

Philosophy of Bhagavad Gita in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

Arun Joshi has focused not on the socio-economic or existing political issues, but he has carefully touched deep and very sensitive layers of human being in his novels. Throughout his fictions, Joshi narrates different aspects of 'Karmic philosophy' taught by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita like law of causation, law of action and reaction, law of compensation, and law of retribution, attitude towards action, detachment, characteristics of actionlessness, divine and demonic nature of man etc. Joshi seems influenced by the Vedanta philosophy, the way of life taught by Mahatma Gandhi and the teachings of Bhagavad Gita, the preaching by Lord Yogeshwara to Arjun in the battle field of Kurukshetra, which has been seen reflected in his works. The roots of Joshi's fictional forte lies within his own, Indian cultural soil. The Foreigner is a presentation of state of mind of the people facing human predicaments. Everywhere in the story Karma Yoga and Karmic principles of Life are seen woven like a fabric. The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), is the presentation of renunciation narrated in the Bhagavad Gita by Lord Krishna. The story of The Strange Case of Billy Biswas reflects karmayoga, bhaktiyoga, and jnanayoga of the Bhagavad Gita. It is a reflection of searching for inner spiritual peace to reside in. The story of the novel focuses on the philosophical concepts of 'sanyasa' and 'tyaga'. It reminds Indian saint went to Himalaya in search of 'Jnana'. The philosophical teachings are presented using symbols in the story.

Key Words

Karmic philosophy of Bhagavad Gita, Karma Yoga, Bhaktiyoga, Jnanayoga, Principles of life.

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Arun Joshi (1939-1993) came to be known as a novelist in Indian English literature with the publication of his first novel *The Foreigner* (1968). Joshi wrote five novels – *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1975), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990). Along with novels he also wrote a collection of short stories, *The Survivor* and a biography, *Sri Ram*. In his novels Joshi has focused not on the socio-economic or existing political issues, but he has carefully touched deep and very sensitive layers of human being. To Sujata Mathai, Joshi confides that his novels are preoccupied with man's mystical urge (Joshi, I'm a Stranger to my Books). Joshi, through his novels, describes the different facets of inner crisis in modern man's life. Though Joshi was influenced by Western life style, his fictional works demonstrate his faith and belief in the rich Indian philosophy, the philosophy of his native land as he confesses in an interview with Sujata Mathai; "my ethos is essentially Hindu" (Joshi, I'm a Stranger to my Books). Lokesh Kumar makes a point that "despite receiving ample influence from the West, Arun Joshi's vision of life reveals his unshakable and deep rooted faith in Indian way of life and culture" (Kumar 138). Joshi's "fiction demonstrates the universal lessons of our spiritual heritage that might have been temporarily relegated to the background but are still relevant despite the materialism and rapid westernization of our country" (S. Sharma Preface iii). Joshi's interview with M. R. Dua shows the influence of Indian religion and the Indian religious thinkers over him. He says; "he has been greatly influenced by Indian religious thinkers". Tapan Kumar Ghosh opines that:

One cannot, however, claim that Joshi's fiction reveals any profound awareness of the entire Indian, especially Hindu, religious ethos from the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* to the present day in all its complexities. But he has imbibed in a significant way the essential lessons of the Indian religious heritage, the teachings of the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the Sankhya system of Indian philosophy, and of spiritual leaders and thinkers like Mahatma Gandhi (Ghosh 34).

Through his fictions, Joshi makes use of different aspects of *Karmic* philosophy taught by Lord Krishna to Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita like law of causation, law of action and reaction, law of compensation, and law of retribution, attitude towards action, detachment, characteristics of actionlessness, divine and demonic nature of man etc.

