



Handling of Cultural Conflict in the Novels of Arun Joshi: A Study of *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

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Abstract

The present study revolves around the theme of cultural conflict in Joshi's novels especially The Foreigner and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas. His novels are specially woven in conflict – cultural and inner. This paper is an endeavor to explore the cultural conflict and various problems of the modern man. Joshi's novels are relevant to contemporary age and talk about the degraded soul of the civilized people and their setting of money mindedness. Here Joshi illustrates the internal and external conflicts of the human. Joshi depicts the root cause of conflict and its solution also in his novels.

Keywords: Culture, Conflict, Internal, External.

Introduction:

English literature in India is considered a powerful medium of expression of Indian social values, customs, traditions, ethics, and rituals. Through their writings, Indian writers have presented the social, political, and philosophic atmosphere of the Indian society. Today, cultural conflict becomes common due to cultural diversity, because every culture has its own beliefs, ideas, and moral values, the differences between cultures become the cause of conflict. Conflict is the idea that people and nations basically have different

values and opposite goals; the result of the disagreement becomes tension, negotiation, ambiguity, and misbehavior.

In Indian culture, we find conflict at works- social, economic, cultural, religious, patriarchal, feudal, and spiritual factors. Feeling, emotions and sentiments give birth to the conflict in Indian society because these are considered the necessary aspect of the Indian culture. In this type of study, an attempt has been made to examine intercultural conflict; conflict is not only occurring in specific cultural setting but is a cultural event itself. The cultural conflict fixes around identified needs like- the need for group identity, security, and welfare. The cultural conflict is basically dominated by the identity scale because identity is a basic requirement of all. The cultural conflict occurs not only at the higher levels of the social group; which separates one country from another like- Indian from American culture but may also at the local level.

The English word 'Culture' is derived from the Latin word 'Cult', it points out to the purification/clarification of individuals or society through the cultivation/farming of education. In fact, culture is produced (built) by a group of human beings, which circulates one generation to the next. We can see the glimpse of culture in society; as in religion, race, creed, language, dress, music, and



dance etc. It is the essence of human and helps to decide the pattern of human activity and refers to itself in terms of literature, customs, language, religion, ritual, and tradition; it contains the set of ideas, beliefs, manner, and above all moral values. According to E.B. Tylor: “Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, laws, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Quoted in *Culture and Conflict Resolution* 6).

Post-colonial and modern literature is built around the concept of foreignness or alienation. The alienation gives birth to both identity crisis and cultural conflict. In his book *Location and Culture*, Homi Bhaba gives the concept of the hybridity of cultures incorporated to the blending of cultures. Almost all the modern and contemporary writers depict cultural conflict in their writing like-Jumpa Lahiri, Rohinton Mistry, Bharti Mukherjee, and Anita Desai etc.

Cultures are more powerful than food, clothes, and traditions. Culture is not stable or tangible; it changes according to the time, and it is an endless process. About culture, Jeffery Saul says that Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. “Culture is an essential part of conflict and conflict resolution. He argues that our culture is like underground rivers that run through our lives and relationships, giving us a message that shapes our perceptions, attributions, judgments, and ideas of “self” and “other” (Nganga52).

Today, conflict is a much-debated term in the twentieth-century literature. It is closely related to the friction, violence,

irrationality. It can be raised due to different ideas or values. In the modern society or culture, conflict becomes the part of human life. It is considered necessary for the development and growth of the person or group; youth faces various types of conflict like- interpersonal, intrapersonal, and internationally. They face conflict from their roots like- home, educational institutes, and at work place. The conflicts arise between cultures when they confront each other, all of the fields like –physical, ecological, societal, cultural and economic.

It is considered a particular aspect of social disintegration According to Gerhart Husserl, “Every system of conflict rules is based on the belief in a set of fundamental concepts and principles of justices, to be found in all legal communities, belonging to the world of western civilization, and rooted in deeper layer of conviction, attitudes and social values that are essential to our civilization” (Riles 284).

Joshi has a significant place among Indian English novelists in the mid-20th century, including – Manohar Malgonkar, Anita Desai, and Salman Rushdie etc. Through his novels, Joshi tries to depict the conflicted structure of the human mind and soul. It will help in better understanding of the world and also of the individual. The conflict between the human soul and his environment becomes a problem for the existence.

