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Metamorphosis of Billy : The Study of the Unconscious
in
Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

Abstract:

It irk'd him to be here, he could not rest .

MATTHEW ARNOLD

The most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The *attempt* to understand is probably even more futile. Arun Joshi's second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a strange tale and unique example to study the unconscious level of human mind which lies behind the unusual acts and moves of the personality. Billy's uncommon traits and transformation of personality from an educated, sophisticated upper strata of society to the primitive tribal world of aborigines is a typical case in terms of accepted social norms and behaviour which can be analysed on the basis of psychoanalytic theory laid down by Sigmund Freud. The paper is an attempt to study the unconscious mind of Billy which brought in a transformational change of his personality. Psychoanalytic theory is a scientific theory developed by Freud to explain human personality and behaviour. Central to this theory, is the concept of the unconscious, the belief that much of one's action is determined by memories, thoughts or wishes of which one is not consciously aware. Closely allied with the concept of the unconscious is the principle of psychic determinism, which maintains that each psychic event is predetermined by previous psychic events of which one may not be consciously aware. Memories, thoughts, wishes or other mental phenomena are excluded

from conscious awareness when they are in some way objectionable or unacceptable to the conscious self. They are not, however, completely pushed aside but are expressed in some disguised manner.

Keywords : Freud, Psychoanalysis, Unconscious, transformation, Metamorphosis.

Introduction :

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas deals with the problem of the quest for identity and the crisis of consciousness of its central character Bimal Biswas, popularly known as Billy throughout the novel. Billy is a unique individual whose behaviour is incompatible with the natural laws of everyday reality. He is driven by “a great force, “*urcraft*” a primitive force” (18) of his unconscious self to abjure the monotonous respectability of his upper class society. He seeks his roots in the company of primitive tribes, resulting in consequential anguish to family leading to his tragic end. He violates all social norms and finally hears the call of his instincts which was present in his unconscious mind from the very beginning of his life. Billy has a mystical urge, a compulsion, which makes him stay away from the materialistic and civilized society. He isolates himself from the whole apparatus of convention and rituals of society upholding the glorious cultural ethos of nature.

Billy Biswas is a man of extraordinary obsessions. He is consumed by a restlessness which grows steadily, forcing him to leave the materialistic aspects of so-called civilized society. Renouncing his past, his family and the everyday world, Billy goes in search of a world of meaningful relatedness which he finds in the tribal world of primitives, he settles there for the rest of his life and ultimately accepts death to sustain his new formed identity of a mythical king of tribals. Freeing ‘self’ from the restraints of the external environment, he remains subjected by the urges of his sub conscious self. His uncanny decision to leave his family, society, status and all other aspects of materialistic life to accept the primitive life is the result of the dictates of his ‘Id’, the fountain head of his uncontrolled basic instincts and sub conscious desires with which he himself was not previously aware.

Billy belongs to the upper crust of Indian society. His grandfather having at one time been the Prime Minister of a famous Princely State in Orissa. His father, who is the Judge of Indian Supreme Court, had earlier been the ambassador to a European country. Belonging to the rich, sophisticated community, Billy is not at ease with his own self and the people around him. His behaviour and actions are not common. He has a personality of whose deeper layers he himself is not initially aware. Despite his conventional roots, high social status and a secure job, Billy feels estranged from the upper crust of Indian society and craves

for the primordial. The people in general and the members of his family in particular are at a loss to understand the workings of Billy's mind.

The life of Billy Biswas is one of strange turns and erratic decisions. Some kind of duality in his character and inner crisis keeps on haunting him. His parents send him to the U.S. to study engineering but there he switches over to the study of Anthropology. He acquires a sudden interest in his own identity, "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (89). The presence of primitive force in him prompts him to stay in Harlem, an abode of American aboriginals, instead of Manhattan. Billy, at times, performs some unusual acts of primitivism. He has a shock of "erotic energy" (91). His hallucinations recur many times, especially when he hears the sound of drums at night. At a music party in his friend George's apartment, Billy, all of a sudden, starts playing upon a pair of bongo drums at a feverish pitch which holds everybody by its "mesmeric pull"(17).