The Foreigner reflects human predicaments. The protagonist of the novel Sindi Oberoi cuts his life between attachment and detachment. He "deals with the problem of involvement in and detachment from the world and the lack of courage to face the bitter realities of life" (S. Sharma 9). He falls in love with June, the central female character of the novel but his strange behavior confuses her. He denies strong desire of June to get

married with him because he is against being possessed by or possess anybody or anything. June marries Babu. Sindi advises Babu in all his confusions and bewilderment but he does not listen to him. Due to some conflicts with June, Babu commits suicide. When Babu commits suicide, Sindi feels embarrassed and comments, "All along I had acted out of lust and greed and selfishness, and they had applauded my wisdom. When I had sought only detachment I had driven the man to his death" (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 8). Later on June meets with the death in an attempted abortion. Sindi blames on his own self for both the death. He says that he had learnt to be detached from the world but, not from his own self and he considers it a fetal error which causes for Babu's death and then for June's death. He seems upset because of his feeling that he has murdered Babu, and leaves America. O. P. Mathur rightly explains;

...the confused approach of Sindi to the concept of detachment has cost him two lives, both dear to him. The 'detachment' of the Gita does not mean inaction as Sindi takes it to mean, Lord Krishana had warned Arjuna in action and deaths of two persons closest to Sindi are a warning to him (27-28).

He comes to India, meets Mr. Khemka and accepts the job offered by him in his firm. Due to some indifferences with Mr. Khemka he decides to leave Delhi and finds a job in Mumbai. But a sincere effort of Muthu, the ordinary clerk of Mr. Khemka's office makes him change his mind. Muthu made him realized his duty. "But it is not involvement, sir," he said. "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved" (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 188). Sindi thought, "a line of reasoning that led to the inevitable conclusion that for me, detachment consisted in getting involved with the world" (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 189). He takes over the management of Mr. Khemka during Khemka's imprisonment. Everywhere in the story *Karma Yoga* and *Karmic* principles of Life are seen woven like a fabric.

Sindi is against the actions performed merely to attain *Bhautik Shukh* in life. In his opinion, the life of those who run behind material happiness throughout their life like Mr. Khemka, is meaningless. The material happiness lies in *kama*, *krodh*, *moha*, and *lobha*. It is influenced by the force of *Maya*. According to the *Gita*, these are the demonic qualities of man. All such demonic qualities of man are reflected in the novel in the form of a party organized by Mr. Khemka.

I suppose Mr. Khemka's guests knew what they were doing. Old men grown fat with success came with their plump wives. They drank and then they had gorgeous dinners. They talked of money and how to make more of it. They felt the impression that they could buy up anybody they wanted. Perhaps they could but it all sounded meaningless to me (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 16).

The lust and hunger for wealth and power make man a slave as his desire to acquire wealth and power is unlimited. As a result he goes to perform every sinful *karma* because he believes in the strength of his personal work rather than the law of *karma*. Lord Krishna warns Arjuna in thirteenth and fourteenth verses of the sixteen chapter and says;

इदमद्य मया लब्धमिमं प्राप्स्ये मनोरथम् ।

इदमस्तीदमपि मे भविष्यति पुनर्धनम् ॥१६- १३॥

असौ मया हतः शत्रुर्हनिष्ये चापरानपि ।

ईश्वरोऽहमहं भोगी सिद्धोऽहं बलवान्सुखी ॥१६- १४॥

This today has been gained by me: this desire I shall attain, this is mine and this wealth also shall be mine (in future).

This foe is slain by me and others also I shall slay. I am the lord, I am the enjoyer, I am successful, mighty and happy (trans. Radhakrishnan 400).

The person with demonic qualities always have an illusion that he can live at the sacrifice of all others and believes himself a superpower.

Along with the demonic qualities of man, the novel reflects the principles of *Karmyoga* described by Lord Krishna to Arjuna. O. P. Mathur rightly observes;

The Foreigner underlines the importance of non-involvement with the self but a sympathetic involvement with the world as a step towards the achievement of *Karmyoga* or non-attached actions. Sindi's career seems to illustrate truth of following verse of *Gita* (Mathur, Arun Joshi and the Gita 26-37).

It is in line with the 3rd verse of the fourth chapter of the *Gita*;

न कर्मणामनारम्भान्नैष्कर्म्यं पुरुषोऽश्रृते ।

न च सन्न्यसनादेव सिद्धिं समधिगच्छति ॥३ - ४॥

Never does man

। enjoy freedom from action by not undertaking action nor does he attain that freedom by mere renunciation of action (trans. M. Gandhi 72).

