

Urkraft, "Social Conformity" and "Site" as Contrastive Concepts that Construct a Thematic Strategy in Arun Joshi's *the Strange Case of Billy Biswas*

Dr. T.K. Pius

Associate Professor of English, St. Aloysius College, Elthuruth PO, Thrissur, Kerala, India- 680611

Abstract: The paper attempts to explicate the concepts of "urkraft", "Social Conformity" and "Site" as they get unfolded in the course of the narrative in Arun Joshi's *the Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and tries to see these as thematic link that knits the various narrative events. While the term "urkraft" is essentially a subjective force within the individual, "social conformity" is the force that breeds docile denizens for society. Arun Joshi explicates how their conflicting interventions within individuals transform them as "sites" of conflict where these extra-subjective forces fight to resolve differences leaving the individuals mere ineffectual victims.

Key-words: *Urkraft- Conformity - Site -plot Structure*

I. Introduction

Arun Joshi explores the human predicaments and the motives responsible for a man's action. He is one such novelist who shifted the spotlight on man's existential questions. Of all the literary forms, he preferred to write novel perhaps because it is the most potent, pliable, and popular means of communicating a creative experience, evoking, and touching the profound thoughts in and about human life. A Novelist in touch with his society can portray the life a nation more authentically, convincingly and artistically than a poet or dramatist. Joshi has to his credit five novels: *The Foreigner* (1968), *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* (1971), *The Apprentice* (1974), *The Last Labyrinth* (1981) and *The City and the River* (1990).

Under the impact of unprecedented technological advancement, dark forces of animosity, mutual distrust, violence, and apathy assail humanity with unchecked vigour. Materialistic aggrandisement and self-delusion have become the guiding factors of human development in its entire dimension. The modern man devoid of faith and enlightenment remains a self-centred vacuum unable to breathe the refreshing air of a liberating truth. Arun Joshi's novels being an incessant search for reality in the present day world, deal with the problems faced by the modern man. In all the novels, Joshi has explored the essence of human living and the mysterious underworld, which is the human-soul. His novels deal with social-alienation and self-alienation, and the concomitant restlessness and their search for a way out of the intricate labyrinth of contemporary life. They simultaneously explore in the Indian context some universal questions of human existence and delineate the search for the essence of human living.

Joshi carries his study of human predicament in the pretentious, ostentatious, and morally and spiritually barren world, a step further in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Blending the Lawrentian quest for the essence of life with Upanishadic search for soul's spiritual reality, Joshi carries the exploration deeper. The novel is an attack on the corruption of "civilized" modern life. When civilisation is linked to materialism and consumerism, the very word becomes synonym for absurdity. Man cannot realise happiness through mere possession. Eternal joy and happiness can be achieved only through self-realisation and spiritual enlightenment. So quite unlike the other authors, Joshi's novels are not mere pathological study of his characters. Like a realist, he does suggest a pragmatic way out of the labyrinth of the contemporary beleaguered existence. He avoids mere didacticism, to use Bandopadhyaya's words, "realism in his hand becomes a consequence of psychological elaboration". His fiction demonstrates the universal lessons of our spiritual heritage that might have been temporarily relegated to the background but are relevant despite the materialism and rapid westernisation of our country. For Joshi they still hold the key to the tormenting problems of our times.

The Strange Case, is concerned with the crisis of the self, the problem of identity and the quest of fulfilment. In one of his interviews, Joshi admits to having been led "to explore that mysterious underworld which is the human soul." In his reply to M.R. Dua in another interview, he says, "My novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and myself". In yet another interview with Purabi Banerji, he admits that the Existentialists like Camus, Sartre, and Kierkegaard have influenced him. The themes of angst and alienation are most prominent in *The Strange Case* than *The Foreigner*. Joshi has carried his exploration of consciousness of hapless rootless people a stage further and has revealed to our gaze new gas chambers of self-

forged misery. The novel is a severe condemnation of the spiritual uprootedness of the post-independence westernised Indian society.

Joshi may be regarded as the avante garde novelist in the sense that he has powerfully exploited and given sustained treatment to a very portent theme of his times namely, "the maladjusted individual pitted against an insane, lopsided society which is unhinged from its cultural as well as spiritual moorings and his uncompromising search for identity" (Ghosh 30). In all these novels the protagonists' dilemma issue from the lack of any moral norm in society. His heroes suffer from the spiritual uprootedness, cynicism, evils of materialism, loss of faith and crisis of identity under the dual forces of native ethos and western training.

In *The Strange Case*, the protagonist, Billy Biswas is disillusioned and convinced that it will be pointless for him to try to participate in the indifferent anglicized social world of India. He is unable to relate himself meaningfully to his surroundings and consequently finds himself helpless in reconciling himself with it. For a period he oscillates between the modern and the primitive. The basic emphasis is on spiritual awakening and reintegration with the self. He undergoes significant transformation in his response to life and relationship to other human beings. His major concern is with his inner world, the world of the soul and its source. His problem of communicating with those around him disappears as he seeks communion with the very centre of man's existence rather than an assertion of identity. He has a positive vision in a newly found world. What he seeks is not specifically that component in an individual's personality which feels realised in the company of other selves, or which seeks relatedness with other similar selves. It is rather that part which responds to the beckoning of the very source of all beings where from the individual self feels it has emanated.

As years advance Billy becomes more and more conscious of his journey towards cosmic self. He ventures forth from the world of common day into the region of the supra natural. There is a beginning of a new existence as "conscious" being in which state participation on social and individual plane cease to have any significance. The contrastive experience in two different socio-cultural environments adds a spark in his life enabling him to rise above his own worldly self. He wants to resolve his alienation from within by tracing the meaning of existence from the beginning to a real beginning. Billy gets strength to resolve the inner conflict through the process of emotional involvement and ultimately he reaches a stage where they have an intuitive perception of a supra-rational bonding with a certain mode of existence in harmony with the very centre of man's existence.

Thus, the novel explores the inner world of modern man and the way in which the self tries to carve out a pattern to save itself from disintegration. Amid modern society, he is aware of the dehumanising effect of mechanisation. In his effort to revive from the sense of futility of life, he explores the "dark mossy labyrinths of the soul that languish forever, hidden from the dazzling light of the sun". (Joshi 4) Whether being in the common day world or not, he finds himself lost within the unbounded prison of his own conscious mind. He is horrified at the isolation in a self-enclosed world that whirls continually around him.

On "'Urkraft', 'Social Conformity' and 'Site'

This paper on "'Urkraft', 'Social Conformity' and 'Site' as Contrastive Concepts that Construct a Thematic Strategy in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*" attempts to explicate the concepts of "urkraft", "Conformity" and "Site" as they get unfolded in the course of the narrative and tries to see them as thematic links that knit the various narrative events. These are not just contrary terms but bipolar forces within individuals striving for domination, finally leaving them as mere "sites" of resolution of conflicting contrapuntal forces. There is also an attempt to enable readers of Arun Joshi to imbibe a vision of existence that is essentially eco-centred and against the whole idea of breeding docile denizens for the social structure.

The term *Urkraft* is a Scandinavian expression and could be translated into 'primordial' or 'primitive' force. It indicates a resource centre of the most inner, primal, and ferocious power endowed by nature, which humans can tap into. The term can be described as deep desire and urgency to realise it in life. In Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, a character named Tridib tells the narrator, "One could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire... a torment of the flesh that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places..." (Amitav 29). Being a principle of individual's subjective realm, the idea runs counter to "social conformity" or to any kind of purely prescribed modes of existence or morality. It is the polar 'other' of any organised social system or Freudian super-ego or meta-narratives which creates docile bodies of conformity through a practised, machine-like automation. *Urkraft* is what our bodies evolved in the course of the many encounters with extreme and dangerous situations, like fight or flight, protection of loved ones, survival, or emergency. Thus in Joshi's *The Strange Case* the characters like Billy Biswas, Bilasia, and Dhunia evidence an intense presence of "urkraft" leading them to various courses of actions to which they are goaded on and the consequences of which have serious repercussions on their lives as well as on the lives they encounter like Mr. Biswas, Meena, Rima Kaul, Romi, Rele, Situ, Havildar and constables.

"Conformity" promotes society-reliance as an ideal, and fits individuals within various modes of conformity by asserting the importance of meekly accepting society's ideas as time-tested values rather than searching for one's own truth. It is to believe that society is the resource centre of all truths and individuals are only expected to mimic those to the extent possible in their private lives. An individual is expected to trust society, for it is the principle that ensures their safe continuity in it and his/her self-esteem is ascertained by certain level of docility to society. Since their loyalties are coerced through careful education and breeding, they are not expected to be spontaneous. They are concerned with and directed by reputation, approval, and the opinion of others. An all-encompassing power source animates the society and it is considered as the source of all wisdom and inspiration. An individual's conscious willingness to be led by this overwhelming source aids him to have easy access to knowledge. Social system focuses its attention on how an individual imbibes accepted social values and learns social dependence by abiding to external norms and resisting all the internal inclination of the individual to be self-reliant, which conspires to defeat docility in its members. This process of "maturing" in the ways of society is materialised through a process of conforming. Only a true conformist can be a true member of society. No law can be more sacred to the individual than society's demands or conventions and these decide the ethics of the individual. Obviously, this is just a counter idea to "urkraft". Of the prominent characters in the novel like Meena, Mr. Biswas, Rele, Situ, havildar, constables and most members of the urban upper class are conformists.

"Site" is a word that has acquired a particular polemical force in literary analysis, although a force that, paradoxically, is linked to a claimed neutrality, ideological innocence, or lack of proper energy or initiatory force. To describe something as a site has become a favoured way of giving exclusive precedence to external determining forces while playing down or denying the self-initiation of movement or development. Thus, when an individual is described as a site, an attack is being made on views of the individual as in control or even aware of his or her own destiny. An individual is according to such a view, more or merely a site on which extra-subjective forces clash and resolve their differences. These extra-subjective forces, which are given priority, can be either language, or history, or the class struggle, or whatever. Put simply, the argument thus invoked by the use of site denies that the individual is in charge of his or her life, or consciousness, and asserts rather, other forces, which then proceed either to nest or to fight it, constitute that subject. Those fond of the term have sometimes come dangerously near to the sort of infinite progress: the subject is the site upon which different ideological forces battle, but then ideology is itself a site on which different relationships to the forces of production meet in conflict, and so on. While most characters in the *Strange Case* are transformed into sites of conflicts, there are certain specific spaces that come to function as sites like Chandtola, Kala Pahar, the temple, the tribal village, and the Collector's bungalow.

