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### LIVING A DREAM: MAGICAL REALISM IN *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS*



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#### ABSTRACT:

The Maikala forests in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* bring alive the living of a dream by Billy and dramatise a reality which appears to be magical when contrasted with the so-called normalcy of the upper middle class sophistication of Delhi or the sanitised life in the suburbs of America. In Maikala forests time, space, status all seem to lose their structured significance. Instead what rules is the simple living of life itself. In this living of life, birth, death, marriage and other events seem to acquire mythical and

magical dimension.

#### KEYWORDS

*Magical Realism, Primitive, Urban, Forest, 'Purush', 'Prakriti', Dream, Reality, Normal, Quest,*

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**INTRODUCTION :**

The Maikala forests in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* bring alive the living of a dream by Billy and dramatise a reality which appears to be magical when contrasted with the so-called normalcy of the upper middle class sophistication of Delhi or the sanitised life in the suburbs of America. In Maikala forests time, space, status all seem to lose their structured significance. Instead what rules is the simple living of life itself. In this living of life, birth, death, marriage and other events seem to acquire mythical and magical dimension.

Billy's entry into the Maikala forests is a Derridian 'rupture' with time. His self has already deconstructed the materialistic modern world and now he is entering a world where friends "gladly die for each other", where "Nobody" is "interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that", where people talk of "supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance and singing . . . and women and sex" (Joshi, *The Strange* 110-11). Here his waiting for Bilasia is not waiting for a person, "it was not Bilasia I had been waiting for but my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life" (Joshi, *The Strange* 111). Bilasia figure seems to enliven the phenomenal reality for Billy, "the whole hut seemed to be full of her, and only of her" (Joshi, *The Strange* 114). Billy realizes his entry into a new psychic realm makes him "terrified," because he realized "I was near the brink" (Joshi, *The Strange* 114). The dragon has been successfully encountered and the hero is in the sight of the captive which the dragon guarded. The liberation of the soul is in sight. Billy becomes aware of this situation, "It was I who had changed . . . I had ceased to resist what was the real me. All that I had been confusedly driving towards all my life had been crystallized, brought into focus . . ." (Joshi, *The Strange* 114). Billy, feeling the goal of his search in sight, is overcome with "terrible" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140) emotions. The process of liberation of his soul makes him cry and heave, and he feels, "as though I were passing through one of my numerous dreams. Or, as though all else had been a dream and I had just woken up" (Joshi, *The Strange* 117). Bilasia "fever" (Joshi, *The Strange* 117) rises in Billy or Billy's anima is activated by her so much so that in his sleep Billy "never had had a dream so erotic". Waking up, he finds the trees "terribly alive" and moonlight drenching everything in its "mystery" (Joshi, *The Strange* 118). He is mesmerized by this magical reality and life. "They all seemed to be waiting and watching and staring at me" (Joshi, *The Strange* 118). Here Billy discovers a new consciousness which is a rupture from the memory of "Bimal Biswas, graduate of Columbia, the only son of a Supreme Court judge, husband of Meena Biswas and father of a handsome child" (Joshi, *The Strange* 118). Billy's consciousness experiences a "Counter-memory" or "a way of recomposing" Billy's consciousness ruptures the historicity of time to be "the first man on earth facing the first night" (Joshi, *The Strange* 118). The object becomes the subject. Billy has been "waiting to explore all this, to enjoy this earth" but now everything seems to call him "to our primitive world" till his "senses are glutted" (Joshi, *The Strange* 119). What Billy's self experiences is not merely an immersion but a live introduction into a new psychic realm towards which his self had held loyally and whose visions through hallucinations and visions had made him survive the Great Mother Elementary. This psychic realm or "the spirit" or "the older force" (Joshi, *The Strange* 122) moves the phenomenal objects to assimilate Billy into its fold, "they all said, 'come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of the hill" (Joshi, *The Strange* 119). This new consciousness interchanges the concept of real and magical, 'the manifest' and 'the unmanifest' and what Billy had been trying hard to

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deconstruct throughout his life stands deconstructed all at once as Billy's entire search is illuminated by this new psychic realm which tells him, "you thought New York was real, you thought New Delhi was your destination, how mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled, come now, come. Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the inheritors of the cosmic night" (Joshi, *The Strange* 119).

Billy's "sanity" or temporal consciousness is ruptured and he undergoes a "deep metamorphosis" as all the structures of his consciousness are shattered and his liberated primary self in the Lawrencian sense is exposed to the elements as it were: "Layer up layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight" (Joshi, *The Strange* 119). It is this spontaneous self of Billy that "takes over" the other self which had so far been in "command" and Billy joins the world of primitive life where "he could for the first time see clearly the change coming in him" and had "the premonition that he might not go back" (Joshi, *The Strange* 135). Now Billy along with all others "was waiting for the rising of the moon" which was not a "side-attraction of life" but "the very reason for being present on earth that night" (Joshi, *The Strange* 135). Earlier he had waited for material and artificial things "that civilized men count as their duty or the foundations of their happiness or both" (Joshi, *The Strange* 135). This summed up the "catastrophic change" (Joshi, *The Strange* 135) which Billy underwent in two days in this new psychic realm, which is not heroic enough to kill the dragon in the Great Mother yet also not selfish enough like the pleasure-seeking ecstasy of having mode of the 'adolescent' incest where consciousness deliberately dips itself in the Great Mother Structure. In Billy's case it has been a prolonged 'struggler stage' between 'adolescent' incest and 'heroic' incest. He has always been conscious of "the Other Side" or the depths of his deeper being which he is being deprived of.

