

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE IN ARUN JOSHI'S OFF THE TRACK NOVEL THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS

Shipra Raghuvanshi

Research Scholar, University of Allahabad, Allahabad, Uttar Pradesh, India

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ABSTRACT

Cognitive dissonance is a behavioral disorder in which a person has in his conscious mind two conflicting beliefs and values and has mental discomfort due to such conflicting thoughts making him irritable and unhappy. The person affected with cognitive dissonance rationalizes his wrong attitudes as right. The smokers who got knowledge that chances of smokers dying due to lung cancer are high and still cannot give up smoking tell the friends and relatives that Fidel Castro is heavy smoker but he is 70 + and still going strong. Indian politicians observe caste system and also say they have faith in secularism.

KEYWORDS: *Cognitive Dissonance, Mental Discomfort*

INTRODUCTION

The novel by Arun Joshi *The Strange* case of Billy Biswas is typical. The author used his literary skill to chart a narrative based on the Behavioral disorder of the protagonist Billy Biswas which I identified as 'Cognitive Dissonance'[1]. This particular disorder is characterized by the mental discomfort triggered by a situation in which two or more sets of beliefs and values of a person clash with each other constantly creating bipolarity. When confronted with facts that contradict personal beliefs, ideals, and values, individuals typically try to adjust to resolve the contradiction in order to reduce their discomfort.

The protagonist Bimal Biswas belonged to an elite society of Delhi and had the aristocratic background. A highly emotional young man swayed by moods, he changes his course of study in the Columbia University from engineering to anthropology as narrated by participant character of the fiction Romesh Sahai who meets Billy in New York while both were enrolled as students.

A first person narrator uses the pronoun "I" to tell the story, and can be either a major or minor character. Here Romesh Sahai or Romi is fast friend of the protagonist and a major character in the fiction. In such type of narrative it is easier for a reader to relate to a story told in a first person account.

Billy Biswas is divided between two cognitive worlds. The one in which there is a hypocritical snobbish society of his birth and another world which is of his colleagues in Columbia University in New York and his friends in Harlem, a Negro dominated area of New York where he lived by choice. The narrator Romi when first met him was shocked by his candidness and emotionality. Protagonist Billy's character is fascinatingly lovable character painted by the author. Now

we focus towards the intention of the author Arun Joshi who chose a story based on cognitive dissonance theory of Leon Festinger. Why this theory is chosen as a base of the theme is not an intrigue. Author Arun Joshi has chosen to shock the reader by taking him/her to a bizarre world which is upside down. While the whole world from ancient times till today wants to go from 'misery to opulence', from 'scarcity to abundance' from 'poverty to riches' and from 'darkness to light' but here we confront a highly educated man with aristocratic background who emphatically wants to travel in the reverse direction. It is a shock to the readers. The Hindu[2] wrote about author Arun Joshi and his novel *The Strange case of Billy Biswas* thus "Joshi was habitually guilty of slight excesses in that regard. It is also exciting, wise, beautifully constructed, and one of the best English novels written anywhere in the world. Billy's conversations with the narrator, his old college friend now a conventional but thoughtful bureaucrat, delineate Joshi's concerns." Can such things happen often in practical, real life? The answer is 'yes' it can be seen in history when Siddharth Gautam leaves riches, a beautiful wife and a son and marches in the wilderness. In the present there is one 75 year old man who gave away crores of rupees in donation and himself lives in poverty. His name is Paalam Kalyan sundaram[3]. The United Nations adjudged him as the most outstanding man of 20th Century. Cognitive Dissonance which has affected Billy Biswas is a behavioral disorder which strikes some people who simultaneously carry two conflicting cognitions in their conscious minds and choose one taking an about turn. Leon Festinger (1919-1989) says 'Proximity Effect' is the phenomenon which can cause cognitive dissonance. Substantial association with some group contrasting in nature may create abhorrence in the person about his own family home and affluence, wife and children.