The Plot Structure

Joshi's *The Strange Case* is the story of the son of a Supreme Court judge, educated in New York, who leaves his comfortable Delhi life, his marriage, and his friends, to become a tribal healer in the Maikala Hills of Chhattisgarh. It is a "sensational" plot; 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, Romesh Sahai his old college friend now a conventional but thoughtful bureaucrat, delineate Joshi's concerns. It is divided into two parts. The first part deals with Billy's social and intellectual life and indicates strong primitive urge in him. It attempts to establish his spiritual decay, his rejection of social values. The second part is devoted to his transformation through his contact with organic life, his meeting Romi once again after ten years and his death.

Part One

The reader is introduced to two people who are very intimately connected to Billy Biswas and who detected Billy's brilliant intellect, excessive sensibility and profound obsessions, one being the narrator Romi (Romesh Sahai) and the other being Biswas's Swedish friend, Tuula Lindgren, who had come to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work. Even when the narrator asserts this, Romi confesses his inability to understand the mysterious primitive urge that compelled Billy to escape his own civilized society and he is equally doubtful if anyone is endowed enough to understand the other: "As I grow old, I realized that the most futile cry of man is his impossible wish to be understood. The attempt to understand is probably even more futile." (7) This statement forms the base, and the first part of the novel exposes Billy's inner life in particular and provides the reader a microscopic view of life then and life to follow. Suddenly, he makes a tremendous leap into the dark, mysterious primitive world. "The other side, you know what I mean, don't you? Most of us are aware only of the other side, the valley beyond the hills; the hills beyond the valley."

In a conversation with Romi, Tuula began discussing Billy quite spontaneously. "You find him an exceptional person, do you not? Tuula said. ... Billy feels something inside him, but he is not yet sure. Something he is afraid of it and tries to suppress it... A great force, " urkraft", a ... a 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 at any time."(18) Right at the start of the novel, Tuula identifies a conflict that was going on in Billy between Urkraft naturally present and predominant in him and force of his own breeding fighting for control. From Tuula's intuitive understanding of Billy, readers understand that initially Billy refused to acknowledge his own natural predilection to the presence of this primitive force.

It is not expected that Romi, an IAS officer, could go by intuition alone. Therefore, he casts a spell of doubt whether he would be capable of understanding the workings of this primordial force in 'the other': "If in spite of this I propose to relate Billy's story, it is not so much because I claim to have understood him as it is on account of a deep and unrelieved sense of wonder that in the middle of the twentieth century, in the heart of Delhi's smart society, there should have lived a man of such extraordinary obsessions. ... Perhaps, as he once said, before the eye of each one of us, sooner or later, at one time of life or another, a phantom appears. Some, awed, pray for it to withdraw. Others, ostrich-like, bury their heads in sand. There are those, however, who can do naught but grapple with such faceless tempters and chase them to the very ends of the earth. These last, he might have added, run the most terrible of perils that man is capable of." (7-8) This passage is very crucial to understand what "urkraft" does to people and how they respond to it. Here we are told about three different responses. The narrator's concern is on the efficacy as a communicator of an experience of the other. Now, communication of something always presupposes that the communicator has at least partially comprehended the situation and is capable of interpretation. Joshi's novel is structured on the narrator's attempt to communicate his understanding of the central character's vague awareness of "urkraft", his ineffectual attempts to make a compromise with it in a mundane social situation and his decision to be exploded by it. Joshi thus places the spotlight on man's existential questions and explores the human predicaments and the motives that have the effect of spurring man's actions. He leaves the reader at the edge of the seat with its matter of fact narration of unbelievable events where the real and the imaginary merge.

The narrator, Romesh Sahai, met Billy at Harlem, the black colony in New York, where for one brief summer they roomed together. He had come to New York from a mid western university for a summer course in Columbia. He was introduced to him by the host as an "Engineer, anthropologist, anarchist".(8) He seemed "thoroughly crazy, even by Indian standards." (8) He was immediately drawn to Billy then because he found him a man of extraordinary obsession. Years later, reflecting on why he was so much intrigued by Billy was not so much the final resolution of his life as "what preyed upon him during the course of it". (8) In other words, he knew "of no other man who so desperately pursued the tenuous thread of existence to its bitter end, no matter what trails of glory or shattered hearts he left behind in his turbulent wake." (8) These little extracts from the novel give insights into the nature of urkraft as it is displayed in the life of Billy and the perceptive and receptive sensibility of the narrator's mind.

We may also note that staying in Harlem was a bit of a letdown because it was situated in what must have been one of the worst slums of New York City. Billy chose to live in Harlem because he said that it was the most human space he could find. His apartment was on the second floor of a tenement that housed at least a dozen other families and it was just appalling. On the following day, when Romi came with his belongings, he found Billy sitting between two Blacks and having what looked like iced tea. Billy introduced him to his friends. One of them was called George, "an enormous hulk of a man with large laughing eyes." (9) Romi observed that Billy was one of those rare men who have poise without pose and his words had a cadence, a compulsive quality that engaged the listener. He talked without gestures, in a pronounced British accent. Romi learned later that when Billy was a boy his father had been Indian ambassador to a European country and Billy who was fifteen then, had studied for some years at an English public school. When he laughed, his eyes remained serious. That was another of his ambiguities. His eyes probably revealed the legendary depths of the primordial force active in him. "For most of the time that Billy was with you, he bantered and laughed, but his eyes which were the dominating feature of his face, and were probably found very attractive by women, never lost their deep sombre look. Most people who met him considered him a light- hearted, good sport without noticing the incongruity of his eyes or suspecting what went on in their dark depths." (10)

Billy's family had originally come from Bengal. His grandfather had at one time been the Prime Minister of a famous Princely State in Orissa. His father after completing his law studies at Inner Temple had mostly practiced law at Allahabad and Delhi. At the time when they were in America, he was a Judge of India's Supreme Court. Billy's family background had little to nurture the primordial force seething within for actualisation. Though an Engineer, Billy was drawn to anthropology. There was apparently no serious reason why he wanted to do a PhD in the subject. All he wanted was to read a lot on anthropology and to visit the places they describe, meet the people who live there and to find more about the aboriginals of the world. Once he would finish his studies, he told Romi, he would take up teaching, but before that, he would travel, mostly in

India for he knew a lot about those fascinating societies that exist in India. What impressed the narrator even more was his passionate involvement with the subject, a thing that is rare among learners. It also gradually dawned upon Romi that it was around his "interest in the primitive man that his entire life had been organised." (12) Thus the plot of the novel centres on Billy and Billy life hinges on urkraft, which leads him away from conventions of society to the primitive way of life.

Romi was introduced to a girl named Tuula Lindgren, when he accidentally picked up a phone meant for Billy. He gathered from Billy that Tuula was a Swedish, who had come to the United States for advanced training in psychiatric social work. Later Romi was invited to join Billy to visit her in her apartment. The impression her apartment evoked in Romi was of taste and a slight artiness. She herself was all taste and intellect and at times very witty. She was a lovely woman of thirty, with blond hair and eyes, the colour of the sea. The conversation between Tuula and Billy moved with the grace of an eagle in flight. It was neither verbose nor forced, and it had all the urbanity that the conversation of the two sophisticated and cultured minds could possibly have. It was obvious that they were very fond of each other. Yet, Romi noted "there was something peculiar about the situation, something that I was as yet too untrained to pin down". (14)

Billy narrated his first meeting with Tuula. They had met in one starry night in a greyhound bus en route from New York to Kansas City. Tuula was on her way to Topeka to work in a mental hospital. Billy was going to San Francisco and further on to Vancouver in British Columbia to discuss some matter with an Indian anthropologist who was teaching at the university there. They spent the night talking as the starlit countryside rolled away. Tuula was strongly interested in India, especially in her tribal people, a subject about which Billy knew enough to keep her engaged a hundred nights. Billy had spent quite a few summer evenings with Tuula Lindgren when she was there. Of the two people who were in a limited way destined to glimpse what went on in Billy, she was the second person who had some clue to what went on in the dark, inscrutable, unsmiling eyes of Bimal Biswas.

Something was disturbing Romi too. For one reason or another, nearly everything academic that he touched that summer turned sour. His grades fell. So did occasionally his spirits, although he was not one to take such things to heart. What bothered him much more than the grades were the reports from his home of his father's steady deteriorating health. Then on the New Year's Day, Romi got the news that his father had passed away and he knew that his stay in America had ended.

Back in Delhi, Romi decided to sit for the competitive examination of the Indian Administrative Service. He managed to scrape through the written examination, although by a mere hair's breadth. This left him with a permanent conclusion that nothing more substantial than a hair separates one way of life from another. He had been selected to join the coveted ranks of the Indian Administrative service. In one evening, he received two telegrams. One was from his old professor who had helped him all along. The other came from Billy Biswas. And it said briefly, "Great news old chap ... Keep the peanuts flying." (23)

After more than a year of their departure from New York, he came to the house of Romi one evening. Romi's sister received him. Billy and Romi were delighted to be in each other's warm presence once more and to exchange news concerning recent developments. Billy would join the Department of Anthropology at Delhi University the following August. Dr. Shenoy, who appears to be a bit of a stuffed shirt, was the Head of the Department there. Billy observed that Romi had not changed, in spite of his great success. Romi noted that it was the same old Billy, except for a scar that ran diagonally across his forehead, the history of which he was to learn several years later. Billy revealed that his parents were mad with rage when they finally came to know that he had done his PhD in Anthropology instead of on one of the branches of Engineering. "Anthropology! Of all things you had to go and do Anthropology" (25). There was a lack of understanding between Billy and his parents. While discussing the Krishna murder case with his father Billy remarked sarcastically that anthropologists can make money by selling skulls, tooth, artefacts etc. found on the excavation sites to rich people like his mother, who likes to display these in their drawing rooms. Mr. Biswas believed that only engineering, law, and nothing else govern man. Before leaving Billy promised that, he would come for a few days to Simla where Romi would be sent for a few weeks after his I.A.S training in Delhi.

