

Inauthentic Involvement of the Protagonists of R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* and Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*: A Study in Comparison

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ABSTRACT

*This paper tries to analyse the protagonists of R. K. Narayan's *The Painter of Signs* and Arun Joshi in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and a comparison is drawn as both the writers have dealt with the issue of inauthentic involvement in their novels but represented in different lights. Although both the writers belong to 21st century, the postcolonial era of the Indian literary arena, but there is a noteworthy dissimilarity in the concerns, approaches and attitudes of both the novelists. The way they both conceptualized the issue of inauthentic involvement is remarkably different. Living in a deep rooted society, Arun Joshi's characters find themselves alienated and rootless and undergo a mental trauma which Narayan's characters lack. R.K.Narayan's characters never suffered from isolation, loneliness and mental depression although they were socially and mentally not free. Narayan's characters connote the strength of constructive and optimistic outlook of life while Arun Joshi's characters offer a picture of conflicts and tensions that defy neat pat solutions. On one hand, Arun Joshi characters totally isolated themselves from the world to search the real meaning of life, whereas R. K. Narayan's characters struggle within the societal conditions for the quest of real self. Arun Joshi's protagonists are rich, higher-middle class and well educated persons; on the other hand R. K. Narayan's heroes belong to middle class, not highly educated common man whose socio-cultural milieu is quite different from the former. Both the writers, in their formative years, was highly influenced by 'Bhagvad-Gita'*

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As the old adage goes 'To Thine Own Self, Be True' which implies, be true to yourself; do not indulge in self deception. Inauthentic Involvement, in existentialism, is a term which a closely followed by self deception. It is concerned with denying the relevance of our own logical arguments and evidences. Jean Paul Sartre also makes it clear that self deception is just like two partially-independent acting minds inside one mind, with one beguiling the other. In other words, it is a philosophical idea in which a human being disowns his/ her inner freedom to act authentically and adopts false values under the pressure from external forces. Kierkegaard views that in order to lead an authentic life; one has to face the reality and forms one's own opinion of existence. If one's act is in accordance of an image and one doesn't employ freedom and responsibility to the limit of the image, one establishes oneself as inauthentic. Thus, freedom and responsibility after making choice and decision makes a character authentic. Arun Joshi had a well defined Indian vision of life which he exhibits through his novels. His novels unflinching record the pain and anguish of modern man, his agony, alienation and loneliness. His deep and extraordinary insight into human psychology is noticeable in his portrayal of man's restlessness, rootlessness and existential quest. He presents his

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protagonist who gets alienated not from the society but from oneself. His fictional world is a projection of a world where an individual struggles for his existence and characterized with sense of alienation, existential predicament, inauthenticity, disillusionment and rootlessness. Through the heroes of his novels, he explores the man's psychology in an exceptional way. He finds man more as a victim of his own inner climate rather than the outer material environment. His protagonists are 'lone questers' who are misfit in the world where they have to live while facing the meaninglessness of life. They are impatiently probing for their roots and trying to know the real purpose of their existence in this hostile world.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), the second novel of Arun Joshi, is based on the quest for authenticity by the single character, Bimal Biswas (Billy). The story is narrated by Billy's friend Romesh Sahai hence forth known as Romi who claims not to have complete comprehension about Billy and realizes

the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile. . . in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extra ordinary obsessions. (Joshi, 7)