Bimal Biswas who has been nicknamed by narrator as Billy is a highly educated young man who had obtained doctoral degree from Columbia University New York and who belongs to a sufficiently rich upper class family and who is member of teaching faculty of Delhi University in the subject of anthropology goes to the Chhattisgarh forest on official tour along with a batch of students to study customs, traditions, mores and belief systems of the tribal people. There, he meets a friendly natured village chief whose niece is young rustic beauty named Bilasia. He has sex with her on a weak moment and then abandons wife, son, parents and property to join Bilasia as spouse in the dense forest where life is hard and where there is poverty and there is freedom to drink mahua liquor, smoke beedies and indulge in sexual orgies. Can the reader digest what Billy does? Hypocritically PhD scholars are writing research papers and assessing the abandonment of wife and child by Billy can be done in terms of Nihilism, revolt, existentialism, asceticism and showering accolades on his kinky behavior.

The present research throws light on his abandonment of cozy urban life as cognitive dissonance, a behavioral disorder. There is nothing like lofty metaphysical thing comparable to Siddharth Gautam abandoning wife Yashodhra and son Rahul. I feel sad for Billy, though it is a fictional character but I do not endorse his behavior as right behavior. The novel is replete with Billy's sexual encounters. Billy, a highly decorated Anthropologist Ph.D. from Columbia University did not spare even his friend Tuula who was African black girl. Billy made one proposal to Tuula (*The strange case of Billy Biswas*, p-15): he would stay on and tutor her on a condition of arranging a job for him. Narrator Romi says on the same page what Billy told him, "I had my first glimpse of the other side". To which Romi asked "what other side?" Billy explains thus: "The other side. You know what I mean, don't you? 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". It was Tuula Lindgren that Billy had spent all those

summer evenings and she was the second person who had any clue what went on in the dark.

When Billy was married and had a son he had one night stand encounter with Bilasia in the forest of Bastar befriend- ing village chief Dhunia. Billy narrates on page 103 “Bilasia was now leading me by hand. And, yet, all the while I could not believe she was real, even though I could feel the flesh of her waist under my fingers and her supple body clung to mine.”

Now last in the narrative is Billy's sexual encounter with Rima Kaul who lived in Mumbai and was acquainted with Billy's aunt on page 134 Billy is telling Romi “I think I'll forever hold myself in contempt for what I did to Rima kaul.” After a moment of hesitation he spoke again “to put it briefly I seduced her. But that is not important. It was the way I seduced her and why I seduced her that still at times can keep me awake the whole of a night.”

The above narrative is enough to grill Billy as womanizer but there are critics and research scholars who say many lofty things about the protagonist. Below is an example of utter hype pomposity and false hood of one scholar from Calicut University (1998)[4]

“The Strange case of Billy Biswas seems to be inspired by the principles of Vedanta as well as the Sankhya philoso- phy of Kapila (KapilMuni). The sankhya Yoga points out the distinction between Purusa (atman) and prakriti. Normally one fails to distinguish between the two and hence has an exaggerated concept of the significance of the worldly existence. But Billy, the protagonist is throughout aware of this illusion. Yet in a dilemma not knowing how to take the right choice. Living in an illusory world knowing all the while that he is destined to be elsewhere makes Billy suffer the problem of alienation.”

Narrator tell the readers Billy sired two sons to Bilasia who is a bhil woman but he did not educate them. They were stark illiterate. While the parents wanted to take Billy back but after his accidental death at the hands of police did not take children for education nor offered to put them in any boarding house though children of Bilasia were fathered by their own son Billy. There is cognitive dissonance everywhere in the novel.

CONCLUSIONS

By deconstructing the novel page by page I could find nothing mystic or metaphysical in the novel. The only intrigue in the novel is that how and why should a successful stable and rich man desert wife and son after a tribal woman. There seemed no lofty reason that Billy left home to seek some spiritual goal. Billy gulped down whisky at Collector Romi's house many times after he became a forest dweller deserting his wife and child. It is also not part of narrative that Billy fought for Hilly people's rights and stopped their exploitation like Medha Patkar did. On page no. 86 of the novel while chatting with his buddy of yesteryears Collector Romi, Billy tells Romi after tribal folks absorbed him as one of them “Yes. We dance and drink and probably make love”. In another sentence he tells “Nothing except death stops our dancing and drinking and love-making” Unpolluted air and the organic food though coarse keeps their libido high. They have no inhibitions of any kind. This is the only possible reason Billy left home and joined sons and daughters of nature.

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