Romi was not very happy during his training period both in Delhi and in Simla. He was not sure if he had hit upon the right vocation; besides, nearly everybody got on his nerves. In one of those squally evening, when he was in the middle of some dreary regurgitation he heard the familiar address of Billy "Hello, old chap." (27) He was with a friend, a young girl of twenty-two and her name was Meena Chatterjee. She was obviously, like Billy, of Bengali extraction who had been born and brought up around Delhi. Meena was quite unusually pretty in a westernised sort of way. Aside from her looks, the most remarkable thing about her was that she was never short of words. "Her voice pitched too high for a person so polished, had the quality of breathlessness that spoke of vivacious little parties, and afternoons spend in beauticians. She talked almost entirely in English in a unique rather flat, accent that is to be found among young ladies taught in convents." (28) He was thinking of marrying Meena Chatterjee and he wanted Billy's views on the matter. Romi was surprised that Billy had sought

his views. Billy was not a person to set much store by other people's advice. "Why do you ask me?" I said... We are good friends, aren't we? Besides, he grinned, I trust you, which is more than I can say for others." (31)

Romi was invited to meet Meena Chatterjee and her family. He was introduced to Meena's parents. Mr. Chatterjee was dapper, dry and looked every inch the proud retired civil servant that he was. Mrs. Chatterjee was a plump fair woman with calculating eyes. She gave out "the impression of those extremely rich and conservative Bengali women that one sometimes sees rushing by in a curtained car on the streets of Calcutta". (34) Mr. Chatterjee did most of the talking. His pet theme seemed to be the tragic decline of Simla as a summer resort. Then he switched on to what seemed to be his second pet theme: the tragic deterioration in the administrative fabric of India. According to him, this was caused by the fact that the new Indian Administrative Service to which Romi belonged was no substitute for the calibre, traditions, and wisdom of to the Indian Civil Service to which Mr. Chatterjee belonged. When they were about to part, Billy asked, "When do I see you again? ... Whenever you are in Delhi, I suppose. One is pinned down there, like a dead butterfly, for the next six months..." (35) Every society trains its citizens to be docile like a dead butterfly. Michael Foucault in his analysis of the Western Civilization found that the development of western societies had always been accompanied by a parallel evolution of an art of human body. An investigation of what Foucault describes as a "political anatomy" lets us appreciate, "...how one may have hold over other's bodies not only so that they may do what one wishes, but also so that they may operate as one wishes, with techniques, the speed and efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, docile bodies" (Foucault 138). Every society spends its time, energy, and money trying to create subjected bodies out of its citizens. There was this struggle in Billy to overcome the force of subjugation by allowing urkraft to realize its full potential in primitive life.

Two weeks later, Romi received a telegram from Billy saying he decided to marry Meena. After a few days when Romi returned to Delhi, Billy invited him to dinner at his house. His family were obviously very well to do, and from what one could see, they lived in great style. In spite of what Billy had occasionally said, Romi rather liked his parents. Mr. Biswas gave him some tips on how to get along in the Service. "Don't ever quarrel with your boss, whatever the provocation, he exhorted. Secondly, never get the police get an upper hand in a time of crisis. Remember these, and you will never have trouble." (41) This is yet another instance of conformist attitude instilled in an IAS trainee, which he repeats like a parrot to himself umpteen times during his career.

After Romi's training period, he was appointed as the Collector of Jhansi. Those first few months in the Collectorate were so bewildering that he found himself feeling constantly harassed and depressed. To begin with, the sheer size of the district literally overwhelmed him. Communications were inadequate, as was the quality of the staff with which one was expected to administer. It was during those days he received two telegrams from Billy in two consecutive days. The first one read "Engagement off". He wondered whether they had quarrelled or whether Meena's father finally got on Billy's nerves. Before he could settle on any of the explanations, he received another telegram, which said, "Marriage on." (43)

Romi later got an account of what had happened from Billy himself. Meena had invited Billy to join a picnic that some of her friends had arranged. And the first thing he heard on entering Meena's house was a ten-year-old American pop record playing very loud, and the two of her silly cousins clapping their hands and wiggling their hips as if that was the greatest music in the world. Billy was irritated and felt he would put an end to it. Everything would have gone all right if on the way back they had not passed a group of banjaras. Presently one of the boys started to give them the wisdom of how all the banjaras were thieves and their women no better than whores were. Even before he had finished Billy jumped down on his throat. He called him every possible name that he could without insulting the women. He told him he was a "bourgeois prig, a pig, a blabbermouth". (45) When they got home, they quarrelled over what had happened. Billy said that the boy had no right to talk the way he did. Neither Meena nor Billy himself did quite understand why he was seething with anger. "I don't know what's eating you", Meena said. I said, 'how are you going to be my wife if you can't see what is eating me'. 'You don't have to marry me', she says. I said, 'all right, if that's what you want. I will tell everyone that the engagement is off.'" (45) On reaching home, he could see how silly he had been. She had been crying all evening until he phoned Meena and told her he was sorry. Therefore, Billy sent Romi the second telegram. Romi was told all this by Billy in early March the following year, when he went up to Delhi to attend his wedding, which was an elaborate affair.

It was during the same trip to Delhi that Romi met Situ. Ever since his entry into the portals of Indian Government, his uncle had considered it his solemn responsibility to see him safely and appropriately married. Therefore, to help him do the needful, Romi went over one afternoon after Billy's marriage to have tea with Situ and her parents. They were an ordinary though scholarly family, like his own people. Her father was an authority on the Bijapur kingdoms, and one of Situ's brothers made a bit of name for himself in radio physics at the University of California. Situ herself had done M.A. in Psychology. After the interview, as soon as their car was a safe distance away, his uncle, bubbling with good humour, and at the same time shy and embarrassed,

slapped him on his back and said, "So, Romi, will you marry her?" "Yes"(48) Romi said. Everyone was stunned by the suddenness of the reply. The following November, nearly eight months after Billy's marriage, Situ and Romi were married. Billy and Meena were present at the wedding. Billy looked unchanged, more boyish perhaps than before. Meena was vivacious as ever and quite obviously with child.

It was nearly three years later, when Romi was posted in Delhi, that he saw them again. In between, he received a telegram from Billy announcing the birth of a child. Meena had sent a set of clothes for Romi's daughter. A month after his arrival in Delhi the family was invited for another dinner at Billy's house. When they were there, Romi was quite puzzled by certain ominous changes. Mr. Biswas had retired and, according to Billy, led a quite existence that swung regularly between irritability and extreme irritability. Billy himself had changed, almost beyond recognition. His conversation was nonchalant, at times almost rude. When he drank, he showed it. Meena had become plump but prettier. Although the evening her eyes kept nervously darting at the husband with a mixture of apprehension and annoyance, ensuring that all was well, guarding something, but guarding what Romi could hardly guess. Their boy, nearly three, was the handsomest child Romi had ever seen. Situ too was quite uneasy with something. Romi saw Meena's glance quickly go over situ's clothes and jewellery. It was a natural gesture but it annoyed Situ. That momentary discord sprang an unfortunate chasm between the two women that only a great catastrophe could bridge. Of all things, Billy talked to Romi of his aunt's business. It appeared that he had come to play a pivotal role in what looked "a shady enterprise". (50) He did not seem to be interested in anthropology or in writing books.

Romi had not felt so strange with Billy Biswas before. He seemed duller than most dull men were. It was virtually impossible to keep the conversation going. Romi tried several tracks: anthropology, business, the political situation, America, the weather, the food crisis, books and so on. "It was as though some part of him had gone strike". Whatever it might have been, the Billy Biswas Romi had known was finished, "snuffed out like a candle left in the rain". (51) The novelist cannot justify the apparent change in Billy unless we admit

On reaching home, Situ revealed her strong feelings against Meena: "Did you see how she looked me up and down... As if she herself was no less than Miss India or something".(52) Situ is not generally catty. That she talked as she did was only a further evidence of the strangeness of that evening. Romi met Billy's family again at a cocktail party given by one of the East European ambassadors. Romi was invited by virtue of his position with the Government of India. The Biswases were present but Billy was absent. Romi had come alone because Situ was down with migraine, something terrible that she had developed since the birth of their daughter. During the party Romi's inquiry concerning Billy to Meena did not find any precise answers. Her expression was distinctly worried. After a few minutes, Meena quite unaware of herself began to reveal what was bothering her. It was getting late. "I don't think he will come now," Meena said, attempting to give her voice a lilt of unconcern, but ended up only by sounding pathetic. I was touched. "My sahib does not think of keeping his promises, does he?" Then while she was trying to laugh it away, a sob rose out of nowhere and choked her off. I was startled; it was so completely unexpected from a woman as self - possessed as Meena. ... Meena was buffeted by some enormous sorrow, was sobbing in the shadow of the silver oaks."(54) She felt that everything was falling apart. "...God knows what the matter is. All I know is that Billy is getting stranger and stranger with every passing day. ... You ask me what the matter is. How is one to know when he doesn't even talk, doesn't even care to tell me what is bothering him.... I just can't handle the situation anymore ... It is all probably my fault. Perhaps I just don't understand him as a wife should." (54-55) When Billy did finally arrive there was an angry exchange. Meena paled visibly. She who had appeared aristocratic and self-possessed a few minutes earlier fluttered like a crushed butterfly as she wrestled with her emotions. She was more uneasy at certain resignation in Billy's voice. Billy's mother who came into the room, at once sensed tension and "her face acquired that peculiar expression – an amalgam of prayer and foreboding – that seems to perpetually dwell on the brows of old people who are helplessly in love with their children even though the latter don't much care for them".(59)

Romi had promised Meena, he would meet Billy personally. Therefore, he invited him to lunch one afternoon. If his intention had been to obtain information about Billy's problems, Romi could not have more abundantly failed. Each question that he tries to formulate to him was pared off with that sabre-edged wit for which Romi's sincere probing was no match. Billy talked again of the expedition that his students were organising in central India, which he was guiding. The words they exchanged at Billy's departure signalled Billy's final but inevitable decision concerning his life. "Tell me about your expedition when you come back," I said. "I will if I do come back." He laughed."(60) In fact, he never did. On the second day of the expedition, "Billy Biswas disappeared from the face of the earth, simply vanished into the saal forests of the Maikala hills". (60)

Much commotion followed on the heels of Billy's disappearance. In spite of the earnest effort of Mr. Biswas to keep it out of the papers, the print media had a field day of it for a week or so. Children of judges did not disappear every day. If the comment in the press exceeded their apprehensions, the gossip in Delhi society was nothing short of a deluge, and that continued to swamp them for many years to come. The attention drawn

by Billy's disappearance would not have been so great if he had not disappeared so totally without leaving a trace. Various theories were advanced concerning Billy's disappearance: that Billy could be a spy for the princes of Bastar whose kingdoms had been absorbed into the republic of India; that Billy possibly eloped with an American woman Tuula and this greatly appealed to the ladies and generously fed the legend of Billy Biswas; and finally, a *deus ex machina* theory to close the files of the government investigators which is that Billy had been killed by a man-eater tiger.

