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Metaphors of Rejection and Reception in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

Aim: The present paper, titled "*Metaphors of Rejection and Reception in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*," aims to investigate the protagonist's existential dilemma and his conscious rejection of the affluent, western-educated, urban middle-class postcolonial Indian society in favour of the tribal world of central India.

Approach and Methodology: The present paper adopts the qualitative method based on close textual analysis supported by relevant critical interpretations, the paper reveals how Billy's disillusionment, alienation, and psychic disturbance lead him toward a redemptive embrace of the tribal ethos.

Outcome: The study identifies the central metaphors of rejection and reception as vehicles through which Joshi critiques the moral bankruptcy of modern life and reclaims the authenticity of primitive existence. The paper ranges from the protagonist's movement from rejection to reception, symbolizing a metaphysical quest for self-realization and spiritual harmony.

Conclusion: Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* emerges as a profound metaphoric exploration of existence rather than a mere tale of escape. Billy's rejection of the civilized world exposes its moral and spiritual hollowness, while his reception into the tribal realm signifies a return to authenticity and unity with nature. The metaphors of rejection and reception operate on psychological, cultural, and spiritual planes—rejection purifies, and reception redeems.

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Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) is a profound examination of psycho-philosophical exploration of modern man's detachment and disaffection and quest for authenticity. The novel intricately weaves the metaphors of rejection and reception to dramatize the protagonist's struggle between inner truth and outer conformity. Billy's spiritual journey from Delhi's sophisticated elite to the simplicity of tribal life symbolizes his rejection of material illusion and his pursuit of self-realization beyond postcolonial mechanization. The rejection represents wealth, social prestige, and intellectual vanity, while the reception signifies the intuitive realm of spirit and being. Billy—born into an aristocratic family, the son of a Supreme Court judge and a Western-educated professor—feels spiritually suffocated by his privileged background. As Romi Sahai notes, "His father had at one time been the Indian ambassador to a European country... he was a judge of India's Supreme Court" (Joshi 12). Yet, this success alienates rather than anchors him. Perceiving the hypocrisy and pomposity of modern civilization, Billy renounces his world in search of what Meenakshi Mukherjee terms "the uncorrupted core of the self" (*The Twice Born Fiction*, 1971). His retreat to the Maikala Hills becomes an allegory of man's longing to rediscover authenticity amid material and moral disintegration.

How do the metaphors of rejection and reception in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* articulate the protagonist's inner conflict between material modernity and spiritual authenticity within the postcolonial Indian context? To examine how Arun Joshi employs the metaphors of rejection and reception in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* to depict the protagonist's spiritual and psychological transformation. To analyze how these metaphors, serve as a critique of the materialistic and morally hollow postcolonial Indian society.

Balumuri Venkateswarlu, in his article titled "*The Artistic Beauty of Arun Joshi's Novels*," appreciates Joshi as one of the few Indian English novelists who successfully captures the subtleties and complexities of modern Indian life. He observes that Joshi's artistic mastery lies in his ability to create psychologically convincing characters and explore the moral and spiritual dimensions of human existence through his fiction. Prof. Manminder Singh Anand, in his study titled "*A*

Study of the Existential Dilemma in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas," examines the novel as a profound exploration of the protagonist's inner conflict and quest for meaning amid the absurdity of modern existence. He emphasizes that Billy's withdrawal from the material world to the tribal realm symbolizes an existential search for authenticity and self-realization. D. M. Jacqueline Sara, in her article titled "*Analytical Portrayal on The Strange Case of Billy Biswas,*" presents a critical examination of Billy's psychological and moral transformation. She highlights how Arun Joshi artistically portrays the protagonist's inner turmoil and his ultimate rejection of the artificiality of modern civilization in pursuit of a more authentic tribal existence.

The novel under critical survey portrays a deep conflict between *material modernity* and *spiritual authenticity*. The protagonist, despite his privileged background, feels alienated from the superficiality of postcolonial urban life and turns toward the purity of tribal existence. The novel's metaphors of rejection and reception symbolically express this transition from moral decay to spiritual awakening. The problem lies in understanding how Joshi employs these metaphors to critique modern civilization and redefine the search for meaning in a fragmented world.

