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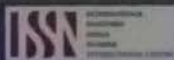
**THE INTERFACE BETWEEN LANGUAGE & LITERATURE:
IDENTITY, INFLUENCE AND IMPACT**

Special Issue Editors

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CONTENTS

S. No.	Title	Page No.
1	A Study on Language Immersion as a Method of English Language Teaching: Advantages and Challenges Ms. J. Mary Jenif	1
2	Socio – Cultural Analysis in <i>Parthiban's Dream</i> Ms. L. Thirunirai	4
3	Exploring The Nuances of Curriculum Development in ELT Dr. K. A. Maria Arokiaraj	7
4	Self-Realising Experience of Indian Women in Shashi Deshpande's Novels T. David	11
5	Bridging The Gap Between Eit/Efl and Literature- Soft Skills Training Through Literary Texts, with Special Reference to Divakaruni's <i>The Palace of Illusions</i> Dr. P. Vaishnavi	14
6	Manjukapur – The Social Reformer - A Study P. Kumar & Dr. K. Dharaniswari	18
7	The Impact of Globalization on Chetan Bhagat's Novel - <i>One Night @ Call Centre</i> Dr. K. Kumar	22
8	Crisis of Identity in Arun Joshi's Novel ' <i>The Strange Case of Billy Biswas</i> ' Dr. J. Josephine	25
9	Confluence of Hybridity in the Colonizer: A Study of Jean Arasanayagam's Poetry Mary Josephine Jerina	27

CRISIS OF IDENTITY IN ARUN JOSHI'S NOVEL 'THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS'

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Abstract

Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian Fiction in English by introducing the theme of alienation in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by the alienation of the individual, shown through a crisis of the self in an emotionally disturbed environment. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the story of a young, rich, America-educated Indian who ends up in the wilderness of central India living as a semi-naked "tribal" seeking a meaning to things above and beyond all that everyday civilization can provide. A key to Joshi's whole intent can be found in the understood

Keywords: alienation, tribal, uprooted, conflict, primitive, materialism, spiritual decay

Arun Joshi adds a new dimension to the genre of Indian Fiction in English by introducing the theme of alienation in his novels. His fictional world is characterized by the alienation of the individual, shown through a crisis of the self in an emotionally disturbed environment. His novels dealt with full of darkness of the identity, conflict and personal sufferings.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is the story of a young rich, America-educated Indian who ends up in the wilderness of central India living as a semi-naked "tribal" seeking a meaning to things above and beyond all that everyday civilization can provide. A key to Joshi's whole intent can be found in the narrator's realization that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood.

This novel concerned about the values and attitudes of the young today. This novel is a critique of this 'diseased' Indian society. It is in the study in the complete alienation of Billy Biswas from his upper class Delhi society with its material concerns, spiritual uprootedness and shameless imitation of the western culture norms in the defiance of its traditional values. It underlines the spiritual degeneration of this society and lives through a rare spiritual rejuvenation in Billy Biswas. Joshi suggests the need for a vision—whether moral or mystical—and for courage to make a decisive choice with full knowledge of its consequences to guide man through the labyrinth of the contemporary life with evils of materialism, confusion of values and spiritual decay. Joshi could not feel at ease in the dwindled stream of modern, mechanized society, which is hooked on the page of money and unhinged from its cultural roots. This novel is 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. The novelist presents his protagonist Billy's strong primitive urge—his 'urkraft' as it is called in the book to critically at the inner decay and sterility of this society. Side by side, there is an endorsement of an anti-materialistic, essentially Hindu, world-view. The traditional Hindu ideal of simple life with its few needs, total 'disregard of money. Tuula Lindgren, Billy's Swedish girl friend and his wife Bilasia are presented with the lack of ambition and its harmonious relation with nature—a life given to the cultivation of man's inborn endowment as well as the higher things of the life. The primitive tribes of India—living far from the corrupting influence and polished banality of the so-called civilized society. The tribal life of Maikala Hills in Central India becomes a concretization of this world-view and Billy's return from White America to India and his ultimate rejection of the post independence, pseudo-Western values of his Delhi society to join the primitives and accept their lives. Billy's fight at this hill stands obvious comparison with Siddhartha's renunciation of his palace, to fulfill the 'greater responsibility towards my soul'. (Billy Biswas, 186) It was not a shrinking of his responsibility to my family, but not attempt to discharge a greater on. In taking to the forest, Billy unlike Siddhartha was not fully conscious of his act. He came under some mysterious spell, which could be shaken off for days. 'I had no idea it was going to happen. It was two days—and two nights—before I knew that I had done. By then it was too late'. (Billy Biswas, 111) He earlier remarked about Krishna murder case and it is relevant. His act was absolutely unpremeditated and he was under the overwhelming influence of some non-physical world. The next point to analysis is the type of self-motif. He finally attained in life of the tribes and the extent to which he travels back. The

tribal life in the novel is a symbol of the primeval, elemental life where nature and the absolute are not conceived as separate entities. The song at the opening in this novel purported to be current among the Bhils of the Satpura hills; 'I came a thousand miles to see your face, O mountain, A thousand miles did I come to see your face(Billy Biswas,01) is revealing. The mountain here may be the totemised object of the group. Anything can be a totem is symbolic of the elemental unity between the realms of nature and the divine. It is not to say that the tribals do not have a sacred—profane distinction. They have it exceedingly, expect that the distinction is arbitrary.

The struggle between two cultures is presented beautifully. The antagonistic relation between man and his environment is reflected in the plot of this novel. That derives its dramatic tension from a confrontation of two conflicting forces. The psychological conflict is presented in the character of Billy Biswas. He becomes the prey of his inner conflict. It reaches the height of the tragedy because Billy's attempt to stand up against his society results not from simple error of judgment or lack of insight but from his genuine concern about the precipitate erosion of the traditional values of the society.

Joshi presents his hero Billy Biswas with Romi (Ramesh Sahi) as narrator. Romi, like Conrad's Malow in 'Heart of Darkness' becomes the narrative voice of the novel but his function is to disguise the very thing that the book, like other novels is about its subjective, spiritual, autobiographical journey. He needs Romi to provide some distance from the real events, to maintain an air of objectivity and to mitigate some of the inner flame that burned his hero. Indeed the events related in this novel would be hard to believe, were they not presented in the matter-of-fact down-to-earth fashion. Unlike Sindi and Ratan, who are more or less victim of circumstances Billy is a rebel. He makes no dastardly compromises, never fumbles and suffers from self-pity. He is never given to introspection and despite his anxieties, he is not a drifter. He is a man of conviction and has the courage to translate his vision into a reality.

The image of the faceless god, perhaps, suggests the imperfect nature of art. The sculptor-king, with all his dedication to his work, could not make the face. It may also imply the hopeless and futile attempt to achieve perfection. Joshi's heroes suffer from a sense of discontent and imperfection and make sincere endeavor to attain fulfillment. But none of them, the partial exception of Billy notwithstanding, succeeds in completely satisfying this hopeless longing. The God's image, itself a symbol of perfection and wholeness, appears faceless in their highly subjective vision.

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