Ultimately *The Foreigner* becomes a medium which reflects *Karma Yoga* of Indian philosophy through Sindi's behaviour of attachment and detachment (action and inaction). He admits that; "detachment at that time had meant inaction. Now I had begun to see the fallacy in it. Detachment consisted of right action and not escape from it. The gods had set a heavy price to teach me just that." (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 162). Finally, he understands the meaning of detachment from the action as it is said in the 19th verse of the 3rd chapter of *Bhagavad Gita* that:

तस्मादसक्तः सततं कार्यं कर्म समाचर

असक्तो ह्याचरन्कर्म परमाप्नोति पूरुषः ॥३ - १९॥

Therefore, without attachment, perform always the work that has to be done, for man attains to the highest by doing work without attachment (trans. Radhakrishnan 158)

Sindi says that;

Absence of love does not mean hatred. Hatred is just another form of love. There is another way of loving. You can love without attachment, without desire. You can love without attachment to the objects of your love. ... Love is real only when you know that what you love must one day die. (Joshi, *The Foreigner* 145)

The Gita does not demotivate us by teaching us to neglect or reject the worldly results of our work, but it urges us not to get stuck in them. By providing us with a loftier motivation for our work, it inspires us to work to the best of our capacity and to relish everlasting results.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971), the second novel by Joshi is unlike any other Indian novel written in English in various ways. The novel opens with a quick glimpse into the narrator's present and then moves onto the past, specifically his encounters with Billy Biswas. How he met him, what happened after, the place where he lived while he pursued his Ph.D. (in Harlem) and the immediate consequences of Billy's quest for understanding himself. What makes Billy do what he does when he has everything going for him – education, wealth, status and a loving wife? His inner world is shaken by growing discontent and dissatisfaction with his life and his restlessness grows gradually. Once, Billy writes in one of his letters to Tuula, one of his close friends in America during his Ph. D. study that;

It seems my dear Tuula, that we are swiftly losing what is known one's grip on life. Why else this constant reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them, sitting at the dining table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 70).

Tapan Kumar Ghosh rightly comments that;

The Strange Case does not merely record an existential protest against the superficialities of a grossly materialistic civilization and a romantic nostalgia for the simple mode of life of a primitive society. It is a study in the total estrangement of its protagonist Billy Biswas, from the upper crust of Indian society with its material concerns, spiritual shallowness and blind imitation of western culture in utter defiance of its traditional values and beliefs (Ghosh 67).

Billy does not find himself fit for the society he is living in, he is always confused between what he sees surrounding him and what he feels, his inner feeling about mysterious reality. The narrator of the story notices his strange behavior because of his inner conflicts, "it was only once that I saw him behave in an unusual manner. At that time I assumed it was due to liquor although, from what I know now, it could have been the result of many other things that were only partly understood by the rest of us" (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 16).

Joshi has presented us with a complex story line which engages the reader from the beginning, starting with his peculiar title, which gently coaxes us to find out what is so 'strange' with the protagonist of the story, Billy Biswas. Through Biswas, Joshi is able to incorporate a man of western ideas with Indian ideologies and is able to create a very Indian novel. The novel has a strong story and plot line with an equally strong and fascinating narrator who pulls the readers deep into the story and Billy. He is very interested in the life of the tribal's of India. Lokesh Kumar points out that it appears to be a sequel to Joshi's first novel *The Foreigner*,

With the protagonist leaves Delhi for mountains in search of inner peace and his spiritual roots the novel is sequel to the odyssey for self-realization stated in *The Foreigner* where the protagonist leaves America for Delhi with the purpose of knowing the meaning of his existence and finding the place which he may call his own (137).

Along with Lokesh Kumar many other critics also make a point that the atmosphere in which the protagonist, Billy Biswas, finds himself is loaded with the same sense of failure and frustration as in *The Foreigner*. The protagonist of the novel "continues Sindi's search for identity and meaning of life. But it carries the exploration deeper, combining the Lawrentian quest for essence of life with the Upanishadic search for soul's spiritual reality" (Ghosh 66).