Romi goes back in the past and recalls how he met Billy in New York, when he was looking for an accommodation in New York. He finds Billy a well -establish man who hails from “upper-upper crust of Indian society” (9). Billy belongs to a family of aristocrats as his grandfather was Chief Minister of Orissa and his father was the Judge of Supreme Court. He was sent to America to obtain a degree in engineering but he makes a conscious choice by becoming a passionate scholar of anthropology. He once told Romi: “All I want to do in life is to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there, find out about the aboriginalness of the world. . . Travel, travel, travel. A little bit here and there but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India.”(14) He was inauthentically involved in the so called civilized world and found solace in Harlem, the home of black Americans and “One of the worse slums of New York City.” (9) because he felt “it is the most human place in the world.” His selection of Harlem as home shows his authentic inclination towards his love for isolation and primitive life. Right from the age of fourteen, Billy had a great urge to live a primitive life. He always felt that there is something wrong with his life and he belongs to the tribal world. His fondness for tribal society can be seen now and then in the novel. The suppression of the call of the other world, of which he has been aware since his childhood days, immersed him in inauthentic involvement. Billy's Swedish friend, Tuula Lindgren was aware about his unique energy, “A great force, *urcraft*, a . . . a primitive force” (23) in Billy and even made Romi realized that this attraction for primitive society might explode any time. After completing his studies, he comes back to India and in order to suppress his primitive impulse, he marries a Delhi based girl, Meena and joins Delhi University as a professor in anthropology. But the marriage instead of being the solution to his problem proves to be a catastrophe. The marriage was a fiasco as Billy marries Meena as he got wretched with the worldliness and materialistic life but quite opposite his wife is very much fond of money and feels contended on being part of the elite society. His yearning for meaningful relationship and absence of communication in marriage subsequently leads to inauthentic involvement with Meena's cousin, Rima Paul. He takes advantage of Rima's innocence by seducing that girl. He pretends himself to be the tortured being and tried to win her sympathy in every way. But he also realized 'a tremendous corrupting force' (189) overpowering him. He feels that his inauthentic involvement with Rima was a sort of warning from the call of wild that if he still rejects the call of primitive life he has to suffer terribly.

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. . . .(Joshi, 121)

He makes every possible effort to withhold his longings of primitive life and to adjust himself in this civilized world. But still, the existential dilemma lingers in his mind and he finds impossible to incorporate himself in this civilized and hypocrite world. He becomes a split personality between the civilized and primitive. Billy also doesn't value society and look upon its ideas and beliefs. Even he almost starts brawl with his friend when his friend shames the banjaras calling them thieves and their wives as whores. “. . . all *banjaras* were thieves and their women no better than the whores” (60) His rejection of social institution compels him to abscond civilized world without any thought, his approach towards society sometimes reminds of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche who themselves refuse social dogmas.

He fails to connect himself to the civilized world and is unable to reconcile himself with his own self. Billy, a despondent, does not find his true identity in these roles. He plans anthropological tour with his students to woods in order to connect himself to his real Self. He even writes many letters to Tuula, his Swedish friend, about his loosing grip over life, himself, his parents and child. Finally, he disappears in the forest of Maikala Hills of Satpura in Madhya Pradesh. Like Buddha, he renounces the civilized world, his wife, and his children for the quest of eternal truth. His flee from the civilized world is a reaction to the riches, hypocrisy, greed of the bourgeois life in which he feels stranded. He was conscious of deeper layers of his personality which hindered him to accept these superficial realities of life. His embracing the primitive's culture of Dhunia is the only step towards authenticity. It is said of him that “no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its better end. . . .” (8)

Nobody knew about the whereabouts of Billy after disappearance and considers him dead till Romi visits the hills after joining the administrative service. By that time Billy has completely absorbed in primitive life. When Romi questions him about running away from family responsibility he cleverly answers that he has more responsibility to the self, its identity and the soul rather than family. He says, “I had greater responsibilities towards soul.”(186) He also tells Romi that living amongst primitive people he has comprehended the true meaning of life. He also talks about his close association with Bilasia whom he calls, “the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year.” (142) Even there is a drastic change in the personality of Billy after meeting Bilasia. He feels Bilasia is the one “that had drawn me to Tuula, to the study of anthropology, to the bizarre spots of north and central America”. She is the missing self of Billy and makes Billy complete. He experiences solace, contentment, real mental and spiritual tranquility as he adapted the primitive life style. But this peaceful life comes to an end when Romi discloses Billy's whereabouts to his officious wife, Situ. Billy's family members' insistence to meet Billy takes him to the tragic end. Heidegger claims, “Death, honestly accepted and anticipated can become an integrating factor in an authentic existence.”

R.K.Narayan, the most acclaimed writer in India, is known for his penetrating analysis of human emotions and human motives and great critic of human demeanor. He presents, through his novels, both virtue and vice impartially and justly without preaching a didactic message. He is

considered as traditional teller of tales, a creator of realistic fiction which impressed the reader with its humor and warmth.