It took the search party nearly four days to reach the point from where Billy had disappeared. Anything could have happened in such a place to a man like Billy, and the so-called organised world would not have heard a groan. When it was cooler, they entered the stream and then the forest. An hour later, they found, Dhunia, the Headman of the little village who had been the subject of the expedition's research. Dhunia was short, almost dwarfish. His hair was grey, his skin nearly black and deeply wrinkled. Two coal-black, eagle-like eyes were particularly striking of an otherwise nondescript face. He must have been a man of considerable influence among his own people, but behaved towards the team with a cloying servility that for Romi was greatly annoying. He kept his hands folded all through the interview, refused to sit down, and denied absolutely anything that was asked.

In the meantime, the Biswases, as one might have expected, had completely gone to pieces. It was the mother who suffered the most, although for a few weeks Meena herself was close to nervous collapse. Mr. Biswas took upon himself the responsibility of looking after Billy's son. The mother was too stunned to speak. All they heard her ever say was, "What happened to Billy? Oh God what they have done to Bimal?" She ate very little, and was known to pace her room for twenty-four hours at a stretch. She lost weight steadily, until one Sunday morning early in winter soon after the police closed Billy's case, she passed away. Nevertheless, Meena bounced back after the initial collapse and was nearly the same in two years' time. She joined as a teacher in a nursery school that catered to the children of upper-class Indians and foreigners who lived in their locality. She also, in association with an old classmate, opened a little boutique. As it always happens, Billy's death had the one salutary effect of bringing Situ and Meena together. They forgave such real and imagined wrongs they had, against each other.

Soon after the investigations were over, Romi received two visitors: Rima Kaul and Dr. Kundt. Romi could not have forgotten Rima Kaul as he had met her in Simla and again at Bimal's marriage. He regretted that she did not recognise him: "I don't think there is anything more dissatisfying than not being recognised by a person who you yourself will not forget." (64) What bothered Romi was that a creature so beautiful should be torn by such sorrow and that he had no words to console her. She asked if he believed Billy was dead or killed by tiger. While he kept quiet, he could see the peon chuckle merrily in the corridor. After a while, Romi said he did not quite know what to believe and what not to believe. He told her that he had himself been to the area and had gone through every shred of evidence collected until then. He had personally spoken to everyone who was worth speaking to. However, nothing fitted in. There was just no trace of him. Therefore, the police had naturally concluded that he was dead, perhaps killed by a tiger. Miss Kaul claims she knows Billy too well to believe in the story of the police. She told Romi, he just went away because he had nothing to come back to, for he did not love Meena. Almost dismissing her assumptions, Romi told her, "A man of twenty-eight doesn't just flee home because he has ceased to love his wife. Half of the city would be denuded if that were the case". (66) She retorted that Billy had confided in her a few things about his life with Meena: they had been quarrelling a lot, with Meena disapproving his absence from home spending his time with the expeditions. She told Romi that just before he disappeared they had a long discussion and Meena agreed to let him spend as much time on his research as he liked so long as he did not go much out of Delhi. She firmly believes that he just went away and she wants to go down to where he disappeared herself: "... I'll find him. If you could help me, it would ease my task. Even if you don't, I will go, anyhow. I'll go from village to village and ask for him. Sooner or later I shall find him." (67)

Romi spend an hour trying to dissuade her. In the end, he was simply dazed by the fantastic determination of the girl. He knew that she loved him, but he had not until then seen in his life, the incandescent white heat that love could ignite in some people, pushing them to the very edge of destruction. Finally, to play for time, he said, he would see what he could do. Her face brightened immediately. She was going up to Simla for a week and she earnestly hoped to get Romi's assistance when she would come back. As Romi watched her go down the steps, he "was again aware of the dark destiny that shadows all passionate love. I felt both helpless and sad..." (68) In keeping so much in tune with his foreboding fear, Romi soon got the news within hours of her leaving him that she died in an accident. Her brother, who miraculously survived, said she had been very excited all the way from Delhi. Once in the hills she insisted on driving. Even though he knew she was not very good at it, he let her, so that her mood may stay. Fifty miles from Shimla, blinded by the headlights of an oncoming truck, she drove the car over a precipice.

His other visitor was one Dr. Kundt, of Swedish Embassy in Delhi. He had come to deliver a package that Tuula Lindgren send addressed to one Mr. Saha. Tuula obviously had forgotten Romi's full name. A note addressed to him said that she was sending a few letters, which Billy had written to her thinking they would be of some use in conducting the search for him. It appears that the first of these letters were written about a year after his return to India and the last nearly six months before his disappearance. The excerpts of those letters in the novel historically trace the realisation of *Urkraft* in the life of Billy. It is also to be noted how differently Tuula Lindgren and Rima Kaul responded to Billy. Tuula was the first to identify the working of the primordial force in Billy. Yet she knew how to handle it objectively so as not to be trapped by it. On the other hand Rima Kaul responded to it subjectively and got consumed by it.

Part -Two

The second part of the novel begins ten years after Billy had disappeared. The planes of central India were ravaged by terrible drought, and Romi was the Collector of one of the worst hit districts. For weeks, he had done nothing but go round in a jeep, not so much providing assistance as watching the land perish under his very nose. From morning to night, he moved about quite without a plan, along dirt roads strewn with the carcasses of dead cattle. His driver told him, "It is the same everywhere, sahib; everywhere it is same" (73) He sent frantic telegrams everywhere. One morning twenty tanker Lorries arrived from the military cantonment at Jabalpur. Twenty tankers were too meagre to meet the needs of an area of 5,000 sq. miles.

On one of his visits, he saw in a village a dog and an old man, two skeletons that managed merely to crawl, licking at the water trickling at the spout of an empty tanker. The old man, his eyes closed with exhaustion, was obviously too weak to push the dog away. A considerable part of the population was made up of tribals who lived on roots and scooped the mud of dried wells to quench their thirst. It was the children whose suffering was the worst to watch. They crawled about naked, their bellies distended, eyes bleary with infections. The women, their hair matted and clothes reduced to rags, tried nonetheless, to preserve their modesty, and stayed in the back. Men whined, pleaded, threatened, touched his feet, and drew promises from him that he knew he could not fulfil.

That morning he had been to a hamlet that lay thirty miles from the district headquarters in a narrow valley beyond the first line of hills. The jeep was pattering and the guard started his abuse. As he slipped into the opening made by the crowd, a man stepped out and put his hand on the vehicle near where he sat. 'I say old chap, you won't recognise me, would you?(75) Romi looked at him as one might look at a spectre and cried, "Billy". The small crowd around him was greatly intrigued that one of their own men was talking to the Collector in the Sahib's own language. Though Romi initially was much at a loss for words, he quickly regained his presence of mind and said: "Don't be ridiculous, Billy. Jump in. Let's go back. This is much too shattering, if you know what I mean." (75) Asking his son who was standing close to him to go home, Billy jumped into the jeep. Romi was much shocked to learn that Billy had a son during the years of his disappearance. He reflected that Man's capacity for absorbing surprise is enormous. A meeting with Billy was the last thing that would have crossed his mind for the past ten years. He finally accepted the fact of his presence as he had accepted the reports of his death earlier.

Billy wore only a loincloth. He had lost weight heavily. However, the impression he gave was one of great vitality. His skin had darkened because of constant exposure to the sun. His hair was lighter and longer than Romi remembered. A thousand questions buzzed in his head, but with the heat, the noise, the dust, and the presence of the driver and the guard, he could not ask any of those. It was only when they got home and each of them had a bath that they were to start talking normally.

Half way to the bungalow, the jeep's radiator began to boil, belching out little jets of steam. "We must get water," the driver said, looking at the guard. "We must get water," the guard said, looking right back. Neither of them knew what was to be done until Billy led them through a series of rocky ledges to a shallow but full tank that contained enough water for their needs. It was obvious that Billy knew the terrain well, and this fact was greatly to baffle the police forces at a subsequent stage.

It was only after Romi had bathed that the full significance of all that had happened struck him to the full. He came out and sat down feeling quite nervous all of a sudden. A little later Billy came out too. Romi was again shocked to see him dressed in the same old loincloth although he did not know what he had expected him to do.

Would you like a change, Billy? ...

What change? He said, puzzled.

I meant, could I offer you one of my... well... some clothes' I said
feeling more foolish than before.

No thanks; that is if it is the same with you.'

'Of course it is the same with me.' I said hurriedly. (77)

It was the same with the servants too. The servants of the bungalow were gaping at him. Their gesture told Billy that Romi's guests were expected to keep certain standards. Romi poured Billy a drink and then, soon after, another.

Romi had read about the Maikala range and talked to experts about it before he took charge of his office as the Collector of the district. Now sitting there with Billy, he felt very ignorant and quite a bit helpless. Few Collectors had unravelled the mystery of the flat rocky strip of land beyond the gorge and beyond it the jungle. During the quite of night, he had often heard the lusty laughter of men and women and had wondered where they went at that time of the night. He knew there were paths in the Maikala range he was yet to set his foot on them. Around these paths lay the widely scattered villages of India's primitive people: the baigas, the gonds, the pardhans, and several others. To Romi, Billy sat before him like the mysterious Maikala hills: "All I knew was that they had done something fearful, something unspeakable, to this friend of mine so that, as the night advanced, I wondered where Billy Biswas as I had known him ended and whisperings of jungle began." (77)

Billy took time to reply Romi's question, inquiring where he lived. Then he lifted his eyes towards the horizon, squinting a little: "Do you see that hump in the line of hills, jutting above the treetops?... And the whitish cliff faces to the right, like the mouth of a limestone quarry... You will see it when the moon comes out. That is why it is called Chandola".(78) He told Romi that he lives somewhere around there. The Collector told him about his mother's death, Meena's boutique, economic situation after the death of Nehru, disorganisation of the country and the drought in particular. He was not interested in these issues. But he did at one point say, "It is your contradictions, old chap, who are playing havoc with the land, so don't blame us" (80). Then he appeared to be calculating. Soon he said that it would rain in about twenty-eight days. He told him that a man named Dhunia had taught him things he was quite ignorant earlier. The name, Dhunia, struck as a bell in his ears, for Romi had talked to him when he went looking for him after Billy disappeared.

