

INTRICACIES OF IDENTITY CRISIS IN ARUN JOSHI'S *A STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*

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Abstract: In a multicultural and pluralistic society like India Identity related debates have been vehemently carried on in the past. In the present era of globalisation due to increased transcultural interactions or interpenetration of interests between the local and the global identities, identity related conflicts have only increased in manifolds. This is because any identity formation as per personal choice in an ambience of cultural plurality always involves sifting through diverse and often conflicting influences. Instances of identity politics and politicisation of identities for various reasons like empowerment and countering marginalization etc have increased. Paradigms of assimilations and maladjustments amongst varied differing identities have resulted in homogenised and hybridised identity conditions much discussed by cultural critics in debates on cultural changes or evolutions in India. All struggles in relation to identity aspects activated for whatsoever reason affects both societies in general and individuals in particular. Persons may undergo schism within 'self' followed by experiences of alienation, anxiety, isolation and also existential angst. The novel *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* by Arun Joshi expresses many intricacies of the kind which the present paper aims to study in detail. Joshi as a post-colonial writer is much concerned with the problems of identity crisis and the angst it generates in individuals in the modern cosmopolitan contexts characterised by intense cross-cultural encounters. A study of the kind will serve to better understand the nuances of identity issues in the larger cultural space of India or any country for that matter in the era of globalization.

Keywords: Cosmopolitanism, Homogenization, Hybridization, Identity crisis.

Intricacies of Identity Crisis in Arun Joshi's *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: Cross-cultural encounters always inspire socio-cultural transformation and generate an ambience of dichotomies of varied kinds; spiritual-material, tradition-modernity, ideal-pragmatic, rural-urban etc. Further contraries common to human behaviour; work and idleness, commitment and indecision, action and inaction, courage and fear, personal needs and social obligations generate many identity related intricacies. An atmosphere of identity contradictions always instigate identity conflicts or crisis, affecting individuals variously; causing existential angst, sense of absurdity, alienation, meaninglessness, quest for survival and affirmation etc. The imminence of conflict in matters of identity and its highly discursive nature is also because the meaning of identity always accommodates the contradictions; the features both of 'distinctness' and 'difference' within it. Fred Dallmayr defines 'identity' as "a certain distinctness of character, that is, a specific difference of persons or groups from other persons or groups and also from a universal sameness devoid of distinct features." [1] Even Connolly's definition as quoted in Nadia Tazi's book *Keywords/Identity* reinforces Dallmayr's meaning of identity thus "An identity is established in relation to a series of differences that have become socially recognised. These differences are essential to its being; if they did not exist as differences, it would not exist in its distinctness and solidity." [2]

Both Dallmayr's and Connolly's definition stresses the imperative of 'difference' and 'distinctness' for the complete meaning of identity. The congregation of multiple identities and the dominant-subordinate relational differences between them as in cases of language, ethnicity, religion, region, caste, and race etc also induces identity conflicts. Identity politics, politicization of identities and gestures of liberation from inferior identities witnessed in times of threat to the 'self' by the 'other' are some of the expressions of identity conflicts. Such conflicts are frequently witnessed in India due to the pluralistic nature of its social setup. Amartya Sen speaks of "Solitarist approach"- "a tendency of seeing human beings mainly as members of exactly one group only, derecognising all other identities" [3] as the main cause of identity disagreements in contemporary Indian society and the general tendency is to foreground religious identity underplaying 'others', irrespective of their importance.

Interpreting identity in idealistic terms as something free from socio-cultural roots is proposed to avoid identity conflicts. But such an approach though signifies attainment of universality yet is not feasible due to the essentiality of the socio-cultural rootedness or culturality of every individual. Further the ascribed nature of socio-cultural identity makes it all the more difficult to deny one's identity or claim others'. But however conscious negligence of group identity in a constantly changing world, fraught with contradictions and changing world-views and foregrounding of 'Individual identity' is described as

having abundance of potential to nullify identity conflicts. J. Rawl quotes Emmanuel Renault's observation of negligence of socio-cultural identities by individuals in the times of globalisation thus, "According to some postmodern thought, all collective identities have begun to decline due to globalization, with the result that the individual, finally rid of social and cultural restraints, is in a position to access a liberating nomadism and so-called cross-breeding." [4]

Bauman as quoted by Emmanuel Renault (102) has a way to avoid identity dilemmas thus,

"It would be better . . . to bury our definition of ourselves with the notion of collective identities; to face today's existing psychological, sociological, and political problems in relevant manner." [5]

Violence and subversive tactics practised in matters of identity differences is minimised if individual's choice is valued over that of social conventions in identification. Changing socio-cultural contexts also will bring shift in identity preferences and always encourage individual choice to social impositions. Indians preferring material prosperity or worldly success (notion of west) to spiritual well-being [more a notion of east] is an instance of the kind. But all such moments, when, one is to opt between personal choice and societal impositions are fraught with lot of conflict and TRS Sharma mean the same thus

