

**Alienation Caused by Selfish Society in
*The Strange Case of Billy Biswas***

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Abstract

Alienation is the process whereby people become foreign to the world they are living in. The concept of alienation is deeply embedded in all the great religions and social and political theories of the civilized epoch. In the past, people lived in harmony, and then there was some kind of rupture which left people feeling like foreigners in the world leading to the feeling of alienation. It is hoped that in future this alienation would be overcome, and humanity would again live in harmony with itself and Nature.

Arun Joshi (1939-1993), was born in Varanasi, completed his higher education in the US, and returned to India to become an industrial manager. His novels delving into existentialism along with the ethical choices a man has to make, won him huge critical appreciation in India, but remained largely unknown in the West. Arun Joshi won the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1982 for *The Last Labyrinth*.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a novel in which the normal and the abnormal, the ordinary and the extraordinary, illusion and reality, resignation and desire, rub shoulders. Billy Biswas returns to India after earning his Ph.D. in anthropology from USA. He has everything going for him—happiness, travel, education, status, wealth, job and a loving wife. Yet his inner world is rocked by a groundswell of discontent. He is consumed by a restlessness which grows steadily. The protagonist Billy Biswas is a misfit in the modern milieu of technological jungle and seeks an escape from it.

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Arun Joshi (1939-1993), was born in Varanasi, completed his higher education in the US, and returned to India to become an industrial manager. In today's world of book-promos and PR, Arun Joshi would be a misfit as he kept himself out of the limelight, writing in the pre-Rushdie era when Indian writing in English was something only eccentric people indulged in. His novels

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Alienation, in social sciences is the state of feeling estranged or separated from one's milieu, work, and products of work or self. Despite its popularity in the analysis of contemporary life, the idea of alienation remains an ambiguous concept with elusive meanings, the following variants being most common: (1) Powerlessness, the feeling that one's destiny is not under one's own control but is determined by external agents, fate, luck, or institutional arrangements and (2) Meaninglessness, referring either to the lack of comprehensibility or consistent meaning in any domain of action such as world affairs or interpersonal relations or to a generalized sense of purposelessness as given in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

In the period from 1948 to 1974, humanity witnessed a display of industrial and technological innovation, the like of which has never been seen earlier. Yet the very success of the capitalist system is now turning opposite. An estimate states that there are officially 22 million unemployed in the advanced capitalist economies of the OECD alone, even without considering the hundreds of millions of unemployed and under-employed in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Despite all the advances of science and technology, society finds itself at the mercy of forces it cannot control. In the 21st century people look to the future with growing anxiety. In place of the old certainty there is uncertainty. The general malaise affects first and foremost the ruling class and its strategists, who are increasingly aware that their system is in serious difficulties. The crisis of the system finds its reflection in a crisis of ideology, reflected in the political parties, official churches, morality, science and even what passes nowadays for philosophy.

Private ownership and the nation state are the two forces hampering and restricting the development of society. This was in complete contrast with the economic chaos of the inter-war period when the intensification of national rivalries expressed itself through competitive devaluation and trade wars which led to the strangling of the productive forces within the narrow confines of private ownership and the nation state. As a consequence of this, the period between the Wars was one of crisis, revolutions and counter-revolutions, culminating in the new imperialist slaughter of 1939-45. In the post-war period, capitalism partially succeeded in overcoming the fundamental crisis of their system through the integration of world trade, creating a largely unified world market.

The long period of economic upswing from 1948 to 1973 is over. Full employment, rising living standards and the welfare state are things of the past. In place of growth we now face economic stagnation, recession and a crisis of the productive forces. John Donne states:

“No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man
is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main;” (*No Man is an Island*).

Animals became human beings by separating themselves from their purely animal nature. Even the most complex animals cannot match the accomplishments of humankind, which enables

mankind to survive and prosper in the most varied conditions and climates, under the sea, in the skies and even in space. Yet, paradoxically, humans are still controlled by blind forces beyond their control.

In all countries, society is afflicted with a deep sense of malaise. This starts on the top and percolates down to every level. The feeling of insecurity bred by permanent mass unemployment has spread to sections of the workforce who previously believed themselves immune—teachers, doctors, nurses, civil servants, factory managers—nobody is safe.

Decades ago, it was confidently predicted that the forward march of science and technology would solve all the problems of humanity. In the future, men and women would no longer be concerned with the class struggle, but with the problem of leisure. These predictions were not at all unreasonable. From a strictly scientific point of view, there is no reason why one should not be in a position to bring about a general reduction in the hours of labour, while simultaneously increasing output and living standards, on the basis of the improved productivity gained from the application of new technology. But the real situation is very different.

One can cite numerous examples of both blue collar and white collar workers from different industries, who complain of chronic overwork.

One of Charles Chaplin's most famous films "Modern Times" presents a graphic picture of life on the assembly line of a big plant in the 1930s. The mindless drudgery of an endless repetition of the same monotonous tasks indeed changes a human being into an appendage of the machine, a 'tool with a voice.'

