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Arun Joshi and His Fiction

Arun Joshi excels as an outstanding Indo-English novelist and what strikes one most is that he could be viewed as a multifarious personality such as an eco-critic, evolutionist, environmentalist, naturist, eco-based aesthetic, a staunch supporter of ethno science, ethno-medicine and supernatural healing techniques of primitive people of various lands all over the world.

Arun Joshi as a post-colonial writer recognizes a reality beyond the mere phenomenal world. He captures it by giving a consistent form, to the shapeless facts of human existence. Restating experiences, in an impersonal cold scientific manner is not his forte but goes way beyond, to discover the hidden reality.

Fiction, to Joshi, is neither a source of entertainment nor an instrument for publicizing some set of ideas. His genius is not for propagating any political or social creed, or escapism from human endeavours and seeking resort in imaginary places as R.K. Narayan did.

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Dhawan states that Joshi is very clear when he says: “My novels ... are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself ... If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration” (Dhawan 8).

Hence, we see that Joshi’s venture into writing is an inborn call to express his ideals just like a liberal humanist who is “not politically radical and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues” (Barry 3). Joshi cannot be labelled only as Marxist, feminist, theoretical but as a believer in “human nature” endowed with a timeless and “universal significance” (Barry 193).

Ecology and Human-centred Living

Garrard speaks about deep ecology which insists upon a shift from a human-centered to a nature-centered system of values. He quotes from George Sessions’s anthology *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* thus:

Deep ecology is concerned with encouraging an egalitarian attitude on the part of humans not only toward all *members* of the ecosphere but even toward all identifiable *entities* or *forms* in the ecosphere. Thus, this attitude is intended to extend, for example, to such entities (or forms) as rivers, landscapes, and even species and social system considered in their own right. (21-22)

Barry states that, for ecocritics, “nature really exists out there beyond ourselves, not needing to be ironised as a concept by enclosure ... but actually presents as an entity which affects us, and which we can affect, perhaps fatally, if we mistreat it.” (252)

Eco Disaster

This ecosystem with intertwining of nature is more adept than a complex machine, which, though, is a combination of various individual components, is in no way designed to adapt to the lapses or demands of the other allied components and hence, is dangerously sensitive and fragile. Here, things fit together exquisitely, the feeding schedule of animals, birds, every breath of life depending on weather, the winds and clouds, the water supply, the stability of the mother earth intact endowed with the other elements such as Air, Water, Fire and *Akash* to sustain one and all. But, all right thinking people like Arun Joshi and his sort are now seriously preoccupied with the fear of overcrowding, poisoning, pollution, drought, calamities due to global warming, rupture of the protective ozone layer due to over-stretched consumption of fossil fuels like petroleum products, all due to hectic advance of industrializations and immodest sophisticated mode of urbanization.

Story of an Anthropologist

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Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the story of an anthropologist Bimal Biswas, son of an Indian ambassador-Supreme Court judge. Biswas was educated abroad, a breed of the upper crust of the Indian society and "a refugee from civilization" (*Biswas* 102). For some inexplicable reason, he was drawn to primitive force abandoning his social security.

Superficially reading the novel, one might mistake it for a social novel depicting a protagonist slightly deranged in mind, abandoning an affluent society in preference of a tribal mode of living. However, if one is able to read between the lines, the clarion call for eco-centric urgency blares forth with a rebounding force right in front of one's eyes.

Biswas' brilliant intellect, excessive sensibility and profound obsessions is detected by very few, one being the narrator Romi and the other being Biswas's Swedish friend, Tuula Lindgren, who has come to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work. Biswas's marriage to a sophisticated beautiful girl is totally on the rocks as it is beyond her means to understand his interest in the wild. His aversion to the civilized world of greed, avarice, riches, and hypocrisy is so strange and strong that it exasperates her. Biswas feels choked by the hollowness of the phoney modern society, and the snobbery of sophisticated people. Hence, his aversion is mainly directed to the upper class of which he himself is a part. The author Arun Joshi himself adds that Biswas rejects the post-Independence pseudo-Western values.

Biswas either had to follow this call or had to be condemned to total decay, and he decides to choose the first. Material society is renounced, and a noble savageness is willingly embraced. Finally, he is disposed off in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers.

All along the second part of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, we find numerous reports of Biswas to his Collector friend about the tribals who cherish many secrets of Nature, their ethno-science, ethno-medicine, strange folklores, astrological acumen, and above all the inexplicable supernatural healing techniques. The words, "I came a thousand miles to see your face, O mountain. A thousand miles did I come to see your face" (*Biswas* 79), declare a strong note in the very beginning of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilization where, "In a balanced, harmonious, steady-state nature, indigenous people reproduced balance and harmony" (Garrard 134).