The study employs a qualitative research methodology based on close textual analysis of the novel under a critical scrutiny supported by relevant critical and theoretical perspectives. It integrates interpretative and thematic approaches to examine how the metaphors of rejection and reception articulate the protagonist's psychological and spiritual transformation. In Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, metaphors of rejection and reception are central to depicting the protagonist's existential quest and his conflict with societal norms. The novel uses the stark contrast between the "civilized" world and the "tribal" world as the primary extended metaphor for these themes.

The novel under critical survey stands as a profound allegory of the modern Indian consciousness caught between *the pull of civilization* and *the call of the primal self*. The novel dramatizes the perpetual conflict between *the internal and the external*—between spiritual truth and the pretentious façade of social success. Billy Biswas, the protagonist, born into an elite family and

educated in the West, epitomizes the disillusioned modern man who finds no solace in the glitter of material comfort. privileged background makes him a symbol of the upper-class establishment—the very “External” world he ultimately rejects. Joshi sets up Billy’s journey as an inward pilgrimage from illusion to truth, from alienation to authenticity.

Billy’s sense of displacement and dislocation within his own social environment begins early. Although he is possessed of all the markers of success such as education, marriage, money and status, he remains inwardly restless and stifled. He describes this void as “something dark and slumbering inside me,” an intuition of a life deeper and more real than the one he lives (Joshi 112). Romesh, the narrator, confesses that Billy was “a man of such extraordinary obsessions” (7), obsessed with an undefined longing for meaning. Critics such as R. K. Dhawan interpret this restlessness as a “mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy go away” (Dhawan 20). His rejection of modernity and middle-class mediocrity is not escapism but a conscious revolt against a sterile and corrupted culture where human relationships have lost their vitality and validity. The city of Delhi, with its glittering parties and shallow social circuits, becomes a metaphor for the barrenness of the “External.”

Joshi’s protagonist embodies what Meenakshi Mukherjee terms *the twice-born consciousness* of postcolonial Indians—torn between inherited Western rationalism and native spiritual instincts (*The Twice Born Fiction* 45). Billy’s rejection of the “smart society” represents the metaphoric death of this Westernized self and the rebirth of his primitive soul. The “external” society around him is depicted as morally decadent, aesthetically barren, and spiritually void. Billy’s world of power, privilege, and social etiquette suffocates him, and compels him toward a *metaphoric resurrection* in the forest. As Balumuri Venkateswarlu observes, Joshi’s art lies in “unveiling the nuances and complexities of contemporary Indian life that trap individuals between outer conformity and inner chaos” (Venkateswarlu 1). Billy’s story thus becomes emblematic of modern man’s existential discontent and dissatisfaction.

Billy forsakes the meaningless existence of the so-called civilized and sophisticated world because he feels suffocated by its artificial and hollow values.

He finds the contemporary urban middle-class society dominated by hypocrisy, snobbery, and material pursuits that leave no room for genuine emotion or spiritual fulfillment. In his conversation with Romi, he exposes the shallowness of the upper class, which mechanically imitates Western culture while losing touch with its own traditions. Art, intellect, and romance have been reduced to empty gestures like American movies, cheap restaurants, and old dance tunes. The festivals and songs that once carried meaning have become hollow rituals, devoid of poetry or passion. What remains, Billy observes, are loudmouthed women and men in suits dreaming of adulteries, symbols of a world that has lost its moral and aesthetic depth. Disillusioned and disheartened, Billy rejects this world of pretension and seeks refuge in a more authentic, primal existence where he can rediscover truth, purity, and selfhood.

The metaphor of rejection begins to take shape during Billy's stay in New York. His choice to live among the marginalized in Harlem rather than the "civilized" white neighborhoods symbolizes his subconscious quest for authenticity. Billy finds in Harlem an unrefined rhythm of life that resonates with his deeper instincts. Joshi writes that he found "White America much too civilized" (9), which implies a world sterilized of spontaneity and emotion. In contrast, Harlem pulsates with raw energy and unpretentious humanity. Tuula Lindgren, Billy's Scandinavian friend, recognizes this shift within him and calls it *aircraft*— "a great force, a primitive force" (22). Her words highlight the awakening of the primal within Billy, a power suppressed by the sophisticated surfaces of civilization.