In recent years scientists have returned to the idea of 'man-machine,' in relation to the field of robotics and the question of artificial intelligence. It has even penetrated the popular imagination, as witnessed by a spate of films of the "Terminator" type. This latter phenomenon describes quite a lot about the psychology of the present period, characterized by the general dehumanizing of society, mixed with a sensation that human beings are not in charge of their own destiny, and fear of uncontrollable forces that dominate people's lives. By contrast, the attempt to create artificial intelligence represents a further advance of the science of robotics, which, in a genuinely rational society, opens up a truly marvellous vista of human advancement.

For the great majority, life is mainly taken up as an activity which has very little meaning for the individual; at best, it is tolerable; at worse, a living torment. Even those who take a job like teaching children or nursing sick people find that the satisfaction they get is being taken away, as the laws of the market-place force their way into the classroom and the hospital ward.

Under these circumstances, sections of society look for a way out in such things as drugs and alcohol. When society is no longer rational, men and women turn to the irrational for solace. Religion is, as Marx said, opium, and its effects are no less harmful than other drugs. Religious and mystical ideas have penetrated even the world of science. This is a reflection of the nature of the period through which we are living.

In this century there is a palpable and all-pervasive feeling of weariness and exhaustion in capitalist society. It is as if a whole way of life has become old and decrepit. Pessimism about the future, mingled with superstition and unfounded hopes for salvation, are entirely characteristic of such a period.

Nature provides a literally limitless supply of potential energy—the sun, the wind, the sea and above all, matter itself, which contains vast quantities of untapped energy which can be harnessed for the betterment of life. But unfortunately, the future of the planet comes a poor second in the cause of the enrichment of a few.

The suffocating one-sided, artificial nature of this "civilization" becomes increasingly oppressive, even for those who do not suffer the worst conditions. The yearning for a simpler form of life, where men and women could live more natural lives, free from the intolerable pressures of competition and conflict expresses itself in a trend among a layer of young people to "drop out" of society, in an attempt to re-discover a lost paradise. Arun Joshi portrays this concept in his *Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. There is a possibility for misunderstanding here. In the first place, the life of primitive people was not as idyllic as some imagine.

It may not be a question of going back but going forward. Not a return to primitive tribal communism, but forward to the future socialist world commonwealth. The negation of the negation brings one back to the starting point of human development, but only in appearance. The socialism of the future will base itself on all the marvellous discoveries of the past and place them at the disposal of humanity. Now, however, we are entitled to go further than this. The staggering advances of science over the hundred years since Engels died mean that the death of the sun will not necessarily mean the death of the human race.

Some or the other or all of these ideas can cause confusion and result in the alienation of the individual. As beings endowed with reason, humanity must endeavour to find a proper solution from these conflicting ideas for the betterment of humanity in particular and the world in general.

Billy Biswas returns to India after earning his Ph.D. in Anthropology from USA. He has everything going for him: happiness, travel, education, status, wealth, job and a loving wife; yet his inner world is rocked by discontent. He is consumed by a restlessness which grows steadily. The protagonist Billy Biswas is a misfit in the modern milieu of technological jungle and seeks an escape from it. "To attempt to understand is probably even more futile" (7) *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to understand and to be understood.

If in spite of all this, in spite of the shabby apartment, the grades, my father's health, that summer stands out in memory as one of my life's happiest periods, rather like a basket of flowers in a vegetables market, the credit must go to Billy Biswas (20).

These words reveal the credit Tuula gives Billy Biswas for the friendship she had with him.

The Swedish girl Tuula Lindgren serves as a foil to Billy. She is similar to Billy in the sense that she is all taste and intellect and at times very witty. The conversation between Billy and Tuula has all the urbanity one can see between two sophisticated minds. The purpose of the novelist in creating Tuula is probably to show how one should be, while Billy shows what one is. Even the narrator is unable to gauge Billy's feelings until he sees the letter of Billy written to Tuula. Billy makes his problem very clear to Tuula.

Dear Mr. Saha,

A pilot of mine who occasionally touches India had been, now and then taking little presents for Billy. Two year ago I learnt that Billy has disappeared. I'm sending a few letters that he wrote to me. I did not send them earlier because I was afraid he may not have liked me having shown them to someone in case he reappears. I hope they are of some use in conducting the search. It was signed 'Tuula' in her childish hand (69).

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* the narrator is concerned not only with certain social evils deep rooted in civilized societies but also with certain complexities new to mankind. The evil effects of industrialization, ennui of city life and its agonizing loneliness combine to drive Billy out of the groove of the common run of life. But of all the heroes of Joshi, Billy alone is able to come out of his predicament successfully. He therefore is presented in the image of a rebel and others remain as hopeless compromisers. While the other heroes of Joshi- Sindi, Rattan and Som act as victims of circumstances, Billy acts with knowledge and conviction against circumstance.

I came a thousand miles to see your face, O Mountain, A thousand miles did I come to see your face? It is an old song, playful and melancholy by turns, like the wind in the saal forest on a quiet afternoon. It is sung both at birth and also at the time of funerals (7).