Billy then revealed to him the story of his disappearance ten years earlier. He had no idea it was going to happen. It was in one late September when he along with four boys and two servants were to camp near the river for two nights and two days. On their way to the camp, they were delayed for two hours at Jabalpur. They had to hurry with their tents before it grew too dark. Since he had been to this place twice earlier, they had no trouble in locating a suitable camping spot. When they reached the place, they quickly began the work of setting up tents. They drove in pegs, took out tents, and spread them on the ground. Soon they realised they had left behind a package of ropes at Bhopal junction. There was not so much time to be lost. Besides, the physical exhaustion and constant threat of wild animals also prevented them from going back to Bhopal. Therefore, Billy walked two hundred feet upstream and reached Dhunia's village. He had met Dhunia twice earlier and had spent nearly two months with him. He had also given his niece some antibiotics, which probably saved her life. This incident had made Dhunia Billy's mahaprasad i.e. the greatest friend that one can make on earth. Such a bond of friendship would make them gladly die for each other. Therefore, Billy went to Dhunia's house to get the requisite ropes. Dhunia was sitting in his usual place with few other friends in front of his hut. They sprang up in surprise on seeing Billy. He told them what he had come for. Dhunia said he would gladly give him whatever rope he had, but Billy would have to wait for the return of Bilasia, his niece, who had gone to the forest.

Billy often wondered what his life would have been if that boy had not lost that package or Dhunia had some ropes available with him right then. Not all that which happened subsequently would have taken place if he had not waited for Bilasia to return home from the forest. It was as though, during that half hour, it was not Bilasia he had been waiting for but his future, his past, and indeed the purpose of his life. They sat around chatting but no one was interested in the prices of food grains, new seeds, roads, or elections. They talked of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, rivers, moods of forests, animals, dance, singing, a lot about women and sex, at length about dance they were planning for the following evening. This led them to talk about liquors, aphrodisiacs, and women. That was when Bilasia arrived. She came carrying a bundle of bundle of twigs on her head. She dumped the bundle in a little distance from where they sat and joined the old men chatting and discussing nothing in particular. Then she led the way into the hut where ropes were stored. She was barefoot and her legs were stodgy as they are of nearly every woman there. Billy watched her as she went about her work. He watched her in her rust coloured lugra, her black hair tied behind her neck, her firm shoulders golden and bare, and the play of oil lamp lending voluptuousness to her full figure until the whole hut seemed too full of her. That was when Billy first realised that something unusual was happening to him and that he was not behaving quite normally. She was a sick girl who had recovered. She had not probably changed in any other way. Billy had changed, for quite suddenly and unaccountably he had ceased to resist what was the real in him. All that he had been confusedly driving towards all his life had been crystallised, brought into focus, so to speak, by what he had gone through during the interval between this visit and the time he had first met Bilasia. "I had changed... But more than that, I knew I was very near the brink. Very, very near. I knew I could go over the brink any day now, any moment, and I was terrified. God, I was terrified. I had never been so terrified in my life". (85) Billy found a group of men and women, about thirty of them, started to cross the strip

of plain that lay beyond the gorge. They were singing. They all went to some clearing in the forest to dance, to drink, and probably to make love. Billy gathered the rope and started on his way back to the camp. Dhunia accompanied him nearly to the edge of the stream. On parting he said, "Come and watch our dance tomorrow..." (86) Dhunia may look dull, but he was no fool. One had to be clever to understand what they were doing. Billy crossed the stream and reached the camp just as the boys had begun to despair. He gave them the rope and they set to work on those tents.

Billy moved a little distance away, out of their sight, sat down on a rock and began to weep. He knew that something was going to happen to him. He was terrified as a child would be terrified in the dark. After a while, he went back to the group to ensure all the tents were up. Then he went to his tent and slept. An hour later, he got up sweating: "I had had a dream, a dream so erotic, the like of which I did not know could still be conjured up by my unconscious". (87) The dream upset him all over again. He came out of his tent and once again sat on the rock. He felt that the whole primitive world was calling him: "Come to our primitive world that will sooner or later overcome the works of man. Come. We have waited for you. Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? ... This is all there is on earth. This and the woman waiting for you in the little hut in the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come. Take us. Take us until you have your fill. It is we who are inheritors of the cosmic night." (88) Sitting there, he thought he was losing his sanity. Layer upon layer was peeled off him until nothing but his primitive self was left trembling in the moonlight. Something similar had happened to him once during his childhood at a temple.

Billy had experienced an awakening of the primitive force quite early in his life. When he was around fourteen, he, along with his mother spent a few weeks in Bhubaneswar with his uncle who was a doctor. A rather strange thing happened during that summer. The moment he emerged from the railway station, something odd started to wake within him, as though some slumbering part of him had suddenly come awake. He could not figure out what excited or troubled him. It might have been a sudden interest in his own identity or a magical glow of something insubstantial that lurked about the place. He became especially aware of it one afternoon when they went for a picnic to Konarak. What appealed to him was the shades of the same spirit that he vaguely knew then, as he knows too well now, that the spirit was a much older force, older than the time when man first learned to build temples. If anyone had clue to it, it was only the adivasis who carried about their knowledge in silence, locked behind their dark inscrutable faces.

In the evening, he saw the chauffeur go out for a bit of entertainment and he accompanied him. He went to the village, in a clearing a little distance away there was a lot of dancing and drinking. The chauffeur disappeared for several hours. He sat there watching the dancing and listening to the songs. He felt a great shock of erotic energy that passed through him though there was nothing particularly erotic about the whole business. The same feeling of unreality followed this. He felt that something had gone wrong with his life. He assured himself that this was where he belonged and what he had always dreamt of. They went back at midnight. His brief elation was followed by a severe depression. He stayed awake most of the night, listening to the drumming. The next day his uncle found out where he had been. The chauffeur was sacked. Mother called him into her room and asked where he had gone the previous night. Crying, she asked him, if he did anything with a woman. She forbade him to step out of the house without permission. Nevertheless, he reacted violently saying that he was not just a boy anymore and went out. During the two weeks that he stayed back at school, the hallucination recurred several times, in mild or sharp form. Depending upon the state of his imagination and the stimuli received, it flared up especially whenever he heard the sound of drums at night.

The camp went on the following day with his instructions on the geography of the place. However, he was not giving them some objective data but subjective experience in a language that inclined to use lot of the dialect like a tribal himself. In the afternoon, he had been troubled by very practical questions about life. After his troubling questions of the past, he slept a little. When he woke up it was evening. He and the boys had tea in silence. Billy was very quiet. His self-confidence began to ebb. He was worried once again. He got introvert, he retired within himself and he opted for the life of a pilgrim.

He had everything going for him yet his inner world was rocked by a groundswell of discontent. He was consumed by a restlessness which grows steadily. Towards the end of the tea the little fellow asked him, when they would start work. Billy said he would go and see the headman that evening. When the little fellow asked if he could accompany him, Billy said that they would feel harassed if they see too many of them.

He could not finish his tea and carried the cup to his tent. He sat on bed watching the sun go down. As it disappeared and the trees began to lose their shapes, the hallucination came back in an overwhelming flood. He could almost hear the roar of it in his ears. His stomach tightened. His excitement rose, and his mouth started to go dry. He sat with his face in his hands, for how long he did not know, until he heard what he had been waiting for: the first loud beats of a mandar. He continued to sit there with his heartbeats steadily accelerating. The sound of the drums came again and then again until it broke into a continuous rhythm." "I'll go and talk to Dhunia about our work and come back" he told himself. "I had better go before they get too engrossed with that

wretched dance of theirs". (97) He stood hesitating at the door of the tent. Then he performed his last act of cunning. He pulled out his wallet, took out nearly half the money he was carrying and put it in the suitcase. Actually, he realised later, he had done it only to fool them. Decisive evidence against the disappearance theory during investigations had been the fact that Billy had left so much of his money behind. Before leaving, he made it a point to go up to the little fellow's tent and told him that he was going off to see the headman and would be back soon. When he left the camp, the boy was staring gloomily after him in the dusk.

When he reached the village, Dhunia was not at home, nor was Bilasia, nor for that matter anyone else in the village except a very old woman who was too weak to leave her bed. From where he stood, the drums were about half a mile away. Beyond the village, he climbed a low hill and entered the jungle. The path was more or less in darkness. It twisted and turned among the saal trees, went around the waist of a hillock, circumvented a boulder, and quite unexpectedly, he was in the clearing, smack in the middle. It was dark there too: they danced almost entirely by the light of the moon. There was quite a large crowd gathered. He could not make out who was who until Dhunia stepped out of the crowd and challenged the others: " 'Now, what did I tell you, you loudmouths?' He cried. Didn't I tell you he would come? Didn't I? But you think I brag. You think I lie. You think he doesn't consider me his brother. And that wide-mouthed Bilasia... she laughed at me no end. Your brother hasn't got guts'. Here you are now. Show them whether you have guts or not." (98) He went on and on lampooning everyone who had even vaguely hinted that Billy might not come. In any case, they seemed glad to have him.

They sat down on flat ground, the men separated from the women. They passed him a leaf cup. He put it to his mouth without bothering to question what it was. There was very little communication between the men and the women except for an occasional somewhat obscene remark from one side or the other. Between the two groups, the drummers, three of them waited in a trance-like immobility, their faces mostly lifted towards the sky. Billy realised then that they were all waiting for the rising of the moon. Moreover, he suddenly discovered that he, too, was waiting for the rising of the moon. While he sat in the purple shadows, he had the first terrible premonition that he might not go back.

Finally, the moon floated up from behind the hills. A hush fell upon the little field as men and women turned their faces towards the sky. A series of hoots and screams and a veritable barrage of obscenities immediately followed the hush. Then, in little gay clusters, the men and the women started to move towards the centre of the field. Billy continued to sit in the patch of shadows. The drummers had not ceased to rip out continual flourishes. Every few minutes one of them jumped into the air and there were loud huzzas all around. Twice Dhunia asked Billy to join them, but he refused. Sitting there, Billy thought, "I have really gone mad. Finally and decisively, I have gone mad." (100)

On the other side of the field, facing the drummers, the women formed a row. The moon, rising behind them, threw tremulous shadows about their feet. Because of the distance and the moonlight in his eyes, Billy could not distinguish their faces. He knew, however, that they were all young and in spite of their finery, rather barely clad. He wondered if Bilasia was among them. The first wave of erotic energy had begun to pass through the swaying, singing dancers. In addition, in their passage, they had touched Billy Biswas, who had begun to undergo a new transformation. These dancers are an orgy of sorts. A bit of lovemaking is an inevitable part of the event but what precedes it is more significant. It is the frenetic drumming, the constant footwork, the making and breaking of formations, the yelling, the fondling of women, which could really be termed orgiastic. They believe that the dancing and the liquor bring about the explosion of the senses.