It is around Billy's interest in the primitive life that his entire life has been organized. Talking to Romi, he tells of his glimpse of the other side: "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) Billy's other side concerns the primitive life untouched by the sophistication, inhibitions and restraints of the civilized world.

To Billy, the *adivasis* had perhaps grasped the spirit of the force that prompted the ancient architects to build the sculptural designs of the Konark. Their dark inscrutable faces, to him, contain the wisdom much beyond the ken of the civilized. Billy, too, possesses this primitive force. Tuula Lindgren, the Swedish lady, who comes to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work and has extraordinary intuition, understands the dilemma of Billy's life fully. She tells Romi that Billy who is "an exceptional person" (18) feels inside him "A great force, *urcraft*, 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 or me. It can explode any time" (18).

She finds him "obsessed with a latent quest" (127). It is this which acts as a volcanic force in the character of Billy Biswas. In order to cure his obsessions for the primitive, he marries Meena Chaterjee, a sophisticated and beautiful girl of his own community and tries to settle down in life. He is blessed with a son. But these bonds do not help him get rid of his obsessions. All of a sudden, he is seized by a phantom from deep within himself which makes him anxious to leave the so called civilized world of greed, avarice, riches and hypocrisy. There is a power manifested in him and something inside him which beckons him towards the primitive riches and pleasures of life and one fine morning he leaves his wife,

child and parents and disappears in the *Saal* forests of the Maikala hills. Ignoring all family responsibilities, filial expectations and social obligations, he escapes from the civilization to the forest and the primitive world. Billy's unconscious self drives him to renounce the monotonous respectability of his higher class society and seek roots in the company of primitives.

Billy's strange case can be analyzed and understood on the basis of Freud's psychoanalytic theory. Freud attributed three qualities to mental process : conscious, subconscious and unconscious. Conscious relates to phenomena one is aware of at any given moment. Reality testing perception of the external world entails consciousness. The subconscious stands between conscious and unconscious as well as it is the aggregation of experiences one is able to get aware if one attends to them. Unconscious is the phenomena of which we are unaware and is not accessible except under special circumstances.

Every person has an unconscious as well as a conscious tendency to place himself in situations in which he feels secure, gets approval and recognition of his merits. His selection of people and surrounding as well as his attitudes is primarily guided by his need to experience a sense of security and of personal worth. Any observed or acknowledged act of the individual usually brings in its wake some degree of social approval or disapproval. Everything a person does or says is weighed by those around him on a scale of social acceptability. Billy's drumming session at U.S. which draws everyone's attention by its "mesmeric pull"(17) as well as his choice to stay in Harlem is the part of his unconscious primordial urges with which he was not so aware at that time.

In his theory, Freud proposed unconscious motivation as an explanation of behaviour and advocated that reasons of human actions can be traced by certain procedures of psychological analysis which can disclose the pattern of forces and energies that led to the action. He introduced the concept that causes of behavior can be determined by exploring the unconscious personality of the individual. Personality, according to him, is constituted by three major systems. Id , the Ego and the Superego. These three elements interact with each other and behaviour is the result of the constant interaction among them.

- (i) Id : Id comprises all that is inherited or present at birth. It is the source of all mental energies in the individual. The powerful group of innate urges is essentially unconscious and the conscious is often ignorant of these urges. It has no direct contact with reality.
- (ii) Ego : It is largely conscious and deals with reality of the environmental conditions. It differentiates between subjective experiences and the nature of

things in the external environment. It obeys the reality principle and acts as an intermediary between three sets of forces of instinctive pressure, external environment and reality. It is controlled from the super ego.

- (iii) Super Ego : It represents the influence acquired from other persons, parents and society. It exercises control over the ego. In a well adjusted person, the relationship among the id, the ego and the super ego is balanced. In a maladjusted person, the relationship is disturbed which causes the uncommon behaviour of the person. Freud claimed that human actions are based on the relationship of these components of his life.

The drastic and determining action of Billy to leave the civilized society and family to join the primitive life is the result of the dictates of his "Id"- the fountain head of his uncontrolled basic instincts and sub conscious desires.