"We are also involved continuously in a process of individuation in order to escape from our social identity, then 'personality' we have acquired, the 'prosopopeia' we invent for ourselves which appears before the public, that is, the 'public' identity a person carries more or less like an endeared burden! In short, in the same person there can be a longing to create for himself an identity or several of them, and also in the same degree a longing to escape from the set identity. And how about those caught up in the diaspora grappling with their ever fluid identities? The problem becomes much more complex then!" [6] Emmanuel Renault asserts the importance of personhood choice often decided by internal, psychological mechanisms than cultural ascription thus,

"Identity is to mean what we are individually, as well as what we aspire to be, what determines or specifies us, as well as how we present our particularities to ourselves, how we refer to ourselves individually, and how we identify ourselves with groups and with the general norms." [7]

Even psychologists believe that group affiliations are incidental rather than definitional to the process of having 'unified self' or 'stable identity' which is of great value to the society, as well as to an individual's moral life or to the positive image of oneself. Stuart Hall's idea of identity [personal or group], as quoted by Emily K. Bloch as an "ever evolving reality",

questions essentialism/fixation in identity and thus providing ample space for freedom in the matter. Hall writes "Perhaps instead of thinking of Identity as an already accomplished fact...we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process." [8] What he means is that personal identity formation is an ongoing process for any thinking being and is also dependent on one's world view. The modernity discourse supports individual's freedom to act independently irrespective of ascribed socio-cultural essentials and the profits of which Wang Bin has described thus "In this era of globalisation and overlapping of cultures, this neutrality with regard to cultures and their basic values could be seen to be an essential requirement, and it might appear as the only way to ensure consensus and social cohesion." [9] Thus personal choice allows for rational critique of cultures and customs and also questions our faith in identities as simple unquestioned convictions not open to rational discussion. An attitude of the kind is more essential in the present era when identity conflicts are generating "cultural backlashes" says Lancy Lobo.

The present paper aims to study identity conflicts as portrayed in Arun Joshi's novel *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* against the background of the identity related intricacies hitherto discussed. Billy Biswas is the main character and the study of his turmoil due to identity conflicts forms the main concern in the novel. He is a smart guy of contemporary society; highly qualified, a technological giant, rich, worldly experienced and cosmopolitan, but not happy at all. His hitherto acquired identities are the ones society respects but personally Billy's real interests lie elsewhere. The needs of his 'inner recesses of the self' are different and failure to find conducive atmosphere around him to fulfil them torments him and precipitates existential angst and the related feeling of meaninglessness about life in him. Joshi traces the source of his anguish to "that mysterious underworld which is the human soul". This difference between the life he lived and the life he desired to live, precipitates inner crisis in Billy. The resultant angst haunts him and that is the time when most basic of the questions -Who am I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" torments him. [10] Romy, Billy's friend describes his angst as "...the most futile cry of man in his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile." [11] The profundity of Billy's sensitivity makes Romy describe him as "a man of such extraordinary obsessions" and towards him he feels "a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder" [12].

Billy moves mainly between two worlds that of India and America and he feels acutely unhappy in both the places. On analysing his unhappiness and disappointments we realise that he is tormented by

identity conflicts and the crisis they precipitate. The raging conflict within him ultimately drives him to reject the contemporaneous, civilised society and retreat to the primitive and archaic world of a tribe, living in the Maikala hills of Bhubaneswar in Orissa. His choice though appears abnormal as per the parameters of the society yet is symbolic of his dejection at the direction in which the modern world was advancing. The return to the primitive to Billy is a return to forthrightness, honesty and integrity something disregarded in the modern civilised world, given to pursuit of false values or to use Mathew Arnold's phrase, "Mammon worship".

Billy literally is in war with the world, acutely conscious of the values he cherished and the absence of the same in the world around him. In the kind of decisions Billy take in the course of his life, we realise the nature of the conflict raging within him. His parents insist to study Engineering in America while he chooses to study Anthropology; the science of human society and culture. Biswas' choice is a parody of the technocratic society where technology and the knowhow of it is privileged over all other knowledge. That is why Anthropology; the science of human society appeals to him as worth studying. Billy's study of anthropology has opened up to him the charm, strength and virtues of the savage man, which Roseau too had appreciated in his idea of a "noble savage". Billy is utterly disappointed and disillusioned at the achievements of America, an attitude which is symbolic of his refusal to identify with material and commercial values privileged in modern civilised society. Engrossed in pursuits of material progress, ideals of fraternity and equality have taken a backstage in the country(USA); the proof of which is the prevalence of the apartheid practises intact even today. Billy protests the prevalence of discrimination against the blacks in America by choosing to live in New York's Harlem, a black ghetto of America; a fine paradigm of the violation of human dignity and exclusionary politics, by abandoning his residence in the colony of the whites. If primitivity ; physically and intellectually, is what the white population associates with the blacks to deny respect to them, Billy celebrates the primitivity in them. Billy's immediate liking for the 'Banjo drums' in a music party in George's apartment at a black ghetto in Harlem rather than to any of the modern musical instruments is symbolic of his love for primitive and the values and forces it stood for. Banjo with its classic twang is associated with country, folk and traditional music in the African American music culture. Even writers like D.H.Lawrence, Henry James and Joseph Conrad always have parodied the association of progress, development and enlightenment with civilisation in their writings. Joshi adds himself to the list of critics on civilization by voicing his disappointment through