The world wars contributed to undermine the basic faith man had in man. Increased tension and frustrations became a part of existence. But the individuals, who thank the social structure and religion, manage to continue to be free from a sense of anxiety. Religion perpetrated social evils of its own. His awareness is also focused on the evils of man's material concerns. Billy's predicament cannot be simply dismissed as the identity diffusion. It is something deep rooted and more complex. Billy himself testifies to the fact that it was a problem of identity.

That summer, he told me, 'I had my first glimpse of the other side'. 'What other side?' 'The otherside. You know what I mean, don't you? 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' (15).

But Billy's nature is such that he can do nothing but grapple with and chase the faceless phantom that appears before him to the very ends of the earth. Of course he runs the risk of the most terrible perils that man is capable of.

Billy stands midway between the flamboyant American culture and the tradition bound Indian culture. The fact that Billy hails from the upper class of Indian society also adds to some of his problems. When the narrator remarks that Billy hails from a well-connected family Tuula promptly replies that “it might be part of the difficulty”. As a student, Billy is less interested in books on anthropology than in the places described in them. He would like to learn with real interest and absorption about the world and feels his entire life had been organized around his interest in the primitive. Billy’s initial itch to return to India is an itch for realization of the relevance of life. On returning to India, however, he feels like a fish out of water and sees no other way but to fly from the civilized, sophisticated modern society.

In spite of somewhat longish stay in America, neither of us had lost out roots in India or in the city of Delhi, nor did we suffer much, except for passing spells of loneliness, from that many other Indians seemed to be burdened with (20).

The crowded city Delhi is frustrating to Billy. The mood of desire is conveyed by Joshi in a flourish. “We went into one restaurant and then to the other” (34). Billy is aware of the deeper layer of his personality and feels totally alienated from the superficial reality of life.

Billy does not sink into existential life overnight. Even as a fourteen year old boy he had felt the loss of identity and a pull towards the primitive. While recollecting the early influences, Billy tells the narrator that something has started to work within him. The consolidation of identity is the primary psychological task of adolescence.

...well, we got home. As soon as we were alone, Meena protested. I said the boy had no right to talk like that. “I don’t know what’s eating you” Meena said. I said, how are you going to be my wife if you can’t see what’s eating me. “You don’t have to marry me”, she says. I said, “All right, if that’s what you want. I’ll tell everyone that the engagement is off” And I dashed home (45).

Billy Biswas has told all this in early March the following year, when George went up to Delhi to attend his wedding.

The complexity of contemporary social life is brought out by the fact that the protagonist goes through certain experiences even while contemplating marriage. The narrator meets Billy while Billy is planning to get married. Instead of looking cheerful, Billy has eyes shaded in darkness. His forehead is furrowed and it looks as if his lips moved silently in the half-light as though he was talking to himself.

It was still light when we arrived at the bride’s house. There were garlands and embraces and more garlands and then, after we entered the house, there was the Jaimala. And Meena put the Jaimala around Billy’s neck making him her own forever (45).

Joshi does not condemn society as such or offer to show it like Chaucer. The novelist is an exact converter of what he has observed. Yet, it is possible to discern the novelist’s implicit attack on a society. Arun Joshi comes very near to it. Joshi’s novels seem to say that all are foreigners,

placed as they are. If only he had done so, Billy would have lost the universal touch. A pathetic touch is added to Billy's character only to serve the artistic purpose. Billy being sensitive to anything that troubles his inner world, he would not just accept it as the curse of existence. After the initial struggle, Billy vanishes into the saal forest to lead the life of a tribal and to carve for his soul an inner shrine of peace and happiness. The contrast between the society that is repulsive to Billy and the society into which he takes refuge is driven home by Arun Joshi neatly.

It would require very exceptional gifts and total bilingualism to express directly in English the lives of people who do not themselves speak English. But Joshi successfully presents the very essence of the primitive culture. Joshi seems to indicate that one can realize the essence of life. Billy's emergence in the mythic world becomes a source of communication for its inhabitants. In a very special way he gives them a language to speak about the mysterious Chandtola rock of kali pahar which they worship.

To Billy, adapting the primitive way of life is only a first step, means to an end but the tribal wilderness proves to be just a change of scene and Billy is forced to remark to the narrator after ten years. Billy's contact with the narrator leads to Billy's death. Billy's death tells us that people live in a space less madness, in a living death. The narrator summarizes the feelings of the readers when he says:

Gradually it dawned upon us that what we have killed was not a man, not even the son of a 'governor', but some for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we killed one of the numerous man-gods of the primitive pantheons. (169)

In *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Arun Joshi is concerned not only with certain social evils deep rooted in civilized societies but also with certain complexities new to mankind. The hero of the story, Billy is the nucleus of the whole action in the book. Billy in his own estimate considers himself crazy.

As far as society is concerned justice is done. The final impression one has of Joshi's story of Billy is that society is faceless though oppressive. Individuals like Billy are born to suffer. One's zeal to reform society can have only limited results. Perhaps death is the real refuge for people like Billy Biswas.

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