The Painter of Signs (1976) is so unique and peculiar in its characterization that it leaves an inefaceable impression on the mind of the readers. The characters are ordinary and found in common place of Indian society, yet they bear uniqueness and queerness which lies in their involvement with one another. The main character is Raman, a conscientious sign-painter who is authentically involves with his profession. He observes minutely each detail while writing calligraphy on sign board and completes his customers' assignments on time with honesty and dedication. He considers himself an intellectual rationalist but lacks the quality of genuine rationalist. He denounces sex and marriage and the narrator claims, "He wished to establish that man - woman relationship was not inevitable and that there were other more important things to do in life than marrying" (Narayan, 45)

The narrator further adds Raman's view against marriage. "He had steeled himself against this blunder committed by human being since Adam."(45) But his hypocritical attitude and contradictory aspects in his behavior lack authentic self and are exposed when he watches a woman bathing on the bank of the river Sarayu which flows at the back of his house. The sight of woman with fair thighs engrossed his mind with the thoughts of the woman and he keeps on thinking about her all the time. Although he is conscious of his obsessive and unholy thoughts and he also criticizes himself but he is unable to control his fantasies whenever he gets a chance. He poses to be an 'edifice of self-discipline' that has self control over sexual desires but deceives his own self. He reiterates his principle to control his thoughts process. He recalls, "Just my principle, and disciplining my mind against sex— obsessive sex" (16). Thus constant suppression of his inner urges and biological necessity, he comes out a split personality who at one time cherishes some idea and the other time questions and doubt about the importance of his idea. Likewise, his principle on reducing the significance of money in his life again projects inauthentic aspects as Raman cannot escape himself to be the part of 'money-mad world'.

Again his rationality and asceticism comes to halt when he meets Daisy, the first female customer of Raman, who is authentically involved in her mission of family planning. She hires Raman to make sign board for all family planning clinics for the entire city and nearby rural areas. At the very first sight, he feels irresistibly attracted to her and his claims of chastity and bachelorhood in thoughts prove void. He closely observes her and questions aside, "Was her complexion dusky or fair, eyes round or touched up? What shape of nose did she have?" (32). Daisy's lovely appearance holds him in a powerful grip and he remains lost in her thoughts all the time. He even realizes his state of mind and tries to restrict himself, "To pursue a female after seeing only the upper half, above the desk— she might be one - legged, after all. But this is not sex which is driving me, but a normal curiosity about another person, that's all". (33) But a constant struggle between self criticism and self denial projects his divided self. Being enchanted by her personality and moved by his own instincts, he starts inventing opportunities to see her. Raman's inauthenticity not only lies in his desperation to meet her but also after meeting her he criticizes himself for his too much eagerness and attraction towards her. He rebukes himself and confesses. "I am sex - obsessed, that's all, to admit the plain fact. The first exposure to sari - clad figure and I drop everything and run after it."(39)

His psychological complexities come to the extent that he starts considering his inclination towards sex and woman as the God's conspiracy to break his vow of austerity. He states "The God

grow jealous of austere men and maneuvered to disturb their rigours, and their purpose; their agency was always a woman of beauty". (40)

Even he recalls the preaching of Mahatma Gandhi to prevent himself against the temptation towards Daisy. "Walk with your eyes fixed on your toes during the day, on the stars at night."(40) He decides not to make an eye contact with Daisy in his next meeting and makes plans of wearing colored glasses to avoid direct contact with her but this idea fails to remove Daisy from his mind and his obsession towards Daisy keeps on increasing. The feeling of lust overpowers his self restraint and self-discipline and he finds himself "on the verge of defeat"—which is not external but from his own unconscious self. He resolute to abandon everything associated with Daisy but the other part of his divided self pulls him towards Daisy. "He told himself, I must get over this obsession. Till yesterday I was a free man with my mind unfettered. Today I am unable to think of any other subject."(44)

But all his efforts to overcome his temptation towards Daisy end in smoke, when he gets a chance to accompany Daisy to a health campaign in his neighboring villages. During their campaign of three weeks, Raman finds Daisy, aloof and zealot who is excessively devoted to her family planning mission and ready to sacrifice her own personal life. She authentically moves towards her vocation which suggests Sartre views. "A man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the some of the organization, the ensemble of relationship which makes up these undertakings."(Sartre, 33).