Arun Joshi’s fiction conforms to Conrad’s conception of the novel. Joshi recognizes a reality beyond the mere phenomenal world,

a reality which the artist could imagine and capture by giving a consistent form to the shapeless facts of human existence. The source of most of Joshi's novels is an actual experience. ...He feels a need to shape it, a need to discover the reality which lies hidden in the actuality of his own life (Dhawan17-18).

In this novel, we can see the clash between various cultures like –American and other cultures like Indian, primitive, modern etc. In his novel *The Foreigner*, Sindi after having spent a decade of his alien environment like- American, London, Boston, Nairobi, Kenya etc. being away from home and native culture, come across many difficulties. The difficulties change just as their nature, from general to cultural, material to an official; all difficulties are emerged due to lack of entrance and basically target on discrimination.

His second novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971) shows the conflict of modern man's soul. Man cannot live without culture and society. Here we find the conflict between "Civilized" and "Tribal" clearly. Billy Biswas the protagonist of the novel wants to spend his life with primitive people but, it becomes dangerous for him because the people of modern society like- Meena and Mr. Biswas (Billy's wife and father) do not understand him as a human being but as mere property, they are devoid of any emotions whether pleasure or pain but gives preference to their stubbornness.

Detachment is the silent feature of his protagonist. Joshi gives the account of modern man's suffering and loneliness. Arun Joshi himself explains: - "My novels are essentially attempt towards a better understanding of the world of myself.... If I did not write, I imagine I would use some other medium to carry on my exploration" (Dhawan18). In *The Foreigner*, Babu, Sindi's friend tries to stable himself according to American culture, but he became fail because it is hard to make a place in fast moving American society. Babu tries to change, but his mental set-up was not changed and due to this he lost his life. He feels alienation; due to his inner conflict of fast and material life of U.S.A. and his traditional simple life at back home. Conflicts arose in his mind when he knew about June that she has a sexual relationship with his friend Sindi and he loses his life. Here we find different moral values of culture and culture and society. So, it becomes clear that every culture and society has its own dimension of moral and other values.

In *The Foreigner* Sindi is suffering from inner conflict, and his several questions remain answered during his life, he always realizes that he being pushed-“ on the giant wheel, going round and round, waiting for the fall”(TF75). Its main cause is dissatisfaction with oneself questioning of existence or identity. In the novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* Billy fights against his own society, culture and family also, those represent the materialistic modern world. Billy does not want to live with the selfish people of the civilized



society, but he loves the simple life of tribal world where people are selfless but here his own family stood against him.

In *The Foreigner* Babu; Sindi's friend can't adjust himself in the forward American society and culture. In the beginning, he becomes happy, that America is a good country that is full of girls. But when he finds that his wife June has a sexual relationship with his friend Sindi, he becomes aggressive and blindly runs the car and he dies. On the other hand, Sindi also feels uprooted from everywhere that he has nothing to feel rooted. In the end, Muthu gives advice to him that provide new meaning to his life that- "Sometimes detachment lies in actually getting involved" (TF188).

The novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, depicts the mentality of the modern people who love only money and consider lower to natural things and natural/tribal people because they have believed in making and spending money. Like Meena, who does not care for her husband but tempted by the glimpse of the glamor world. Conflict affects everybody, every culture, and every society. Joshi reveals the cultural conflict which shows the inner and the soul frustration of the protagonist against the society of the materialistic world. Conflict is an essential aspect of all human civilization, but the main reason behind the conflict differs widely.

In the novel, June represents the western culture and Babu presents the Indian culture. According to western culture, June gives preference to the physical love, but

Babu becomes upset when he knows about her that she has sexual relations with Sindi and just before marriage; he commits suicide, every culture has its own dimension of morality, value, beliefs, and ideas. Sindi is shocked by the death of Babu and June and live conflicted because he can't express his problems and agonies he thinks "twenty-five years largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. Twenty-five years gone in search of peace" (TF80).

Sindi, Babu, and June have different roots and all of them are the misfit for another culture. Joshi promotes the Indian philosophy of Karma yoga. The novel deals with conflict of modern man and culture. Murali Das Melwani remarks-"the novel examines the effects of alienation on sensitive Indians of mixed heritage, as the protagonist in *The Foreigner* is an alien everywhere since he shares three cultures" (Trimbakrao1).