During a party scene, Billy's trance-like drumming becomes a metaphor for his spiritual release. He seems possessed, merging into a state of unconscious energy that reflects his return to the archetypal self. D. M. Jacqueline Sara notes that this "analytical portrayal of Billy's instinctive awakening" foreshadows his later rejection of material society (Sara 3). Joshi's use of rhythm and music here functions metaphorically: drumming replaces dialogue, sound replaces intellect, and instinct replaces reasoning. The Harlem episode, therefore, marks Billy's first symbolic rebellion against modernity's sterile rationalism. He rejects the artificial

“External” to embrace the unmediated “Internal,” which lays the foundation for his future transformation.

Billy’s mystical experience in Bhubaneswar is another turning point in his metaphoric journey. He recalls the incident as an awakening, “A slumbering part of me had suddenly come awake” (Joshi 112). The ancient temple town, steeped in myth and spirituality, acts as a liminal space between the civilized and the primal. It is here that Billy first senses his alienation from the world of logic and his affinity with the world of intuition. The city becomes a symbolic site where the sacred and the profane collide.

Later in life, his vision of the man-eater in the forest becomes the culminating metaphor of this inner call. The voice that tells him, “You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Come now, come...” (111), functions as a mythic summons to his authentic self. As Dr. Ashish Gupta observes, Joshi’s novel “creates an aesthetic sign of the mythical morality of a tribal world against the sterility of contemporary technological mechanics of human values” (Gupta 2). The man-eater is not merely a beast; it symbolizes the devouring power of truth that consumes the illusions of civilization. When Billy admits that “layer upon layer was peeled off me until nothing but my primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight” (111), he achieves metaphoric rebirth; this is the shedding of the external ego and the revelation of the inner self.

This Bhubaneswar experience also connects Joshi’s narrative to the existentialist tradition. Like Camus’s or Sartre’s heroes, Billy faces the absurdity of existence and responds by asserting personal meaning. However, unlike Western existentialists, Billy does not end in nihilism but finds transcendence through primitive communion. Prof. Manminder Singh Anand interprets this as Joshi’s attempt “to reconcile man’s existential dilemma with India’s spiritual heritage” (Anand 5). Billy’s “call of the primitive” is thus not regression but a recovery of the self’s original wholeness, a metaphoric return to innocence.

Billy’s existential conflict arises from the incompatibility between his spiritual yearning and the expectations of modern society. He asks, “Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?” (Joshi 112), echoing the timeless

questions of identity and purpose. His rebellion, therefore, is not social but metaphysical. The world he abandons is a world obsessed with power, prestige, and appearance, “the glossy surfaces of our pretensions” (8). Joshi uses the metaphor of mirrors to illustrate how reality in the civilized world is distorted and disfigured by vanity. Billy’s rejection of this mirrored reality becomes his revolt against illusion.

His marriage to Meena Chatterjee represents the failure of modern relationships. Their union, shaped by status rather than emotion, deteriorates into alienation. Meena represents the “External”—urban materialism and conformity—whereas Billy represents the “Internal”—spiritual hunger and authenticity. Critics like Siddhartha Sharma describe Billy’s marriage as “a tragic metaphor of man’s bondage to society” (Sharma 47). The more Billy tries to reconcile the two worlds, the more suffocated he feels. His decision to leave his wife, child, and profession is, therefore, an existential statement, a quest for freedom beyond social validation.

Billy’s rejection of the external also extends to intellectual life. Joshi, through Romesh’s narration, mocks the Delhi intelligentsia as “a more pompous, a more mixed-up lot of people... Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the West abandoned a generation ago” (Joshi 162). This biting critique exposes the cultural bankruptcy of postcolonial elites, who imitate Western forms without understanding their spirit. Billy’s revolt, thus, becomes symbolic of a broader cultural rejection, a metaphoric cleansing of the borrowed masks of civilization.

If rejection defines the first phase of Billy’s journey, reception marks its culmination. His arrival in the *saal* forests of the Maikala Hills in Central India, especially Madhya Pradesh or Chhattisgarh signifies not mere escape but acceptance into a deeper mode of being. The tribal community receives him not as an outsider but as a reincarnation of their ancient king. This metaphor of rebirth reinforces Joshi’s vision of cyclical time, where spiritual truth is eternal and civilization is transient. The forest becomes a living metaphor for purity, instinct, and harmony. Billy’s integration into tribal life represents the merging of self and nature, man and cosmos.