Biswas and Arun Joshi

Joshi's personal trait is revealed through his nature-loving, primitive savvy protagonist Biswas. He gives a marvellous account, with a deep and unrelieved 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 extraordinary obsessions. This engineer, anthropologist, anarchist was thoroughly crazy, even by Indian standards, always harping on the

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primitive Truths and values of the ancient Vedic era which worshipped Nature and nothing else. Joshi proclaims about a Utopian society of eco-centric basis, through the character Tuula.

Vedic Doctrines

Advocating on a point bordering almost on the ancient Vedic Hindu doctrines, Joshi feels that,

... to survive, man needs a minimum of goods which must be given to him by society or he must receive the exchange to procure them. This minimum, however, is very, very low, much lower than people imagine, and, except on times of calamity, like war or famine, easily available. Once the society or your profession ensures this minimum, you should devote all your energies to the full exploitation of your gifts ... that you are born with, and in the process contribute as much to the society as you can. (*Biswas* 126-127)

This is no simple concept, put forth in such plain terms. Adhering to the same would be a Herculean task as such, in the modern materialistic society.

Eco-Socialist

A profound eco-socialist of postmodern era, Joshi drums into the ears of non-thinking neo-politicians about the much esteemed Gandhian rural economy and socialism, which strictly says that one who has more than necessity is stealing another man's livelihood.

Exploiting natural bounty just to fill one's coffer does not fall in line with Gandhian as well as Joshian principles. Biswas and his friend Collector Romesh Sahai are talking of the economy of Saal forest into which Biswas migrated and how it would soon go to pieces, with all the wanton destruction of the forests and so on.

Not the Tribals to Blame

Biswas reiterates that it was not the tribals to be blamed for the denudation of millions and millions years old earth. Joshi is nailing the crucial point that, unlike the avaricious urban ones who often accumulate wealth at the cost of our precious heritage, the simple nomads and primitives of the forests just utilize the herbs, shrubs and twigs for their sustenance without endangering their whole lot. Killing the duck that lays golden eggs to grab all the golden eggs at one stroke is the stupidest attempt of modern man, who routs out the whole flora and fauna endlessly.

In Search of Holistic Redemption

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Joshi asserts through his protagonists, yearning for a holistic redemption for the poor evacuees. Biswas contemptuously remarks to his Collector friend that no Collector has ever heard the truth.

Here, the Collector personifies all the government forces that destabilize ecology. The Collector is at a loss to know the terrain of the land under his jurisdiction. Maikala hills with its vast wilderness under the administration of Romi poses *abracadabra*, not alone to himself and his retinue, but to the whole race of Collectors. Romi senses the mystery of the hills and admits, "Beyond the strip of land lay the jungle a dark mysterious shadow whose mystery very few Collectors had unraveled since the race of Collectors began" (*Biswas* 77). His blatant confession that there "were paths in the jungle although I had yet to set my foot on them," (*Biswas* 77) convey much between the lines.

The Meaning and Relevance of Transformation

Nevertheless, "it is essential for eco-critics to give greater consideration than they have thus far to the transformation in the dominant meaning of the word earth, from the most immediate ground of existence, the soil, to life's largest relevant context, the biosphere"(Garrard 162). Bio-geology is in the roots of man, his activities, his history and historical events, economy, sociology, philosophy, religion and political thinking:

Ethno-scientific and ethno-medicinal information of healing herbs, nature cure and spiritual healing which the modern world now appreciates largely is found in abundance in the novel. Astrological information, star readings to negotiate their path even in pitch darkness amongst the thickest of jungles, predicting rain by the position of the stars in the galaxy, gazed at, not with ultramodern equipments but with their naked eyes with razor-sharp eyesight is just unbelievable to a shallow breed of modern upbringing. Nevertheless, not to Joshi and his protagonist who find 'Harlem' like places as the most "human place he could find" and "white America, was much too civilized for him" (*Biswas* 9).

Genetic Modification – Wrong Direction

Garrard refers to Vandana Shiva's argument in her *Biopiracy* that,

...genetic modification is misrepresented as a predictable deterministic process of 'engineering' that creates organisms worthy of patent protection. On the contrary, this mere 'tinkering' with DNA, as she calls it, involves both processes and products that rely on nature's own capacity for self-organisation and reproduction, so that a patent effectively appropriated for biotechnology companies destroys the inherent creativity of nature. If...the latter deserves reverence in itself, patenting even hybrid seed varieties would be a form of blasphemy. (164-165)

Vandhana also makes a strong case for the legal protection of indigenous knowledge, albeit without explanation of how it differs from biotechnology as an appropriation of nature.