The second novel, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* depicts the real and self-created agonies of the modern man very well. Here we find Billy's strange interest and his liking for the primitive world. Romi tells the story of Billy in New York and Delhi on the basis of his own observation. He likes selfless people like Tuula, a Swedish friend of him. She tells Romi about Billy that he feels inside him a strange force- "A great force or craft... a primitive force... it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode any time" (SCBB19). Billy studies anthropology, and he rejects everything for the primitive culture because "Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or

new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that (SCBB114).”

The entire novel describes the account of an extraordinary person who irritates from the modern culture; he feels alone and separate because his inner-self makes him alienated. He thinks that modern people are artistically dry and intellectually barren. “Billy feels that this civilization is a monster. It is not a civilization, but degradation” (Nwale53). In this novel, Joshi reflects the conflict between civilized and primitive culture. About this novel, the author himself said that it is “about a mystical urge, a compulsion which makes Billy goes away.... In a number of Indian legends and religious texts, people go away to the forest to heal themselves spiritually. Possibly that’s what he is suggesting, though not consciously” (Anand86). Joshi portrays the inner and cultural conflict of human where he finds instincts and impulses at work; he searches a process of the apprehension of reality which may lead to him to the world of the love and truth of man’s life on the canvas of literature very clean and neat.

The key problem of the today is purposeless life, because modern man does not suffer from natural or other problems like—rain, flood, drought, and famine, etc. Today’s man is suffering from his own inner conflict/ problem like- loneliness, frustration, depression, rejection, isolation, separation, and alienation. These are the hybrid problems of the modern time that can break man completely. “There is no purpose in life. There is perhaps a little purpose in

right action, in action without desire” (TF120).

In Indian fiction, his novels represent the Indian philosophy of Karma yoga and reflect the influence of existential writers like –Camus and other writers of this stream. He accepts that he has “The powerful sway of the Bhagavad Gita and Albert Camus along with Mahatma Gandhi on him” (Abraham36). Joshi wrote five novels—*The Foreigner*, *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, *The Apprentice*, *The Last Labyrinth*, and the last novel *The City and the River* and a collection of short stories titled—*The Survivor*. His works illustrate the universal truth about the agonies and the conflict of the man. Death and the loneliness are the universal truth of mankind; loneliness becomes the main cause of the conflict. Joshi’s conflicted protagonists give the new dimension to the Indian fiction. Sindi illustrates the complex state of modern youth that become the part of the conflict and crushed between western and Indian culture and that is the root cause of their conflicted state. “Joshi’s protagonists are singularly individualistic and completely self-centered” (Dhawan 73). Every moment of life examines Sindi; from life, he gets only experiences. Once Professor White says “Every foreign student is an ambassador of his country” then he thinks that “And what country had I represented? Kenya or England or India? (43). His conflict of uprooted and foreign always haunts him, he considered himself alone and aimless and says –

Somebody had begotten me
without a purpose and so for I



had lived without a purpose
...I would still be a
foreigner. My foreignness lay
within me and I couldn't
leave myself behind
wherever I went... (TF55).

He is confused and afraid of relationships because for him relationships are the root of the conflict, they give pain and suffering. Sindi's girlfriend June finds him a queer person, she tells-"there is something strange about you. You know something distant ... May be it's an Indian characteristic, but I have a feeling you'd be a foreigner anywhere" (TF29). Joshi examines the cultural illusion of the countries through this novel like- June; an American girl, she is interested to meet with the foreign students and wants to know about their culture. Babu, an Indian boy attracted towards fast growing America because here he finds heaven for free sex. He is an innocent boy and does not aware of the intensity of the attachment outside the country with alien cultures, totally unknown to him. Sindi the protagonist of the novel, after arriving in India thinks that it had only been a change, a change of theatre and the show had remained unchanged. Gradually, he understands the real meaning of involvement and detachment. His journey from one country to another and his experience with the cultures of different between countries have provided him the inner satisfaction that all are alike poor and rich. Sindi, June, and Babu have different cultural roots and become failed to adjust themselves to the other's culture.

Through Billy, Joshi portrays the picture of the modern man, who is suffering and conflicting from the society and its system. Billy examines 'himself' minutely, but he finds himself an 'eternal outsider'. The entire novel revolves around conflict, inner conflict, social conflict, and cultural conflict. Romi gives the description of Billy's conflict and strange interest, his liking for the primitive and of India. Billy tells Romi- "Anthropology, although my father does not know about it. He thinks I am doing engineering. And I am already halfway through my Ph.D. Isn't funny" (10).