Thus Billy Biswas, a refugee from civilization, sat in the shadow of a saal tree, a thousand miles away from home, and gradually underwent his final metamorphosis. He stood on a rock and saw in the night sky a reality that blinded him with its elemental ferocity. It was as though his life had been reduced to those elements with which we all begin when we are born. "'Come' they cried. 'It is with us you begin and with us you will end'." (102) He looked at the dancers entwined in the darkness, and they called out to him, "Come, come. Too long have you wandered the purlieus of our forbidden city". He squatted at the edge of a promontory and stared into the basin of a gorge five hundred feet below while the tumultuous drums chiselled away the edifice of the past. As he stood there, he asked himself: "Why did it take him thirty years to discover this. For all his ...courage...he... had been afraid, afraid and foolish, squandering the priceless treasure of his life on that heap of tinsel that passed for civilization". (102) It didn't take him much time to blend with this group. He stood before Bilasia while Bilasia danced. A little later she was leaning against the trunk of a tree looking up into his eyes with a smile on her lips. From what he remembered, they were alone. Her hair was loose. Just behind her left ear was a red flower. The necklace of beads glowed a little in the darkness. Her enormous eyes, only little foggier with drink, poured out a sexuality that was nearly as primeval as the forest that surrounded them. "Come, come, come she called, and Billy Biswas, son of a Supreme Court Judge, went. The top of her lugra came down. Her breasts, when he touched them, were full." (102)

The word, 'desire' was too mild a word for what he felt at that moment. It was closer to madness, a terrible madness of a man who after his great sin and much suffering finally finds himself in the presence of his God. "I don't believe I had felt towards any other woman what I felt towards Bilasia that night. And I don't think I shall ever feel it again, even towards Bilasia. It was that passing moment that rarely comes in a man's life, when he feels he has suddenly discovered that bit of himself that he has searched for all his life and without which his life is nothing more than poor reflection of a million others". (102-3) Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of all that primitive force that had called him night after night in the past. The same force had drawn him to Tuula, to the study of anthropology and to the bizarre spots of North and Central America. If forests and hills had earlier beckoned him from a distance, Bilasia was now leading him by the hand. It is clear that something grave and decisive happened during those thirty-six hours. As Billy himself put it, "I arrived at the fork of my life that, without being conscious of it, I had waited all my life. I took the turning that was irrevocable as it was awesome. Why all this happened to me I do not know, and even if I knew, I could not put into words". (104)

They spent the night together, wandering about a little, drinking, dancing a little, until it was nearly dawn. Billy was exhausted and was almost in a trance but his cunning had not yet deserted him. He came down the forest towards the clearing looking for Dhunia. It was only when he was standing right next to him that Dhunia took notice.

'Dhunia', Billy said
'Are, re, re, Bhaiya. Are you still here?'
'Yes. I am still here and I am not going back'
'That is very good. That is all what we want.'
'I am serious Dhunia. I am not going back. That is that. That is final'. (104)

When Dhunia looked at Billy, he knew at once that Bilasia had done love-magic on him. He promised him to take him to the greatest gunia to free him of the powers of magic. Billy told him that he has no time for all his nonsense. What he wanted was very clear. He has decided to stay and wants Dhunia to ensure nobody knows he was there. "... I am fed up of those slimy bastards who are camped across the river, and I am fed up of the millions who surround me in that wretched city where I come from. I do not propose to go back, even if it means killing some of them. And if you don't want bloodshed, I want you to wake up this moment and tell this lot of drunks they know nothing about me". (105) Dhunia realised that something most extraordinary was afoot. What gave him the energy to do the needful was the firm conviction that a person crippled by magic, especially one who was his mahaprasad, had to be defended at all costs. Though Dhunia had told him to stay away from Blasias, Billy went right back to her and retreated into the Jungle.

What helped Billy more than Dhunia's organisational abilities was the fact nearly the entire population of the village remained in a drunken stupor during most of the day and by the time the boys got around to the village it was deserted once again. Only Dhunia chose to stay back, and met the little fellow who was leading the search with all the duplicity he was capable of. Bilasia and Billy were carted off overnight to a cousin's house in the village. That was also the village of the great gunia. It goes to the credit of Dhunia and his village that although they were visited several times by the police no one even remotely hinted at having seen a creature like Billy Biswas. Finally the police, exhausted by the fruitless search, jumped with avidity upon the man-eater theory as soon it was broached, most probably by none other than Dhunia himself.

Billy and Bilasia lived in the subsistence level. What kept them happy were the same things that have kept all primitives happy through the ages: the earth, the forest, the rainbows, the liquor from Mahua, an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and lovemaking, and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all. He had no ambition, not even for becoming a good primitive.

Romi who was listening to Billy's strange story became more and more curious about his way of life. He asked him about Rima Kaul whom he met in Simla. He informed him that she died in a car crash. For a moment, he stared at Romi too stunned to speak. Billy told him to keep the fact of his being alive a secret because there could be all sort of complications. If not, the civilized folks in Delhi would immediately try to reclaim him once they come to know he was alive and that would be dangerous. Then he strode quickly away. His strides were long and resolute and yet absolutely relaxed. Romi admitted that he envied him a bit, as he watched him go down the narrow road and disappear from his view.

Late in the morning as Romi sat in the courtroom pondering the futility of all human justice, his eyes fell on Dhunia. He had probably come with the party of the young man who Romi had just sentenced to ten years' imprisonment for murdering his wife for a simple reason she had failed to provide him a hot meal. The boy was obviously not a murderer and yet what could one do? Justice, they had repeatedly been told, must be done.

Romi had not noticed Dhunia earlier but after what he heard of him from Billy, he wanted to meet him. He watched him for several minutes while Dhunia tried to calm the young man's mother as she struggled to touch her son one last time before the constables led him away. Since he was unaware of Romi's eyes, he was so fully himself without the trace either of cunning or of that infuriating servility with which he had greeted Romi ten years earlier. When he was called into the office of Romi, he appeared with his hands folded and with his usual obsequiousness and cunning until Romi told him that he was a good friend of Billy as Dhunia was. Then his apparent servility had vanished and its place was taken by a perfect composure. In his eagerness to understand Billy, Romi wanted to get another depiction of him from the perspective of Dhunia. He said that the night, Billy came to be with them, was full of strange happenings. Bilasia completely lost her mind over Billy and to top it all Chandtola, the white-faced cliff, came to life. It started to live again. It started to glow as it used to thousands of years ago when we were kings here. Dhunia told him that Billy was a King and to offer evidence he said, "Haven't you seen the way he stands? Haven't you noticed the regal carriage? Who else but a king can hold you with his eyes the way he does? What more, the Devi would never have returned if he had not been the king himself." (112) Romi then asked him who this Devi was. He took nearly half an hour to answer that question, burdening the simple reply with an unbelievable amount of superstition. In any case, the story of Devi hints at the extra-subjective force at work in Billy.

Devi was the queen of a king that had ruled those parts thousands of years ago. The king excelled in all: in love, in magic, and in saintliness. He was a great sculptor and had many temples built. Finally, he wanted to build one temple that would surpass all others. He called the builders from all over the country. They made many magnificent idols, but the chief idol the king wanted to make himself. So night and day he struggled, chisel in hand. Ten years passed. Then on the last night of the last year, under the light of the full moon, the king produced an idol the like of which had not been seen before. It was so lovely that Bhagwan himself decided to enter it before someone else did. The idol came alive. Since the god knew he had struggled so much, he let the king ask for a boon. However, the king said he needed nothing. Nevertheless, the idol told him, not to be in haste in saying 'no' because boons are not given every day. It asked him to come again the next day and let it know the wish. The king told of the happenings to his minister. The minister was evil. He passed it on to king's brothers who were jealous of him. In the morning, the king was found dead, possibly poisoned by his brothers. Devi, his queen, immolated herself on her husband's pyre, prophesying that she would return when her husband returned to the forest. And at her return Chandtola would glow again on moonlit nights. Since Billy's arrival in the village, Chandtola has begun to glow and this shows that Billy is no other than a king.

According to Dhunia, Bilasia is only a wife of this perishable world. It is Devi mata who had been his companion for five thousand years, from one life to another. It is from Devimata he gets his magic. They came to know of his powers only when he sent the tiger away. A tiger had been roaming the jungle for a week killing their cattle. Billy Bhai went into the jungle and spoke to the tiger, and the tiger went away. He also brought his grandson back to life after he had been dead for two hours. Besides, Billy looks after them; he was their priest. To Dhunia, he is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of their kings passed away.

Romi then decided to move to another question that had troubled him ever since his meeting with Billy. The question was why Billy left the civilized world and his people. Dhunia claims that one cannot resist the call of the primitive force one identifies within oneself. This again throws another hint at the extra-subjective force at work in Billy: "When the kala pahar calls you ... there is nothing you can do but go. The first time I heard his drumming I knew the Rock had called him. It is like a woman calling you. You become blind. All you see is the Big Rock. All you hear is its call. Day and night, it calls you... And you go like fish hooked on a string, in spite of yourself, bound hand and foot. There is nothing you can do but go, when kala pahar calls you... the Black Rock is the master of us all." (115)

Romi did not quite know why he was interrogating him. He did not believe a word of what Dhunia said. It seemed no different from the tall tales that he had heard from all and sundry ever since his childhood. What held him to the old man's chatter was a peculiar quality of his narrative. At one level, it was nothing but simple folklore. However, as he listened, he became aware that he was trying to say something else; something to communicate for which man's language was grossly inadequate. Dhunia was trying to tell him of an aspect of Billy Biswas', of which perhaps he himself was vaguely aware. He spoke in a highly musical variation of Chhatisgarhi that gave his narrative that spellbinding intensity that ballads have. As their conversation progressed, Romi thought, he could hear a note of mockery: "So you don't believe me, Collector Sahib... You think you know all that is there is to know. You think you understand life. Just because you can lock a young man up for ten years, you think you understand the laws that govern the universe. By what right do you sit in judgement day after day? Why should Billy Bhai not have kicked the world that inspires you with so much confidence?" (116) Romi asked Dhunia, why the Kala Pahar should call only Billy. To this Dhunia said: "Now Collector Sahib ... it is like asking why a man dies or why at night the stars come out." (117) It was time to preside over the next session of the court. Dhunia was told he could leave and slowly he passed his bony hand

across a heavily wrinkled forehead. Romi sat down and addressed himself to the task for which the civilised world had deputed him and he felt unusually uneasy.