Raman wants to show his extensive love for her but she gives him no chance. Even Walsh says, "Raman fell irresistibly in love with the formidable girl. The only privilege she offered him was that of accompanying her."(Walsh, 158)

On their way back, when they travel by bullock cart Raman raises the issues that she likes—birth control, contraceptives and population which brings them close "The and barriers between them seemed to be falling. Daisy becomes more communicative."(84) But these thoughts are inauthentic as the motive of this discussion is to drag her thoughts towards sex. At night, due to bullock's injury they have to spend night all alone. The solitary night and his suppressed voluptuous desire evoke his animal instinct and he rushes towards her to grab her. Without considering the consequences, he tries to achieve her but somehow Daisy manages to escape and spends her night on the tree. On that evil night, Raman put everything at stake to satisfy his animalistic urges. Even Raman involvement with Daisy is inauthentic as he tries to cross his limits without the consent of Daisy who is authentically absorbed in her vocation. But later he suffers from existential anxiety and depression with the fear that Daisy might take a legal action against him. He wants to scream and tell everyone in Malgudi "I have done no wrong. Most natural event between a man and woman. Yet this lady spurns me. She causes me great anguish and has punctured the sail of my life (111)". But with the fleeting time, everything comes back to routine and Daisy comes out of her state of aloofness and gets involved with Raman. Thus Daisy herself moves on the path of inauthenticity leaving behind her mission to fulfill her physical desires. Soon their love affair attracts attention of the people of Malgudi and this news falls into the ear of her Aunt also. She feels shocked when she comes to know that Daisy is a Christian girl. She tries to persuade Raman to leave Daisy but Raman has no respect for her sense and sensibility and she feels so sapped that she decided to leave Malgudi. Daisy's inauthenticity is clearly visible when she advises Raman to allow his aunt to go to Benares like her mechanized thoughts on her mission.

She does not respect the emotions of Raman's aunt and becomes responsible for the decision of her aunt to leave Raman. Even Raman inauthenticity towards Daisy becomes evident when he thinks, "Was she tendering this advice in order to clear the way for herself?"(156) Raman is also inauthentic towards his aunt, who sacrifices her whole life bringing him up after the death of his parents, and allows her to go to Benares due to his association with Daisy. He is not ready to shun the company of Daisy but sometimes he feels divided between his reverence for aunt and his infatuation for Daisy.

Later in the novel somehow Raman persuades her to marry him but after accepting all her conditions for marriage. She wants marriage as per *Gandharva Vivah* which believes "When two souls met in harmony the marriage was consummated perfectly and no further rite or ceremony was called for". She doesn't want herself to be bound in any commitment and wants to live life on her own terms. Without giving second thought, Raman accepts her conditions as he is totally enchanted by her physical charm. Raman proves to be inauthentic in the involvements as he is responsible for everything he does. As existentialist says,

Man is condemned to free. Condemned because he did not create himself; yet in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does (Sartre, existentialism 123)

However, in the end Daisy rejects marriage proposal and decides to move on with her vocation of population control. Daisy is inauthentic towards Raman as why she comes so close to Raman when she knows about her devotion towards her career. She also advises Raman to move to his own authentic world. She requests Raman to forget the past as she is already wiped it out from her mind and retain her authenticity towards her career leaving her emotions behind whereas Raman finds himself immersed in existential anguish as both Daisy and his aunt left him all alone, "Raman is left with neither possibility open to him, as both his aunt and Daisy abandon him to pursue their particular goals in life." (Thieme, 149)

CONCLUSION

Both the writers share a deep interest in the fusion of fiction and philosophy as the authentic source of enunciating the experiences and philosophical dilemmas that a human being faces while existing in this world. They have conceptualized differently various existential issues in their novels. On one hand, R. K. Narayan operates existential issues on comic note while on the other, Arun Joshi's characters takes existentialism to pessimistic note. They both conclude that while making genuine attempts and constant struggle in life one can tries to evolve authentically in this world. Whereas Billy finds his true self by renouncing the materialistic self, Raman suffers from existential inauthenticity and tries to come out of it while leaving in this abrupt world. While Narayan is aware about evilness of life, still he loves life. As a humanist, Narayan presents human relationships, human emotions, human weaknesses and human trauma as the essence of human existence. His characters have the urge to combat existential concerns and emerge out with positive and strong psychology and thus improve human condition which further uplifts humanity whereas Arun Joshi as an existentialist projects his characters suffers from social isolation, cultural estrangement, social isolation and self estrangement and seek refuge in non- involvement and inactivity. He proves through his works that total-involvement in work does not lead a man to attain perfection while abstention from work doesn't help a man to attain complete freedom from action.

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