Pathetic Condition of Living

The pathetic condition of that draught-hit place is narrated thus by Romi: “On one of my visits, I saw in a village a dog and an old man, two skeletons that managed barely to crawl, licking at the water trickling from the spout of an empty tanker. The old man, his eyes closed with exhaustion, was obviously too weak to push the dog away. I hoped never again to have to witness a sight such as that” (*Biswas* 74). Water scarcity and civilian unrest due to it, is a norm even today. Right thinking statesmen today are concerned more than anything about the even supply of potable water to all parts of the country. The concept of nationalization of all Indian rivers is gaining momentum so that wastage of water resources is averted.

Nature Beckons – Past Glory and Present Misery

When Dhunia, the tribal headman says very reverently that, when Biswas *Bhai* came to them, once for all “Chandtola came to life....as it used to thousands of years ago when we were kings here” (*Biswas* 112).

In addition, Joshi reminds us symbolically through Dhunia that thousands of years ago when the forest and the hills were under the adivasis’ nature abiding rule, the regions bloomed in all glory. Biswas’s arrival as rain in the parched land brought a healthier look, because he identifies himself as one among them, sharing their ideals and caring for their well-being with a compassionate empathy with no other hidden motive. He is like a balm on a wound, as Dhunia proudly declares to the Collector. It seems that nature beckons people like Biswas to “Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of cosmic night” (*Biswas* 88). The narrator says thus: “There was the moonlight shimmering in the tree-tops, the plain across the gorge was purple. The wind gently tapped stray twigs of the bamboo that grew against the window pane. ‘Come, come, come, come,’ they all said. Who were they calling now? Surely, not the Collector himself!” (*Biswas* 88-89). Romi has a glimpse of the all-pervasive spiritual force in a dilapidated temple into which Biswas ushered him in.

The Collector narrates:

Then something distracted me...All of a sudden, I had the feeling that we were not alone that there was another presence besides us...It seemed neither good nor evil but terribly old. ‘Beware’, it seemed to say. ‘There are things that the like of you may never know. There are circles within circles and worlds within worlds. Beware where you enter. (*Biswas*_137).

Joshi is sure that “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” (*Biswas* 90).

Characterization of Biswas and Supernatural Modality

Through the characterization of Biswas, Joshi goes on enumerating lavish anecdotes upon the supernatural modality. All he says is that there are “worlds at the periphery of ours, one above it and below it and around it” (116), of which we know nothing of until we are in them. Quite a baffling utterance, but there is evidence in Siddha Literature and Siddha tradition in Tamil which speaks of Siddhars like Bogar, Moolar and the like, roaming around all the worlds in their own energy body, helping mankind by their timely intervention.

Relationship with Animals

The eco-worshipping Adivasis, and nomads are always friendly with all the animals of their forest. The animals understand them and share a congenial relationship with them since they are never marauded in the name of safari to get their skin, tusk, nails, teeth and meat by the people surrounding them. Dhunia’s story of Biswas *Bhai* going into the jungle and speaking to the tiger, to send it away gives the proof: “We came to know of his powers only when he sent the tiger away. A tiger had been roaming the jungle for a week killing our cattle. Biswas *Bhai* went into the jungle and spoke to the tiger, and the tiger went away” (*Biswas* 114).

God is Everywhere on Earth

God is found by the tribals everywhere on earth, in Kala Pahar, a running stream, a very old banyan tree and so on. The folklore narrated by Joshi brings out the above-mentioned supreme truth. The temple mentioned in the novel had neither ‘sanctum sanctorum’ nor the main idol, because the king who tried to make a face of the idol failed repeatedly and met his death without finishing the idol:

For ten years he chiselled at granite imported from all parts of the country. Leisurely at first; then, as the work on the temple gathered pace, the fever in his blood rose until dawn to late in the night, in the light of flares, the young king chiseled at the stone...He forgot to eat or bathe or rule his kingdom... Years went by. His hair grew long and white. Blood oozed from under his broken nails. Even the gold rings in his ears began to rust... The king went mad. But the chiselling went on day and night. Then one night the chiselling ceased. In the morning, the townsmen came and found the young king with the white hair dead... The last piece, the one at whose feet he lay, was exquisite. No artist had ever infused such life in a stone figure or hewn such limbs out of common granite. But the figure had no face.

That had always been the trouble. The king could never make the face of his god. (*Biswas* 122)

This story has a very deep significance. The author tries to put a cosmic interpretation of how ill equipped we are in understanding and molding nature. No man is ever capable of completing the face of Nature. It chooses its own identity.

