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REPRESENTATION OF TRIBALS IN ARUN JOSHI'S *THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS* & KAMALA MARKANDAYA'S *THE COFFER DAMS*

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ABSTRACT

Since time immemorial, tribals with sizeable population have inspired for scholarly studies. Various poets and novelists have found their culture romantic. There has always been lack of literary pursuits to explore the different layers of tribal society, their customs, culture and more over their economic backwardness. In this connection, *Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971)*; *Kamala Markandaya's The Cofferdams (1969)*; *Gita Mehta's A River Sutra (1993)* are highlighted ones. One should not forget the collection of short stories '*The Adivasi Will Not Dance*' of *Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar* which brought him in literary circle. This paper presents before the literary world a review kind of investigation of *Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas and Kamala Markandaya's The Cofferdams* respectively. Billy Biswas of *Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* seeks peace and solace in the tribal beauty Bilasia in Maikala Hills of Chhattisgarh whereas Helen of *Kamala Markandaya's The Cofferdams* in the strong arms of Bashiam, the '*junglywallah*'. Both pine for the primitive carefree life where singing, dancing, drinking and merrymaking are of utmost importance. Both Billy Biswas and Helen face the problem of the barren, modern sophisticated society and hanker after the inner peace to be found in harmony with the nature.

**Keywords:** Tribals, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Helen, Bashiam.

"The Strange Case of Billy Biswas"

The novel published in 1971, begins with the song that is very popular among the Bhils of the Satpura hills,

"I come a thousand miles to see your face O' mountain. A thousand miles did I Come to see your face." 1

The narrator of the story, Romesh Sahai aka Romi quotes this song to introduce us to the tribal world where the mountains and rivers are worshipped as the gods and goddesses. Billy Biswas is drawn to this world despite his birth and upbringing in a sophisticated society of a metropolitan city like Delhi.

We have a glimpse of Billy's love and inclination towards tribals in Bhubaneswar. It seems as he had taken a dose of hallucinatory drug under whose effect he says:

“Something has gone wrong with my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of.” 2

Billy’s disgust with the civilized society stemmed from the fact that here everybody madly runs after money. The secret of his extreme happiness in tribal society is that here materialism is conspicuous by its absence. As for the factors that have led to his happy life among tribals he tells Romi:

“What kept us happy, I suppose, were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages. The earth, the forest, the rainbow, the liquor from the mohua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love making and more than anything else no ambition, none at all.” 3

Billy’s true companion in the tribal world is Bilasia whom he marries soon after joining the tribal society. She is introduced to us in the latter half of the novel as a divorced tribal lady who fascinates Billy by her enchanting beauty and simplicity in the first meeting. In a flash, she becomes the very purpose of Billy’s life. The moments he spent while waiting for his first meeting with her were most crucial moment of his life. It was the time when Billy’s whole course of life was about to change.

“It was as though, during that half hour it was not Bilasia I had been waiting for, but my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life.” 4

Bilasia, the tribal lady is a woman of bewitching beauty. Her enormous eyes poured our sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them. She has that untamed beauty that comes to flower only in primitive people.

“Looking at Bilasia one could well believe that these were the children of kings condemned to exile by those rapacious representatives of civilization who had ruled the thrones of Delhi and still continued to do so. Where else could be found that proud carriage, a figure so graceful, eyes whose brightness made your pulse quicken.”

During conversation of Romi with Billy in the jungle, they talk about the pitiable condition and poor economy of the tribals in that region. According to Billy, is that money is the thing that does not interest the tribals at all. They are interested in many things except financial matters. As Billy says:

“Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grain or new seeds or roads or elections and the stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust, storms, rivers, forests, animals, dance, singing. And we talk, I am afraid, a lot about women and sex.” 5

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Billy has completely identified himself with tribal culture. Like tribals, Billy is not much interested in financial matters, and this is one of the reasons why he preferred tribal society to civilized society. While discussing with Romi, Billy straightforwardly blames the contractor for the pitiable condition of tribals. To Billy, the contractors are solely responsible for the pitiable condition of the tribals. Billy observes:

“It is your contractors, old chap, who are playing havoc with the land.” 6

Billy’s fascination towards primitive way of life despite having all the facilities of luxurious life at his command remind us of Siddarth who renounced the worldly life for attaining immortality to become Gautam Buddha. Through Billy Biswas, the Sahitya Akademi winner Arun Joshi has revealed the hollowness of modern sophisticated society who hankers after materialism rather than inclining towards the inner peace to be found in harmony with the nature.