The drums, the dance and the local brew spread the waves of "erotic energy" and Billy "had begun to undergo a new transformation" (Joshi, *The Strange* 137). The "liquor" and the "dancing" as Billy says brought about an "explosion of senses" as it was "much easier for us to get down to our primitive self . . ." (Joshi, *The Strange* 138). Billy entered this new psychic reality with success and he felt his entire self expanded into nature into the very source of all life as it were. This psychic reality is now not in front of him but in him. In the shadow of a saal tree, he achieves his Nirvana or what he calls the "final metamorphosis" (Joshi, *The Strange* 139). Billy Biswas "a refugee from civilization" saw "in the night sky a reality that blinded him with its elemental ferocity. It was as though his life had been reduced to those elements with which we all begin when we are born" (Joshi, *The Strange* 138-39). This new psychic reality is elementalized or elements are animated as they tell Billy "Come . . . It is with us that you begin and it is with us that you will end." Billy's new psychic discovery makes him wonder, "why did it take him thirty years to discover this" (Joshi, *The Strange* 139). In a heightened state of consciousness he realized that he had been "afraid" and "foolish" in squandering "the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passes for civilization" (Joshi, *The Strange* 139).

Billy's new psychic discovery is followed by his successful encounter with the dragon and moves further to free his soul or the captive maiden and attain the treasure, and realize "men's potentiality for the divine in him" (Mohan 195), as his "anima" is activated, by the "animus" or the male principle in Bilasia whose "enormous eyes" poured out "a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them" (Joshi, *The Strange* 139). Billy, the "son a supreme Court Justice" dissolves into it with "the terrible madness of a man who after great sin and much suffering finds himself in the presence of his god" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). The captive maiden is freed and Billy attains the treasure

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in a moment when his meeting Bilasia becomes the meeting, as R.S. Pathak suggests, of Prakriti and Purusha, the source of all creation, or The First Cause. It is a moment which is in time yet transcends the historicity of time, "It was that passing moment that rarely comes in a man's life, when he feels that he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). The thrill of attaining the treasure can be seen in Billy's released and heightened consciousness which draws its life from the unconscious yet is independent in itself. In this state Bilasia "was the essence of that primitive force that had called me night after night, year after year" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). Billy's self now in its liberated state recognizes her as the motivating force of his life which drew him to Anthropology, Tuula, forests and hills. Her magical reality is more real than the phenomenal world and Billy finds her "leading me by the hand" like "another vision" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). The thrill, of freeing the captive and attaining the treasure which is in the form of the marriage of the hero with the captive or the self and the soul, can be seen in Billy's awareness of the moment of liberation of his soul. Bilasia has acted as "god" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140) for Billy because she got the god in him released and Billy's madness and thrill are understandable. They are like the crossing of a space-barrier by a space-bound ship which struggles to free itself of the gravity of the mother earth. That is why Billy says "I don't believe I had ever felt towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia that night" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). Billy has been communicated the "essence" of his life in the enactment of "visions" (Joshi, *The Strange* 140). Billy is conscious of his new magical state of heightened self that he has arrived "at the fork in my life without being conscious of it, I had waited for all my life" (Joshi, *The Strange* 142). Billy knows that "the turnings" were "as irrevocable as awesome." Billy's search involves him in the deconstructionist "counter act of destroying the episteme of civilized world" (Mohan 205) where the "counter memory" creates a new land to strike a beginning: nature, culture, language and God once again. The freeing of the captive and the heightened state of Billy's self creates a new "episteme of a sacred beginning, by externalizing the divinity potential in him" (Mohan 205).

In the search for self, Billy's psychic events, symbolized by the dragon fight and freeing of the captive maiden, are aspects of "the same mental phenomenon, separable only by abstraction" (Smithson 240). These psychic events are actually "closely interwoven events occurring simultaneously" (Smithson 240). Once Billy self is fulfilled he is shown as acquiring power beyond rational comprehension, Chandtola starts glowing as Billy is returned to "Devi Mata" his "companion . . . from one life to another" (Joshi, *The Strange* 156). Billy is deified as the king who had been united with his companion. Devinder Mohan calls it "a human manifestation of divine mutuality between man and woman" (205). Billy's search has been synchronized in the mythical structure of the return of a king of divine power in human form. His mere presence sent the marauding tiger "away" (Joshi, *The Strange* 156). While the dying grandson of Dhunia "was breathing again" within "an hour" of his coming (Joshi, *The Strange* 157). Billy's enlightened self is celebrated "like rain on parched lands, like a balm on a wound" (Joshi, *The Strange* 157-58). He is the higher intelligence of the primitives, "He is our priest" says Dhunia and his function is that "he looks after us" (Joshi, *The Strange* 157). Sushil Kumar Sharma aptly remarks that this state of Billy is the result of a "perfect harmony by belonging to microcosm and macrocosm: living and non-living; nature and human beings" (Sharma 171). A state which D.H. Lawrence calls the "real thing" in which one is "alive" to the "depth" of one's "soul" and "in touch somewhere in touch with the vivid life of the cosmos" (Inglis 379). In Lawrencian sense Billy has turned to 'life' itself "to the life that flows invisibly in the cosmos, and will flow forever, sustaining and renewing

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all living things" (Inglis 379). This is the strong magical realism in the novel where being alive and living fully is an enactment of a reality which seems very dreamy when compared to the 'unstrange' cases of the so-called 'normal' life in Delhi and New York.

#### NOTES

- i. Foucault Michel, qtd. in Devinder Mohan. "The Image of Fire." *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The Fictional World of Arun Joshi. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Classical, 1986. Print.
- ii. Pathak, R.S. "Human Predicament and Meaninglessness in Arun Joshi's Novels." *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi*. Ed. R.K. Dhawan. New Delhi: Classical, 1986. Print.

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