Romi tries to understand Billy. He meets Billy when seeking to place in New York. Billy warmly offers him to share his apartment in Harlem, the black area of America. Billy tells Romi that he finds it "the most human place" (9), so he lived here. Romi welcomes Billy's offer and sharing the room creates an amazing friendship which lasts until the end. He gets satisfaction when he reads about a primitive world like-hills, villages, forest, and river, etc. He says to Romi that- "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." Here the 'other side' is a symbol of the primitive life beyond away the materialistic world. Tuula Lindgren, a Swedish friend of Billy, who has come to the United States for advanced training in the psychiatric course and "the second person who had any clue to what went on in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas" (SCBB16). She clears the fact that Billy has deep the interest in the

primitive/tribal culture. She talks with Romi about Billy primitive force. He is afraid of it and tries to suppress it.’.... ‘But it is very strong in him, much stronger than in you or me. It can explode anytime.”(SCBB18).On the other hand Billy’s wife, Meena tries to prompt him only surface not deeply and loves money and glamor. But Billy hates all materialistic things, the culture of greed, hypocritical, and pretend people and loves tribal culture. Billy becomes like a finished snuffed out, like a candle left in the rain and his conflict and loneliness increase day by day.

The study of the paper is based on the cultural conflict in the novels of Joshi *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. It depicts that how Joshi handles the cultural conflict in his works. His protagonists Sindi and Billy reflect the conflicted state of modern man. “The conflict between human self and his environment has often baffled human existence. It has given birth to different varieties of fiction through which writers have tried to analyze the anxiety and absurdity of human situation” (Dwivedi iv).

Joshi’s novels portray the multidimensional personality of the characters divides between the worlds of conflict. His novels reflect the clash and confusion of values, cultural conflict, self-centered and corrupt people of this modern era. Joshi cleverly handled/managed some main themes like- conflict, detachment, the quest for self-identity, limelight our cultural and moral values. His novels are the good source for a better understanding of the thinking of the modern man in the civilized

society; like the father is not satisfied with children, the clash between husband and wife, and the inner conflict of man. So, in the concluding lines, we can say that the entire novel full of conflict; cultural and inner conflict, as Murali Das Melwani says that “ the novel examines the effects of alienation on sensitive Indians of mixed heritage, as the protagonist in *The Foreigner* is an alien everywhere since he shares three cultures”(Trimbakrao1)

The second novel of Joshi depicts the hidden world of the human soul. Here Joshi portrays the dilemma of the sensitive individual in the materialistic society. Through Billy we can clearly see the conflict of modern man; but the case of Billy is strange, he hears his inner voice “I had a greater responsibility towards my soul” (133). He doesn’t suppress his soul like Sindi. He leaves the civilized world and enters into the tribal/primitive world.

O.P. Mathur says about Billy’s strange case as “an allegory of the realization of one’s true self the final resolution of one’s life, the meaning of which lies not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever hidden from the dazzling light of the sun” (Anand73).To escape from the sufferings and agonies of life, he arranges an anthropological expedition to the many parts of India with his students of the university. At last, he leaves the civilized society and joins the tribal world. Meenakshi Mukherjee gives her view that it is “a compelling novel about a strange quest drawing upon myth

and folklore to reiterates its elemental concerns” (Anand73).

The conflict of culture rises in his mind and at the end, he is satisfied in Natural and primitive culture with the tribal people in which he finds peace and happiness and he pays the heavy price for that. Joshi portrays the real picture of the modern culture and the conflict between cultures on the canvas of the literature through his novels *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Again Meenakshi Mukherjee says about both the novels that “renunciation is a dominant theme and...makes the reader disturbingly aware of the many levels of reality” (Anand73).

Billy enters into the group of marginalized people and depicts the philosophy of life of those people. Joshi’s quotes from Arnold’s “Thyrsis” is the symbol of Billy’s restless soul-*It irk’d him to be here, he could not rest*. Joshi’s works revive the Wordsworths’ idea ‘the world is too much with us’. Joshi handles conflict in his both novels- *The Foreigner* and *the Strange Case of Billy Biswas* very well. We can clearly see the conflict between soul and mind, modern culture and primitive culture, social conflict and familiar conflict, etc. *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* suggest different approaches to solve life’s meaninglessne

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