### “The Coffer Dams”

Kamala Markandaya is one of those contemporary Indian English novelists who have dealt with the issues of tribals in their works of art. In the connection, *The Coffer Dams* published in 1969 presents the picture of a tribal village near which the British engineers, Howard Clinton and Mackendrick, intend to build a big dam to control and channelize a turbulent river “that rose in the lakes and valleys of the south Indian highlands and thundered through inaccessible gorges and jungles down to the plains with prodigal waste” 7

Bashiam, a skilled technician belonging to the tribal society by birth, is the chief crane operator. Nicknamed as 'junglywallah,' Bashiam is an educated member of tribal community who later becomes the love interest of Clinton's wife, is described by the narrator:

"He was not like the others, a product of technical training colleges that were being urged into being up and down the country. He had been born in these hills, had followed the traditional craft of woodcutting until they began building the hydro-electric station, further up the river, uprooting his family, indeed his whole village, to do so." 8

Helen, the wife of Howard Clinton developed intimacy with the tribals whose huts attract her more than the grand bungalows in which she failed to enjoy the fullness of life for which she had been craving since her childhood. Her love for tribals makes her a frequent visitor of the tribal huts. Clinton warns her as she may endanger her life by drinking their polluted water. Helen pacifies him by saying "There are no men." 9 But her love for tribals grows day by day. The narrator puts in:

"Helen got on well with the tribesman. He had seen groups of them gathered around her in their compound or accompanying her if she returned after sunset from her wandering." 10

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Clinton is antipathetic towards tribals whereas his wife, Helen, and his fellow engineer, Mackendrick, are sympathetic to them. To him tribals are savages and sods whereas Helen regards them as perfect human beings.

Helen's inclination towards tribals can be seen when she opposes mass fines imposed by Clinton on tribesman. Expressing his reservations at his wife's predilection for the tribal community he says:

"What of a tribe whose outstanding characteristic in his view was the severe retardation of its civilization? Or of the glib communication she had established with a people who presented to him only the blank opacities of their total incomprehension?" 11

Clinton's height of inhuman attitude towards tribals could be seen when he shows no sign of concern at the untimely death of thirty laborers. Instead of sympathizing with the tribal community he gives vent to his anti-tribal attitude when he declares "*the bodies can be incorporated into the structure*" 12

Bashiam is the link between Helen and the tribals. As Bashiam knows the tribals more than anybody else due to his long association with this community, he can acquaint Helen with tribal ethos to her full satisfaction. As for his role as a link, the narrator says:

"Bashiam, the hillman whom they called junglywallah or ever more disparagingly the civilized junglywallah became her linkman providing the information she sought of a country and a people who intrigued her, whetting a curiosity with which she had always been liberally endowed. The curiosity grew with each encounter, no longer satisfied with watching, but wanting to know: entry achieved, now seeking performance. He helped to quench her wanting to know, and she gave him generous credit. He finally declined it." 13

The helplessness of tribals could easily be seen when Helen, during one of her conversations with Bashiam, she says:

"You were, you are a member of that tribe. It was their land. They did not want to leave it, they were persuaded. Why did they allow themselves to be? Why did you? Without even protesting?" 14

Helen's closeness with tribals in general and Bashiam in particular are due to various factors. Helen is young and expects her husband to give her full physical satisfaction which Clinton fails to give on account of his over-age coupled with his over-indulgence in the construction of the dam. Contrary to it, Bashiam is physically strong and give her full satisfaction. Clinton's excessive interest in machine is insensitive to Helen's emotional demands. She has always sought the fullness of life since her childhood, but to her frustration she could not find it in grand bungalows, rather it was felt in tribal huts.

Its true purity is corrupted by sophisticated society. Chastity is devoured by lust. Bashiam, the pure tribal is dragged into the mud of lust by Helen. In darkness, Helen appears in the hut of Bashiam to taste the coarse flavors of a burly tribesman like Bashiam. What a sight it is!

“What do you want with me, he said and stood outside warily, because it was *memsahib* who wanted. Who would use him like a blackjack upon her white and exquisite body, suck him into her vortex to taste his coarse flavors and when it was done, the rare thing savored, go leaving him to what? What about me, he whipped himself, what about me? While her nearness wafted warm currents about him, about his body.” 15

After getting the rare experience for which Helen had come to the hut of Bashiam in the darkness feels a great mental peace arising from the physical satisfaction for which she had been craving since her marriage but could not find anywhere except in the hut of a tribal. She consoles Bashiam that he is equal to her. No difference of caste, color and creed. Humans are humans.

“You are not something of a freak to me. We are alike, we are freaks only to the caste we come from, never to each other” 16

In conclusion, it can be said that the protagonists, Billy Biswas and Helen are meant for the primitive society where they could find peace and solace. Among tribals they realized that nobody is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. Rather trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, mood of the forest, animals, dancing & singing are of interest for tribals. Though they have to suffer a lot due to government policies, yet they don't retort back. They are satisfied whatever they have. The presentations tribal life by Arun Joshi and Kamala Markandaya is so lively that it takes us to the land of tribals. We are unified with the tribals. Being literary readers, we feel both pain and pleasure with the characters.

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