The law and order situation in the district deteriorated rapidly almost from the day of his meeting with Billy. While earlier he had busied himself trying to secure redress for people's grievances, he now ran about here and there, trying to quell a rash of riots that had almost sprung from the withered land. Having to procure relief for them, he was reduced to the one function that a Collector could always perform: keeping the wretched population in its wretched place. His superintendent of police named Rele, discovered much to his pleasure that his training at last was being put to use. There were frequent baton charges and several people were arrested. Romi restrained Rele as much as possible. Yet, he felt harassed by population and let down by his superiors. The district, which had once appeared pleasant, even romantic to him, now filled him with disgust the moment he set out of his bungalow.

The population appeared to him to be an irresponsible, backward mass worthy of worst repression that, under law, Rele could think of. During the course of the day, they had burnt the headman's home, the co-operative store, a water tanker and the local family planning clinic whose existence they had resented on other grounds as well. They even planned to set fire to the police station. He could perceive the brutality of it all, and yet he felt nothing but indifference. He watched without interest as Rele's men stopped conferring and started taking positions. A man had detached himself from the crowd and was advancing towards them. Luckily Romi had his binoculars to his eyes. Observing the gait of a man, he recognised that he was Billy. All of a sudden, he was petrified with fright. Without putting the binoculars down, he cried out to the constable who was almost ready to fire, not to shoot. Billy in his usual style addressed him, "Hello, old chap". Rele could barely contain his astonishment. He hardly expected the visitor to speak such fine English. It was too apparent that Billy was negotiating on behalf of the crowd. It was equally obvious that Rele did not like his negotiation business. They haggled for several hours, and, finally, around nine o' clock, arrived at an agreement. Rele watched sullenly as the siege was lifted. This certainly was not his idea of preserving the authority or dignity of the government. Rele is a typical conformist who given the freedom would act the way he was taught to perform.

Romi was going back to the headquarters, and he offered Billy a lift. At an hour later, they stopped at a dank bungalow and had some tea. It was nearly two hours' drive from his bungalow. This is the point, however, where they were to part, and Billy was planning to cut directly into the hills. However, after tea, Billy asked Romi if he would like to visit a temple near there. He agreed since he wanted to see some more of Billy. Billy gave the driver some instructions. The plain that they were on was an extension of the one that ran across his bungalow, where the other night they had seen the villagers crossing. Occasionally Billy looked at the sky and spoke to the driver. It was sometime before Romi realised what he was doing. "You are not navigating by the stars, are you, I said. What else is there to navigate by, old chap? The drive was no longer than a mile... but I remember getting exceptionally restless and excited during the course of it." (121)

All of a sudden, the temple loomed in the glare of the headlights like an apparition. Romi sat on the edge of the seat and stared until Billy told the driver to stop. The ruin that faced them was not large. As a matter of fact, it looked larger than its size because of the shadows. The moon was nearly halfway to being full. It had just cleared the top of Chandtola, throwing the ruined walls in dark relief. It looked like any other abandoned monument. A very old banyan, its trunk gnarled with age, stood to one side. Fifty thousand years according to the tribal friends of Billy, but only a few hundred really. It is one of those few Indian monuments whose date and sponsor have not yet been definitely ascertained. Billy has a slightly different version of the temple story. The legend says, a king who was a great sculptor himself commissioned it. Artisans built the temple, the carvings, the gopuram, all except the chief idol. The chief idol he wanted to make himself. For ten years, he chiselled at granite imported from all parts of country. Leisurely at first; then, as the work of the temple gathered pace, the fever in his blood rose until from dawn to late in the night, in the light of flares, the young king chiselled at the stone. Deep in the night, the townsmen would sit up in their beds and hear the sound of the chisel against the stone. He forgot to eat, bathe, or rule the kingdom. In the morning when the guards came, they would find him asleep, hugging a column of granite, his cheeks wet with tears. When summer came, he worked without a pause through the heat of the midday sun. The monsoon storms drenched him to the bone, but he refused all shelter. Yet the idol that he wanted to make he could not make. Years went by. The kingdom passed into the hands of his brothers. The king left the palace and lived in a little hut. The king went mad. However, the chiselling went on day and night. Then one night the chiselling ceased. In the morning, the townsmen came and found the young king with the white hair dead. He did not finish the idol. The last piece, the one at whose feet he lay, was exquisite. No artist had ever infused such life in a stone figure or hewn such limbs out of common granite. Nevertheless, the figure had no face. That had always been the trouble. The king could not make the face of his god. That is why the temple never had a main idol. There are as many versions of the story around the place as there are men. In another version, after the completion of the statue, Bhagwan's emissaries are meant to have arrived and carried the king to a place called Kala Pahar. Everybody sticks to his own version, which is just the way it should be.

Romi also wanted to get Billy's version of the tiger story to see if there was something unusual about it. He said that a tiger had been hanging around the jungle for a week, killing cattle and scaring everyone. One afternoon Billy went into the forest for a walk. When he turned the corner, he found the tiger staring him right in the face. It was lolling about sunning itself. He was too taken aback to be scared for it was the handsomest thing he had seen. Billy was especially fascinated by its eyes. Billy stared into its light green eyes and it stared right back into his. After about a half a minute of this, it just got up and went away, wagging his tail. It is true the tiger never came back.

Romi then asked about Dhunia's story of Billy giving life back to the dead grandson. Billy said that the boy was not dead in the first place. A harmless snake had bitten him. He was unconscious when he saw him, though his pulse had slowed down considerably. What he did with the boy was to make a cut near the wound and apply a herb. It was called chaulai in Hindi and *Amarantus Gangeticus*, its botanical name. It just happened that it was the right antidote for that particular poison. Billy had always had an interest in Indian medicinal herbs. During all his expeditions, he had been exploring them, especially those that were meant to cure snakebite and malaria. The gunia, that Dhunia sent him to cure him of Bilasia's love magic, was not a hoax in spite of all his hairy-fairy theories. The year he spent with him, he gleaned a few rather interesting odds and ends about Indian herbs. Later on, he had come to know another person who taught him a few other things.

Billy also revealed to Romi his exceptional regard for Tuula. She had quite an interest in occult, hypnotism, autosuggestion, and so on. He often had the craziest discussions possible with her. Once, she even hypnotised him, although she refused to admit it. Luckily, Tuula's inversion ensured that their emotions never got into the male-female tangle. Such a tangle would have ruined everything. For all her friendliness, she had a way of detaching herself that Billy did not quite like. He had learnt a great deal from her. She was a kind of person that one cannot easily pin down. One either liked her or considered her nutty. She was pretty, good in her job, friendly to some people, markedly to the left in her politics. Beyond this, however, she was very elusive. She never really tried to explain herself, nor did she really care what others thought of her. If she decided to talk of something, she talked without reservations and without batting an eye. That was the thing Billy learned from her. "You speak what you think, and think what you speak, but never bat an eye".(126)

Yet another thing what attracted Billy to her was her total disregard for money. She had quite a simple philosophy, bordering almost on the Hindu beliefs: she believed either that to survive man needs a minimum of goods, which must be given to him by society, or he must receive in exchange to procure them. This minimum, however, is very low, much lower than what people imagine, and, except in times of great calamity, easily available. Once the society or one's own profession ensures the minimum, one should devote all one's energies to the full exploitation of their gifts they are born with, and in the process contribute as much to the society as they can. At times, she could scare the wits out of a person with her recklessness. The search for truth, she believed, was a lonely business. She was aware that one has to be prepared to go it alone if one really wanted to be honest to oneself. Billy said, "You were fortunate if you had companions, if you were understood. It is an old idea, but it is more effective if it comes to you not from a book but from a friend, especially a friend as friendly and gay as Tuula."(127) She had an extraordinary feat of perception. She had sensed what was bothering Billy even when he had only a faint idea of it. The source of her perception lies in her extraordinary intuition, or a sort of sixth sense. Things that one did not know existed, that one could not find words for, go across her in a flash. Then she had the habit of not letting one know that she had seen something unless she was certain that one wanted rally to know.

Billy did not seem to think highly of the city society in Delhi though all city societies are more or less the same. What got on his nerves was the superficiality and here Billy makes a scathing attack on such communities: "I don't think I have ever met a more pompous, a mixed-up lot of people. Artistically, they were dry as dust. Intellectually, they could do no better than mechanically mouth ideas that the west had abandoned a generation ago. Their idea of romance was to go and see an American movie or to go to one of wretched restaurants and dance with their wives to a thirty-year-old tune. Nobody remembered the old songs, or the meaning of the festivals. All the sensuality was gone. So was the poetry. All that was left was loudmouthed women and men in three-piece suits dreaming their little adulteries... The only thing that I could see them worrying about was money... May be it all seemed like that because my own married life so quickly went to pot". (128-9)

Then Billy went on to the subject of his own marriage and to his near frustrated life with Meena. Instead of blaming her, he takes all the blame upon himself. He knew what he was, and he should have known better not to get married in the first place. Besides, Meena was too young to judge him by herself. The marriage was just a consequence of his preoccupation with hallucination. He thought it was alcohol that led to hallucination but soon discovered that the hallucination would occur without any apparent stimulus whatsoever. After he started studying anthropology, the lapses became more frequent. He would read an exciting chapter on one thing or another and, he would be off on a trip. Its duration would be no longer than a

minute or two. It would be like a great blinding flash during which he would be completely unaware of anything else. And invariably it left him with old depressing feeling that something had gone wrong with his life.

He frequently discussed this with Tuula whose advice was that in a very mild form such hallucinations occurred in everyone – all art in a way flowed out of them – but he should not encourage them too much. Then he had a great big whooping dose of it in Acapulco when he had an accident, the one in which he got this scar. He was in a car with Tula. His head was hurt badly and was hospitalised for several days. It was then that hallucination got out of hand, though he enjoyed it each time. Nevertheless, when he came out of it he was very depressed and really shaken up. He was still quite shaken up when his mother introduced Romi to Meena. It had come to be that he had grown terribly afraid of himself. He thought terrible things might happen unless he did something drastic. What with being an Indian and having been brought up in a close-knit family, the only thing he could think of was to get married. It was like taking out insurance on his normalcy. Instead of waiting or simply leaving home, as he should have done, he decided to drag another person into the mess. Within a year, he realized he had committed a blunder. The game he had been playing was the stupidest gamble one could think of.

While they were thus talking, there was a whirlwind and they went to the other side of the temple. They crossed the platform, stepped over a fallen pillar, and entered the outer wall. A little later, they were in complete darkness. Slowly they started across the maze of halls, corridors, and pavilions. They crossed a large hall, which had several pillars, went around an inner room, and entered a short corridor. At the end of the corridor, Romi could once again see the bluish glow of moonlight. The corridor turned abruptly and entered into another platform and they were on the other side of the temple.