The psychoanalytic theory of motivation insists on the structure and historical development of motives. Freud formulated the concept of unconscious motivation to make sense out of a relatively small incidents which further leads to the large picture of decisive actions of life. It emphasizes the importance of underlying motives in human actions and gives importance to the developmental determinants of behaviour. Early experiences are important in adult life. Due to the dangers of the external world, the ego experiences tension and pain which create anxiety. In order to reduce anxiety and maintain the balance of personality, the ego makes use of mental mechanisms such as repression, projection and regression etc. Freud proposed that instinctual drives are the principal motivator of human actions.

Billy's escape to the primitive world of tribes is due to his disliking for the materialistic upper class life with which he is fed up. His marriage with Meena also turns into a miserable failure. The society of Delhi has begun to get on his nerves. He tells Romi :

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 upper 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 (128).

Condemning the civilized society, he writes Tuula : “I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does the civilized man do? (69). In another letter to Tuula, he writes of his strange dreams about a tribal woman. “A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man’s house... this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand” (162). Meena gets upset by his frequent hallucinations and terrible moods and feels he does not love her any more. His strange moods and actions leads to the miserable condition of their married life.

Billy’s interest in anthropology and his interest in tribal world and habitation had its germs in his childhood memories when he visited Bhubneswar with his mother at the age of fourteen. He recalls the incident :

Until then I had been mostly in Delhi and in Dehradun where I went to school. I am sure I was like any other boy of my age. Yet almost from the very first day, almost from the moment that we emerged from the railway station, something odd started to work within me. It was as though a slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake. You know this happens with almost everybody at the time of adolescence. Strange passions are roused. Some get fascinated by music, others by painting or literature or the sciences. Your life starts to take the final mould, so to speak (89).

Again he remembers :

It was more or less the same with me except that I could not figure out what excited or troubled me unless it was a sudden interest in my own identity. Who was I ? Where had I come from ? Where I was going ? ... there was something about Bhubneswar that had brought it on (89).

Then his visit to Konark enhanced his feeling of some magical or unknown influence on him :

What appealed to me was the shades of the same spirit that I spoke of although I knew 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 (90).

Again he recalls his experiences of Bhubneswar when he went to watch the dance of the tribes “Something similar happened to me then. First a great shock of erotic energy passed through me... The shock of erotic energy was followed by the same feeling of unreality... Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of” (91).

Billy’s interests in the tribal world had developed in his adolescence phase but he was not so consciously aware of this fact. His interest in the primitives urged him to opt anthropology for his higher studies. Later, when at the age of twenty he moves to America for his higher studies the same feeling recurs again. He tells Romi :

That odd thing that happened to me in Bhubneswar. Nothing happened for the next five years. But when I was twenty and in America, it started to recur again. You know the same odd feeling of being in a place other than where I was, in a place very, very old, at times a wilderness, at other time full of strange primitive people (129).

His hallucinations occurred without any apparent stimulus. After he started studying Anthropology, the lapses become more frequent. The feeling deeply affected his mind that he was not there, where he belonged. During his anthropological surveys, when he started to describe his students about primitive people, their origin, life, customs and livelihood , he felt that he was a tribal himself and he is one of the primitives to be investigated. A great conflict of his inner and outer world was shaking him inside. The call of the primitive world which continuously prompting him to join their group : “Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you” (88). He is compelled by his innermost feelings : “I was waiting to explore all this to enjoy this earth, this moonlight, these imperishable rocks, the touch and smell of this primeval night” (88).

It was precisely this phantom which he himself has been trying to pin down all these years. So, ultimately he hears the call of his soul and undergoes a great transformational change of personality. “ I certainly underwent a deep metamorphosis that was, no doubt, responsible for all that I did subsequently. Layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight” (88). Billy has never imagined that such a drastic change would occur in his life ,but, his innate urges compelled him to undergo his transformation: “Billy Biswas, a refugee from civilization, sat in the shadow of a *Saal* tree, a thousand miles away from home, gradually underwent his final metamorphosis” (102).

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