biswas, Hamlet, Anthropology, predicament, tradition and materialism.*

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Like Hamlet, Billy is a speculative man. He thinks deeply before doing anything. After his dilemma with regard to his career is over as a result of his getting the lectureship of Delhi University, his dilemma over the question of marriage haunts him like a ghost. He is divided

in his heart over this issue. One part of him favours the idea of leading a married life whereas another part disapproves of it. In order to get over this dilemma he along with his girlfriend Meena Chatterjee, the daughter of a retired civil servant, visits I.A.S. training school Shimla where his friend of student days Mr. Romi (Romesh Sahai) is undergoing training. Romi's advice to follow "The usual amalgam of western pragmatism (a wife is so necessary socially, sexually, for a fuller life) and Hindu dharma (a man's duty to marry and reproduce; there is a time for everything)" 1 resolves his dilemma. After his dilemma over the question of marriage is resolved as a result of Romi's friendly advice, Billy is confronted with the state of ambivalence at his plan of marrying Meena Chatterjee. To get rid of his ambivalent state he again approaches Romi and seeks his opinion about Meena. Meena's talkativeness prevents Romi from being appreciative of her conduct. Criticizing Meena for being excessively talkative he remarks:

'Meena was quite usually pretty in a westernized sort of way- the most remarkable thing about her was that she was never short of words. We were to meet many times during the course of the next twenty years and not all our meetings were to take under circumstances as happy as these, but Meena was never short of words; so much so, in fact, that at times in my memory the very essence of a happening tends to get lost in the maze of verbiage that Meena produced at the time'P.28).

In spite of being aware of the fact the Meena is a talkative modern city girl, Billy marries Meena and becomes the father of a son three years after marriage. Hereafter, the primitive force that led him to opt for Ph.D. in Anthropology in place of the study of engineering for which his father had sent him to America starts haunting him. His Swedish friend, Tuula's prediction "the primitive force in him can explode any time" (P.18) proves true. His interest in everything that belongs to the civilized world is replaced by his interest in the primitive. The books on tribal life attract him more than his newly born son and his young wife. The family, service and social status appear meaningless to him. His inner urge to realize the meaning of life leads him to devote a larger part of his time to the study of books in the library. His detachment from his family heralds the onset of Meena's trials and tribulations. Like an ideal wife, she has pinned all her hopes on Billy who does not bother to live up to her expectations. She needs him more than anybody and anything else whereas he cares for her the least. His obsession with the tribal life characterized by humanism disillusion him with the modern city life characterized by artificiality.

With the passage of time, Billy grows temperamentally antithetical to Meena. This fact is intolerably painful to her. Meena's agony reaches its climax when he does not give her a

company in the cocktail party given by one of the European ambassadors. He had promised to reach the venue of the party directly from the library. But, to Meena's utmost dismay, he does not reach there at all. After the party is over, she is questioned by Romi as to the whereabouts of Billy. Her predicament at Romi's query can better be imagined than described. She tries to laugh away her agony, but fails. Unable to hide her misery, she bursts into tears. The narrator reveals her sorrow in a touching manner:

“While she was trying to laugh it away, a sob rose out of nowhere and choked her off. I was startled; it was so completely unexpected from a woman as self-possessed as Meena. For a moment, I did not believe my ears. But sure enough, Meena Biswas, buffeted by some enormous sorrow, was sobbing in the shadow of the silver oaks. Looking back, I have only reproach for myself for the scanty credit and even scantier understanding that I gave her for the incredible torture that she must have been undergoing during that period. Her breathing rose and fell as though she had run a long distance. To sob in public must have meant that she was very near the end of her tether”(54).

Meena tries her best to hide her agony arising out of her husband's callous attitude towards her. But, when it goes beyond her capacity to let her heart remain heavy with sorrow for long, she unburdens herself by saying:

“All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day”(P.54).

Revealing her agony she further says:

“What I can not understand is why he is always annoyed with me, why are we always quarrelling. He comes home angry with somebody, something. 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 we have a full scale quarrel”(56).