Conception, Practice and Implications of Ethno-medicine

Regarding the tribal ethno-medicine, Joshi has a lot to reveal. With a peculiar literary acumen, Joshi mouths through Biswas, the healing therapy of the native people. Biswas explains to the Collector how he cured a tribal boy who was on the verge of death, bitten by a venomous snake. During all his expeditions, he had been exploring them, especially those that were effective cures for snakebites and malaria.

What I did with the boy was to make a cut near the wound and apply a herb. It is called *chaulai* in Hindi. *Amarantus Gangeticus* is its botanical name (*Biswas* 125).

Gangeticus indicates that the particular herb is found in the Gangetic plain. Indian herbs and their uses if made familiar amongst us, will earn a lot of foreign exchange. Expenditure on hospitals will be reduced considerably and the general health of our population improved. However, Joshi also regrets about the secrecy of oath held to the tribal's bosom regarding these medicines, beliefs, customs, supernatural happenings and magical prowess for fear of losing their value. Dhunia fears to elaborate, for if he did, "those who must not will hear of it," (*Biswas* 114) and "Biswas *Bhai* will lose his powers" (114). Vasudev falls in line with the same and states that one "should use the local structure, the indigenous structure, whatever the indigenous culture is, use that and make education happen, make food happen, make prosperity happen..." (114).

Poet and Novelist Combined

Finally, yet importantly, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* brings out a magnanimous poet in the brilliant novelist. Joshi identifies the secret unknown inner nature of all individuals with his special remarks about valleys and hills. 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 and the hills beyond the valley" (*Biswas* 115). Dhunia's description of the Black Rock their master, runs thus,

Beyond the forest are our hills. Beyond the hills is the plain. And still further beyond are the seven seas ... In the middle of the seventh sea is an island as blue as the sea itself and as fresh as a bride even though it has lived for as many years as there are ants in this world, and it has seen all there is to see. The sea surf breaks on this island day and night forming a

shimmering girdle of foam like the girdle of moon. Where the surf ends, the forest begins. There is both light and darkness in the forest. It is full of strange animals, some pleasant, some not pleasant, and some positively evil. The evil ones stray out only at night so that no one has seen anything of them except their eyes, burning like coals. In the middle of the forest, its head high above the clouds stands the Kala Pahar. (*Biswas* 115-116)

The Philosopher in Joshi

The philosopher in Joshi sparkles here. A great admirer of the serene Himalayan range, Joshi like a pastoral poet convincingly asserts that if there is anything in the world to match the spectacle of thunder, rolling across the Himalayan range, he is yet to hear of it. Even Naipaul says with pride: “India, the Himalayas: they went together ... they had become part of the India of my fantasy” (167). Joshi is more than proud to say, “in the far distance, high up in the blue sky looms the mountain, its snow-covered peaks forever brooding over this panorama of brown and pink and white. No one has yet climbed the mountain even though, for hundreds of years, men have launched expeditions against it and two hundred men have died in the attempt” (*City and River* 13).

Bharathiar’s song also resembles that of Joshi’s eulogy on the mountain thus:

Himachal is our mountain
The world has not its fellow
Ganga is our fountain
Pellucid, sweet and mellow. (105)

Thus, we see *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is not a direct account of the dilapidated eco-balance of the modern world, but it brings out the nagging details and facts clad in a superb literary firmament convincingly. There are laws that govern the universe out of which man has a lot to learn. Dhunia states that there is no point in questioning, “why man dies or why at night the stars come out” (*Biswas* 117). So also unquestioningly Natural Environment with its entire constituents whether man or animal or vegetation or hills or streams and shrubs must be left at peace and not submerged under mega dams and mines.

The novel refers back to a linguistic or cultural system which it cannot totally reconstruct and Madhusudan Prasad states that it is a “remarkable novel” wherein the “same events are recounted by different characters to lay stronger emphasis” (58) and C.N. Srinath writes that “the narration achieves a tonal distinction by telling the tale with admirable restraint, objectivity and a formal façade” (39).

Archaism arouses an often vague delight in the familiar but long forgotten. Yet as it refers back to the unknown it is also frightening and sometimes monumental and intriguingly remote impression of human emotions such as heroism, nostalgic yearning

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and guilt. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is also one such novel which tries vehemently to unravel visions of the past glorious Vedic era.

On behalf of these inactive intelligentsia, Joshi, who has traversed far and wide in this land of horror wreaked by inhuman interference in the inroads of eco-kingdom, begs forgiveness. The *Yajna* of the affected ones whether they are humans, flora, or fauna, should go on with the fire of enthusiasm of the environmentalist, eco-conscientious public and devotees of Nature till the goal of restoring a healthy, wealthy, fertile earth and sky to our descendants.

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