Joshi's disgust for demonic qualities in 'the so called real society' is seen in this novel. The novel symbolizes two separate and hostile worlds, Delhi and Maikala Hills, between which the protagonist is trapped. In this novel, the author expresses his disliking for money and wealth – a material happiness through the words of Billy, who writes in his letter to Tuula;

I sometimes wonder whether civilization is anything more than the making and spending of money. What else does civilized man do? And if there are those who are not busy earning and spending – the so-called thinkers and philosophers and men like that – they are merely hired to find solution, throw light, as they

say, on complications caused by this making and spending of money (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 69).

Though the protagonist belongs to the upper class well-to-do society, he is confused between aristocracies of his family and primitive world in the Sal forest behind Maikala Hills. The narrator of the story remarks that;

If life's meaning lies not in the glossy surface of our pretensions, but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it more doggedly and, having received a signal, abandoned himself so recklessly to its call (Joshi, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* 8).

With the equanimity of mind he leaves so called 'his society'. He was searching for his identity what he found among the innocent primitive world in the Maikala Hills. He believed that it is important for the people to search for what truly makes them happy. Money and material possessions aren't necessarily evil, but the strong desire for money and material possessions is the root of all evil.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is the presentation of renunciation narrated in the Bhagavad Gita by Lord Krishna. Billy's decision of leaving aristocratic society "of fashion and comforts" (Narayan, *Indian English* 38-47) was a step of renunciation in his life and it made him *Sage* among the primitive people of Maikala Hills. C.N. Srinath observes that his "exit reminds one in a minor way of Siddhartha's renunciation of wife and children in search of Enlightenment. To Billy it is a movement from darkness to light" (Srinath 122). It was his sacrifice of life for the primitives. In the 9th verse of the 18th Chapter of *Bhagavad Gita* it is also said that;

कार्यमित्येव यत्कर्म नियतं क्रियतेऽर्जुन ।

सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा फलं चैव स त्यागः सात्त्विको मतः ॥१८- ९॥

But he who performs a prescribed duty as a thing that ought to be done, renouncing all attachment and also the fruit – his relinquishment is regarded as one of goodness (trans. Radhakrishnan 419).

It is also true that true renunciation cannot be achieved without *Karma*-yoga. Renunciation means complete renouncement of doership, ownership, and selfish motive behind an action. In The Gita, Lord Krishna explains to Arjuna that renouncing all actions by thought and self-controlled, the embodied one rests happily in the nine-gated city, neither acting nor causing to act.

सर्वकर्माणि मनसा सन्न्यस्यास्ते सुखं वशी ।

नवद्वारे पुरे देही नैव कुर्वन्न कारयन् ॥ ५.१३ ॥

The self-controlled man, that is the man established in the atman, mentally renounces all karma and lives in peace. To renounce all karma mentally means to make the mind indifferent to them (Gandhi 154).

Within the character of Billy both *Sanyas* and *Tyaga* have been seen. *Sanyas* means renunciation of actions prompted by desires while *Tyaga* means abandonment of the fruits of the actions. Both are the true characteristics of a true *Karma-yogi*. In this sense Billy is the true *Karma-yogi*.

अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः ।

स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरर्गुणः चाक्रियः ॥६- १॥

One who does the work which he ought to do without seeking its fruit he is the samnyasin, he is the yogin, not he who does not light the sacred fire, and performs no rites (trans. Radhakrishnan, 218).