Billy Biswas. Billy's sarcasm of the values modern society privileges reaches its pinnacle when he chooses to live amidst the aboriginal, the adivasi tribe. The tribe to Billy is symbolic of the uninhibited human spirit yet to be tainted by the false values of modern society. Similarly the erotic sculptures of the Konark's Sun Temple appeals to Billy as symbolic of the vitality intact in early man. The spirit and frankness that went into the sculpting of the erotic is indicative to Billy of the capacity for forthrightness and honesty in the ancients. The erotic sculptures signify the acceptance of the naturalness of human sexuality and the celebration of sexual vitality which in civilised world is couched in lot of hypocrisy and curtailed with submissive norms. He links the adivasi and the erotic sculptures of Konark thus

"No, what appealed to me was the shades of the same spirit that I spoke of although I knew them, as I know now, that the spirit was a much, much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples. 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." [13]

Even D.H.Lawrence had regretted the loss of the world of impulses and instincts (primitive vitality) in the modern man in the novel *St Mawr*. In the novel a splendid stallion is portrayed symbolically as endowed with the natural vitality and for the same reason is at odd with the world lacking this vitality. *St.Mawr*, the horse, endowed with male principles of life-power, energy, forthrightness and courage (maleness) becomes the antithesis of the modern man- deficient of the same. The loss of the essentials of 'Purusha' and 'Prakriti' (to quote in Indian terms), Lawrence attributes to the modern, mechanistic, money grubbing world. Lou, the heroine of the novel has sensed the absence of the 'maleness' especially in men around her and as a protest she breaks her marriage. Like Billy she retreats from the civilised world to live on a secluded ranch in Mexico, all alone. She starts life anew in close proximity with nature as if trying to retrieve the primitive force disappeared within her: the absence of which had stifled her soul and sensuality. Conrad in *The Heart of Darkness* had sensed the prevalence of the capacities for frankness, honesty and forthrightness in the natives of Africa in comparison to the white men who perpetrated imperial rule to fulfil their greed for power and the benefits that go with it all the while portending themselves as agents of civilising mission.

Billy is also sarcastic and unhappy of his personal life controlled by 'others', namely cultural agents and society. He is forcefully married to the girl of his parents choice namely Meena, whereas his real love is for Rima Kaul. His marriage with a girl of his parent's choice is suggestive of filial control widespread in

Indian culture and to Billy it means stifling of individual freedom. He leads the double life of running his family and continuing his adulterous relationship with Rima until the duality becomes unbearable and he breaks. The facade of the social institution of marriage that of both the East and the West is parodied in the disaster of Billy's married life. Billy believes in true love and sensual compatibility as the most abiding factors in man-woman relation but his marriage has nothing of them. Billy's marriage, the author reasons out, symbolises the amalgamation of the meaning of marriage both that of the West and the East- "western pragmatism- a wife is so necessary, socially, sexually for a fuller life" and Hindu dharma or the conventional wisdom of the Indian middle class- "Man's duty to marry and reproduce." [14] In both the claims there is no place for Love. The strained marriage and the sham of modern life intensify Billy's anguish and anxiety culminating in his disappearance into the remote regions of wilderness of Maikala hills where adivasis (a tribe) lived. He deserts his family including wife and son and even abandons his teaching assignment at the Department of Anthropology at Delhi for the tribal way of life. Billy's escape into the primitive world of the tribe signifies protest against the phoney world of his class, and society. Like all other Joshi's heroes Billy too perceives modern society to nothing more than "the making and spending of the money" [15] and completely lacking in vibrancy or spontaneity. A life of the kind had inspired boredom in Billy and he speaks to Romy of the Delhi society getting on his nerves, and all other modern societies being a prototype of it. Hence Billy never contemplates escape from Delhi to elsewhere (other cities), for everywhere it is the same. He conveys his disappointment with his class and life in all of the Indian cities thus,

"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 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. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or to go to one of those wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty year tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loud mouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries." [16]