On being asked to reveal the root cause of her quarrel with Billy she mournfully replies, “He he does not want me anymore. He has not touched me for six months. Not once “(57).

Billy's attachment to the tribal world results in his detachment from the civilized world. His callous attitude toward his wife, which is the root cause of her agony, results from his detachment from the civilized society in which he was born and brought up. In order to satisfy his inner urge to join the tribal society for realizing the meaning of life, he leaves his service, old parents, young wife and newly born son and vanishes into ‘the saal forests of Maikala Hills’ with firm determination never to return.

Meena's agony multiplies with the disappearance of Billy. She patiently tolerated the ineffable tortures resulting from her husband's callous attitude. On occasions, she reacted sharply to the unfair treatment that Billy meted out to her. Anyhow, she reconciled herself with the adverse conditions of life without showing any sign of infidelity as a wife. A faithful wife can face the

unfavourable conditions of life boldly, but to tolerate the disappearance of her husband with the least hope of his returns is a difficult thing. The responsibility of looking after her old father-in-law and newly born son is unbearably agonizing to her like salt in the wound. She patiently faces all these trials and tribulations in the hope that her happy days will return with the return of her husband.

In the majority of such cases, man is directly responsible for the miseries of woman. None except Billy is to be held responsible for Meena's plight. Before marriage Meena was not aware of his predilection for tribal life. Although Billy had married her after giving a serious thought to the question of his marriage, his decision was completely wrong. But, when realizes his mistake, it is too late. During his meeting with Romi he confesses his mistake:

"I should not have asked her to marry me in the first place. I knew what I was and I should have known better. Besides, she was too young to judge me by herself. I have never made more serious mistake in my life"(P.129).

In spite of his awareness about the fact that he is responsible for the miseries of Meena, his heart has no place for her as it is filled with love for a tribal lady, Bilasia. While Bilasia rules over his heart, Meena's heart has no place for any other man except Billy. Meena's condition represents the deplorable position of woman in male dominated society. As regards the status of woman in society Russian scientist Anton Nemilov aptly remarks:

"Until now the concept of inequality between man and woman has been so deeply rooted not only in the lesser educated people but also in the high educated people as well as in women themselves, that if, on occasion, women are treated as having full equality with men, this is attributed to men's weakness and impotency. If we pursue the thought of any scientist, writer, student, businessman..... we shall soon realize that he does not in his heart of hearts regard woman as his equal. If we read any recent novel, however free a thinker, a write might be, we shall certainly find something or other in it which expose as superficial his concept of woman as equal to man". (2)

Two years after Billy's disappearance, Meena recovers from trauma, joins a school and opens a beauty parlor at her residence. Thus, her life undergoes a change, but her faithfulness to her husband does not diminish. When she gets the news that her husband is living in a tribal village near Jabalpur, she, along with her father-in-law, immediately leaves Delhi for Jabalpur to find her husband. In order that she may get the help of Romi, the present Collector of Jabalpur, she reaches his bungalow and requests him to help her. But, to her dismay, Romi shows his reluctance to help her as he has given a word to Billy not to reveal his whereabouts to anybody belonging to the civilized world. Meena's father-in-law, being an influential person, contacts the Chief Secretary of Madhya Pradesh and requests him to order the Collector of Jabalpur to accord him help in search of Billy. Pursuant to the order of Chief Secretary, Romi orders the

Superintendent of Police Mr. Rele to get Billy rounded up. A police contingent under the supervision of Mr. Rele launches a search operation in the tribal area. During the operation a havildar's bullet wounds Billy seriously leading to his tragic death. Billy's death shatters all hopes of Meena and makes her life unbearably pathetic and miserable.

To sum up, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents the predicament of Meena Biswas as a by-product of her husband's quest for self. Marital discord, husband's disappearance and death, and last but not least the responsibility of looking after her aged father-in-law & male child make her life a tale of untold miseries and excruciating experiences. Being an Indian woman, she patiently and ungrudgingly bears her misfortunes with no deviation from the established standards of Indian society.

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