Performing action without expecting any fruit is difficult especially in the age of Kali but Billy did it in its original spirit. Whatever he does with the people of that primitive words, he does for them, he lives and dies for them. Nothing is done to entertain his selfish motif, not even to win any fame. These are the real symptoms of the true *yogin* (the man of action). Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna that;

कायेन मनसा बुद्ध्या केवलैरिन्द्रियैरपि ।

योगिनः कर्म कुर्वन्ति सङ्गं त्यक्त्वात्मशुद्धये ॥५- ११॥

The *yogins* (men of action) perform works merely with the body, mind, understanding or merely with the senses, abandoning attachment for the purification of their souls” (trans. Radhakrishnan 207)

According to *Karmayoga* of Bhagavad Gita, renunciation does not mean the abandonment of action. To perform action is inevitable. The Bhagavad Gita teaches that;

कर्मणैव हि संसिद्धिमास्थिता जनकादयः । ॥३- २०॥

Even the king Janak, who is known for his renunciation, attained salvation only by the means of *karma*. Here, Billy leaves so called elite class and not his actions. He followed the call of friendly and fearless furry animal, “Come to our primitive world and that will sooner or later overcome the works of man” (Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas 88). He goes to the lap of nature, another world, the world free from any pretentiousness or hypocrisy. He feels alienated amidst the crowd of insensitive and corrupt society which turns into spiritual regeneration when he leaves for the Maikala Hills.

The story of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* reflects *karmayoga*, *bhaktiyoga*, and *jnanayoga* preached by Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. It is a reflection of searching of inner spiritual peace to reside in. It reminds Indian saint went to Himalaya in search of *Jnana*. The philosophical teachings are presented using symbols in the story. The two societies, the upper crust, and the primitive are themselves symbolical. They symbolize artificial and real. Even Billy and Bilasia are shown as reincarnation of King and Queen. Billy, the *Purusha* is attracted by the Bilasia, the *Prakruti*. When Billy meets Bilasia, Chandtola comes to life, and Billy feels that he conquered all his demonic qualities. R. S. Pathak comments that narrative of Billy and Bilasia is on the concept of *Sankhya* concept of the fusion of *Purusha* and *Prakruti* (Pathak, Human Predicament and Meaninglessness in Arun Joshi's Novels 132). It is like the union of *Jivatma* with *Parmatma*. When one conquers his mind, *Jivatma* is absorbed in *Parmatma*. Lord Krishna preaches in the seventh verse of sixth chapter of the Gita that;

जितात्मनः प्रशान्तस्य परमात्मा समाहितः ।

शीतोष्णसुखदुःखेषु तथा मानापमानयोः ॥६- ७॥

For one who has conquered the mind, the Supersoul is already reached, for he has attained tranquility. To such a man happiness and distress, heat and cold honor and dishonor are all the same (trans. Bhaktivedanta Swami 279).

Thus, Arun Joshi stands as highly significant novelist among the contemporary Indian English Novel writers. He has contributed profusely in the shaping of dominant Indian English fictional pattern of later half of the twentieth century. Arun Joshi is highly influenced by the existentialist writers like Camus, Kafka, Sartre etc. as he himself confesses; "I did read Camus and Sartre, I liked *The Plague* and read *The Outsider*. I might have been influenced by them" (Joshi, I'm a Stranger to my Books). Along with the Western existentialist writers, Joshi was also influenced by the *Vedanta* philosophy, the way of life taught by Mahatma Gandhi and the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita*, the preaching by Lord Yogeshwara to Arjun in the battle field of *Kurukshetra*, which has been seen reflected in his works. The roots of Joshi's fictional forte lies within his own, Indian cultural soil. "He has absorbed and assimilated all his influences, oriental as well as occidental and fused them with the indigenous, transmuting them into organic, well-orchestrated novels with the indelible imprint of his own individuality" (S. Sharma 122). Throughout his novels Joshi emphasis on the morals of Bhagavad Gita. "He strongly believes individual actions have effects on others and oneself. One cannot therefore afford to continue with irresponsible existence but has to commit oneself at some point" (Mani, Detachment and its Meaning in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner* 36-53). Even Joshi himself says; "my novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of myself..... If I did not write, I imagine, I would use some other medium to

carry on my exploration" (Joshi). Joshi takes Indian philosophy of Lord Krishna in *The Gita* as a base for the solution of the human predicament evolved due to the crises of existence by posing the eternal, metaphysical and ethical questions" (Mathur, Arun Joshi and the Gita 26).

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