Billy's disparagement of the upper classes is indeed for the reason of their debased values, their superficial and imitative life of especially of the west

and to such life condition of total decay with "all the sensuality ... gone". Hence Billy prefers the life of tribes in whom impulses and instincts remained intact; forthrightness and honesty prevailed; love and sensuality merged. Billy's union with Bilasia, a tribal girl is described as the most ceremonial and auspicious moment in the novel. She epitomises primitive force, like the horse in the novel *St Mawr* by D.H. Lawrence. The union of Billy with Bilasia is symbolic of the union of "purusha" and "prakruthi" (masculine and the feminine in pure self) on terms of equality without being tainted by false values; of gender, status etc. The glory of Billy's union with Bilasia is reflected in The Chandtola peak of Maikala hill range glowing after the Gap of many years. The tribal people in the glow of the Chandtola peak recognise the blessed nature of Billy's union with Bilasia. Billy's association with the primitive way of life is also symbolic of the value of the life in close proximity with nature. To live so is to embody its redeeming capacities or healing powers. A proof of acquisition of such strengths in Billy is proved in the way he cures Romy's wife of migraine headache by a wild herb, for which there is no definite cure in modern medicine. But Billy's happiness doesn't last long, he is shot dead though accidentally by a member of the search party sent by the administrative machinery of the city. The killing of Billy is symbolic of the inability and impatience of the modern world to recognise the virtues of primitive man. Thus the strange life of Billy Biswas which had lot of propensity to reveal the essentials of life in contention with modern materialism is met with a tragic end.

The absence of all the values Billy believed in and wanted to identify with, in modern civilized society makes Billy suffer from alienation. The class which Billy represent; the upper crust of the society, has power, status, pleasure that money and privilege can fetch but Billy hates them as they signify pseudo powers for him. K.R.S. Iyengar interprets the extreme decision of Billy to journey from the civilised world to the savage/primitive life of the tribes in the forest region as expressive of "exploration of the consciousness of hapless, rootless people a stage further and has revealed to our gaze new gas-chambers of self-forged misery". Iyengar's interpretation of Billy as a victim of 'self-forged misery' though is not untrue yet Joshi's purpose in conceiving of an extreme example is to warn humanity, of the disastrous journey the world was heading at. The below lines from the text best exemplifies it

"I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending—the so

called thinkers and philosophers and men like that--- they are merely hired to find solution, throw light, as they say on complications caused by this making and spending of money. What need would be there of psychiatrists, research foundations, learned societies, great scholars, scientists, ministerial advisors, generals, had the world not initially been hung on this peg of money." [17]

The novel thus becomes a fine study of the identity conflicts modern society is inducing due to its privileging of mammon worship. In the turmoils of Billy if the nature of identity conflicts is perceived, in his efforts to resolve his identity conflicts, solutions to suppress the same is hinted at. Billy suffering from acute identity conflict and the related crisis finally is able to induce individuation in the matter resulting in "Identity formation"-acceptance of certain preferred identities obstinately against all odds and oppositions. Identity formation moments thus are also moments of attaining what psychologists regarded as "stable identity"- where inner personality traits and outer personality traits coordinate. Identity thus formed always contestsshouldering of negative identities but all choices of the kind is of great worth if it is guided by one's voice of reason or enlightened consciousness. Billy's ways of resolving the conflict that haunted his innermost recesses of his soul is indeed significant act of individuation or "Identity formation". Billy can never be described as an escapist who shirks responsibility if we adjudge his actions compassionately. He describes his behaviour as an act catering to the needs of the soul hitherto stifled. He says "I had greater responsibilities towards my soul" [18] He describes the challenges he was facing within thus;

"It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. 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 clamouring for. "Here, you swine, 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." You see what I mean." [19]

He also describes his identification with primitivity as the "first step, only a means to an end". Billy union with the primitive sources doesn't mean retrogression for he says "becoming a primitive was only a first step, a means to an end". He wants to begin afresh the journey of civilisation on the foundation of the lesson hitherto learnt. The 'end' he aims to attain is to refurbish civilisation with better meaning than its present meaning of material, technological progress and mammon worship. Billy had to disappear stealthily because he knew his dream is incomprehensive to the majority and he knew he was all alone in the struggle. Joshi's hence describes Billy thus - "he was one of those rare men who have poise without pose". Jasbir Jain describes his behaviour as a search for "a world of meaningful relatedness" or "emotional fullness". The novel thus discusses identity problems too contemporaneous spread across cosmopolitan width. Or in other words the angst causing identity dilemmas in Joshi's works range from the post-independent corrupt ambience of India to the matters of devaluation and cultural uprootedness in cross-cultural ambience of the transnational contexts. Thus the crisis of identity in Joshi's novel is explored at various levels; national, international, individual and, interpersonal levels etc.

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