The simplicity of the tribals contrasts sharply with the artificiality of urban life. They embody what Rousseau called *the noble savage*—untainted by greed and deceit. As R. K. Dhawan remarks, “His love for the primitive in life makes him leave his wife, child, and parents, ignoring family responsibilities, filial expectations, and societal obligations” (Dhawan 32). These familial and social ties are the last vestiges of the “External,” and Billy’s renunciation of them completes his transformation. His marriage to Bilasia, the tribal woman, symbolizes the union of spirit and instinct, a metaphorical reconciliation of divided human nature.

However, Joshi refuses to romanticize primitivism. Billy’s death at the hands of the police reveals the tragic inevitability of conflict between the two worlds. The forces of civilization, law, authority, and rationality, destroy the individual who dares to transcend them. D. M. Jacqueline Sara calls this ending “a haunting metaphor of civilization devouring its own truth” (Sara 5). The reception into the tribal world, therefore, is spiritual but not physical; the external world annihilates what it cannot comprehend. Yet Billy’s death transforms him into a mythic figure, a legend whispered among the hills, a man who found truth only by losing himself.

Throughout *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Joshi uses metaphors of light and darkness, civilization and wilderness, to trace the protagonist’s spiritual odyssey. The *External* world—Delhi, New York, Meena, intellectualism—embodies light without warmth, knowledge without wisdom. The *Internal* world—the forest, Bilasia, the drum, the moonlight—embodies darkness that reveals rather than conceals. Billy’s rejection of civilization and reception into nature thus forms a metaphoric dialectic between two modes of existence.

The novel’s title itself functions as a metaphor. The word “strange” suggests otherness, deviation, and mystery. Billy is “strange” not because he is insane but because he resists normalization. His strangeness is his authenticity. As Meenakshi Mukherjee observes, Joshi’s protagonists often “inhabit the margins of society, where alienation becomes a means of self-definition” (*The Twice Born Fiction* 62). Billy’s life becomes a metaphor for the modern man’s

struggle to reclaim meaning in a mechanized world. *His rejection is a protest; his reception is redemption.*

Moreover, Joshi's use of mythic imagery, reincarnation, the man-eater, the tribal king, universalizes Billy's journey. The personal becomes archetypal. Dr. Ashish Gupta notes that Joshi "creates an aesthetic sign of mythical morality" (Gupta 3), and turns Billy into a spiritual symbol rather than a psychological case. The metaphors of rejection and reception, thus, reveal the novel's dual vision: civilization and primitivism are not opposites but stages of self-realization. Rejection purifies; reception redeems.

The present study is limited to a textual and interpretative analysis of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, focusing primarily on the metaphoric dimensions of "the internal" and "the external" as they relate to spiritual alienation and self-realization. It does not encompass a comparative study of Joshi's other works or a broader socio-political analysis of postcolonial India. Moreover, the interpretations rely largely on close reading and selected secondary criticism, which may restrict the scope of diverse theoretical perspectives. The study, therefore, emphasizes depth of analysis over the breadth of contextual or intertextual engagement.

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* emerges as a profound metaphoric exploration of existence rather than a mere tale of escape. Billy's rejection of the civilized world exposes its moral and spiritual hollowness, while his reception into the tribal realm signifies a return to authenticity and unity with nature. The metaphors of rejection and reception operate on psychological, cultural, and spiritual planes—rejection purifies, and reception redeems. As Shankar Kumar observes, Billy's journey transforms the quest for meaning into a spiritual pilgrimage "from the void of civilization to the fullness of being" (Kumar 118), epitomizing modern man's eternal search for truth. Future research may undertake a *comparative study* of Arun Joshi's other novels to trace recurring metaphors of alienation, spirituality, and existential quest across his oeuvre. Further studies can apply *interdisciplinary or theoretical frameworks*—such as psychoanalysis, postcolonialism, or ecocriticism—to deepen the

understanding of inner–outer conflict and the human search for authenticity in modern Indian fiction.

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