Billy told that he had been in the hills around three months when he started to feel guilty about what he had done. He admitted that he had been brutal as far as his family were concerned. He could barely sleep at night. He quarrelled with everyone including Bilasia. Had he not been Dhunia's mahaprasad, he was sure he would have been thrashed up. Finally, he announced that he was going back. No one seemed to mind, but Bilasia was furious. She complained to the elders, and some sort of panchayat was called. It was a most unusual case as far as they were concerned, and, he was told, there were many inconclusive debates. Finally, they decided that he should be allowed to go if he gave a four-day feast for the whole village. Therefore, he gave the feast, and everyone except Bilasia and he had a jolly good time. On the fifth day, he started for Delhi. He sat down in the temple for a bit of rest.

He must have been around for about half an hour, feeling all along a steady ebbing of his excitement, his worries, finally his purpose. He arrived sat down on same stone they were sitting then. Suddenly, his mind went blank. All his willpower drained out of him. He felt as though he was in the presence of Fate and he knew he would never be able to leave these hills alive. This temple, incidentally, is the only one, which was built to Fate. What else but Fate prevented the sculptor-king from carving the face of his god? Billy thus becomes a "site" of conflict between what he decides to do and what he is forced to submit himself to.

His marriage to Meena was just ill conceived and ill fated like the ship, which got smashed up in a gale. Only one chance in a thousand could have saved his marriage. It might have been saved, if Meena had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering. Her upbringing, her ambitions, twenty years of contact with a phoney society – all had ensured that she should not have it. So the more he tried to tell her what was corroding him, bringing him to the edge of despair, the more resentful she became. Whatever Billy said got distorted in her mind. She thought he was complaining against her, which was not the point at all. Within two years of their marriage he knew they were heading for a disaster of some sort. Often he thought it might be averted if she too could have a glimpse of the gathering nightmare. However, he did not succeed and instead he merely convinced her that he was some sort of an ogre or selfish brute at best. Communication between them was reduced to zero. All he wanted was that he should be left alone. What she wanted was promises, dozens of them, all directed to ensure that he would not be left alone. Every now and then, they had great quarrels followed by tearful reconciliations and a few days of peace ending in another flare-up. Things had really reached the breaking point when he undertook that expedition. It was true that he had responsibilities towards her and his son but he felt he had greater responsibilities towards his soul. The institution of marriage here becomes a site of conflict for two contrapuntal forces, which can never stick together in normal terms.

Romi remembered that in one of Billy's last letter Tuula, he had mentioned that he had done something terrible and asked him to elaborate on that. He reiterated that his action was terrible and even that day he would hold himself in contempt for what he did to Rima Kaul. He seduced her. But the more important thing was the way he seduced her and why he seduced her. He used to go to Bombay to help her aunt in running her business. He saw quite lot of Rima on these trips. She lived close to his aunt's place. They were alone quite a lot. As the strain between Meena and Billy increased, he perceived a peculiar turn in his relations with Rima. An element of self-pity started to colour whatever he said to her. He started to play-act. He started to whine at times, to downright lie. He was not doing all that just to sleep with her. She might have done that without all the play-

acting. The point was that he had come to acquire a taste for the shamming for its own sake. This part of the affair is what he liked more than he liked the sex part. He felt happy when he took her, but when she said, "How misunderstood you are, my poor boy. I know how you feel'... It was this I was really looking for".(135) So one afternoon he took her to Juhu. He hired a room in a third-rate hotel, and like any common rogue, he seduced her. After it was over he looked into her clear trusting eyes and he could glimpse his own degradation. He did not love her the way he had pretended to. He continued to behave as before, continued to whine, lie, and sham. He found that he could not stop. He met her three or four times after that. Each time he would determine to be honest with her and with myself. Moreover, each time, he would start to play the part as soon as he got the chance.

One thing that intrigued Romi was what Billy has been doing with himself the past ten years. Dhunia had told him that Billy was their priest. Billy admitted that he was some sort of a priest though they hardly had any religion in the sense the civilised world thought of. He went about doing little things for them. While they were thus talking, something distracted Romi. All of a sudden, he had the feeling that they were not alone. He felt that there was another presence besides them on the darkening platform. It seemed to have come out of the large mass of the temple that lay at Billy's back. He stared off Billy's left shoulder into the black square of the corridor through which they had come. Then he looked around confused. It was still there. It seemed neither good nor evil, but terribly old. "Beware, it seemed to say. There are things the like of you may never know. There are circles within circles and worlds within worlds. Beware where you enter." (138) His feeling was not fear, disgust, or defiance. All at once, he felt terribly tired and felt like leaving.

Situ had joined Romi after the rains, which incidentally, came suddenly at the end of four weeks as Billy had predicted. The rains washed away most of the dirty burden that had nearly broken his back. He was able to relax again. With the coming of the rains, the countryside exploded into a riot of colour. Whenever he went out, he found the people to have undergone a transformation, although nothing much had really changed. It was nearly two months before he saw Billy again. He thought frequently of Billy. It would have been a breach of faith if he had confided in Situ, although several times he came dangerously close to it.

If there was one discordant note in the general orchestration of well-being, it came from the constant ill health that continued to dog Situ. Her migraine had become an agonizing affliction, as unendurable to her as it was depressing for Romi. Altogether, it had acquired a nightmarish quality that neither of them had been equipped to face. Situ would wake up one morning with a harrowing look in her eyes, and both of them would know that she would be writhing in bed before sundown. They avoided looking into each other's eyes and talked of everything on earth except what they really wanted to talk about. What made things worse was the fact that of late her migraine was accompanied by a severe backache towards the end of the spine. It was fortunate that both of their children were at a boarding school in Delhi. It was during one such attacks of Situ's that Billy dropped in at the Collector's Bungalow. Billy came to pay a visit, as all in the town knew the news of her illness. Romi told him she was unwell. At the hospital, there had neither pathedine nor morphia in stock, so Romi sent a man to Jabalpur to get it. In the mean time, she was suffering no end. The man would return only the next day. Having heard all this, Billy suddenly stood up to leave telling Romi that he will be back before midnight. He even refused to have a drink. Romi was rather disappointed that he was leaving soon.

It was nearly half past eleven when he returned. He had been away nearly four hours. Romi greeted him from the veranda where he sat reading the same book. He did not reply. He seemed very serious, even tense. His wiry frame threw a lean shadow as he came across the courtyard. He apparently carried nothing with him, even though Situ later had a different version to tell. Romi again offered him a drink, which he again refused. They chitchatted about this and that, but he could see that his mind was elsewhere. As the minutes ticked by his tension grew visibly. He seemed to be waiting for something. While they sat there, the police station chimed out the midnight hour, and almost immediately, Billy stood up. He asked Romi if he could have a look at Situ. He agreed after a little hesitation. Actually he had been taken by surprise and he did not really think that he should see her.

He led him into her room. She was lying on her back, a white sheet pulled up to her neck. Her face looked purplish in the violet glow of the night light. Now and then, she tossed her head and groaned. Billy stared at her without moving. His face had acquired a tense but distant look. He asked Romi without removing his eyes from her face, almost like a command to leave him alone with her. Romi left the room, picked up the book, and read blindly. Billy came out an hour later. He was neither tense nor serious but very exhausted. He replied to none of his questions, which were numerous. All he said was, he could have a drink. He had a couple of drinks in quick succession and left.

Quite unlike Situ, Romi believed neither in magic nor in the potency of the so-called forest drugs. Nevertheless, the fact remains that when he went into her room after Billy's departure, Situ was sound asleep. She slept all the way until lunch the following day. In the evening when his men returned from Jabalpur with the much-awaited ampoules, she was sitting up and having tea with him. The fact also remains that since that night she had not had a single attack of migraine. She was more or less stunned. That very day she made it clear to Romi that she knew something extraordinary had happened. She knew that someone had been to her room the previous night and that he had given her something to smell as also touched her with a metallic rod. Since then she was persistent, to the point of Romi getting extremely annoyed, in her instance on revealing the identity of the person who cured her. Initially, he tried to give many plausible answers like Dr. Das from the Railway hospital, a local *vaid*, a magician and so on. The same thing happened twice the following day until Romi got annoyed and rebuked her. Her weeping was worse than before, and she went to bed without dinner. There was a lull for two days. Then the inquisition started once again. This time when he refused, she became nearly hysterical as though Romi was conspiring against her until he began to fear that she might have a relapse. So quite afraid and helpless he told her it was Billy. When he said that he saw the look of utter terror in her eyes thinking Billy's ghost haunted her. He related to her the story Billy's disappearance and then he swore her to secrecy.

On three occasions during the following weeks, Situ tried to persuade Romi to write to Billy's father or, at least sound him out whether she could. His reply was always the same. Yet the power of a perverse fate was such that barely three weeks after he had cured Situ, Romi was sitting face to face with Meena and her father-in-law and vehemently denying that he knew anything about Billy Biswas. Romi was sitting in his office one morning when a bedraggled Meena Biswas walked in. She was followed by an even more bedraggled Mr. Biswas. Meena was in a state of extreme excitement. After a few exclamations of general good feeling, she bluntly asked where Billy was. Situ had written to them that she saw Billy. When Romi denied having seen him, Situ interrupted. She related in detail, all that Romi had told her about Billy. She must have written all that in her letter, but both Meena and Mr. Biswas listened again with greedy attention. Therefore, the morning dragged on: the women baffled and weeping by turns; Mr Biswas mostly irritated and silent but quite openly hostile to Romi; and Romi all the time, feeling more harassed than ever. By lunch, Romi saw the hopelessness of his position and changed his stand. He said he knew where Billy was but was not prepared to tell them where he was. Meena watched Romi in silence. She had begun to realise that things were not as simple as Situ might have painted. Romi caught her eye and tried to communicate the situation to her. There were things about Billy that she and Romi only knew. He hoped he could make her understand. With all the passion he could command, he poured his message into them: Billy's great struggle; the frightening prospects of pursuit; and, finally, a plea for mercy. Meena stared back. Then she turned away. She had understood but was not prepared to give in.

Deliberately exaggerating Billy's feelings, Romi told them that he did not want them to know where he was because he hated both Mr. Biswas and Meena. There was no other way of deflecting them from the terrible course they had embarked upon. These statements stunned them to silence but not for very long. Then Meena argued back that he would come back for his son. Romi was forced to throw a bombshell of information that Billy had a wife and children there. It was followed not by silence, but by a long tirade from Meena. Her tongue had at last had come into its own. Her effort was directed first at proving that no such thing as a second wife existed and secondly, at the wife itself. Her vituperation, springing from a deep hurt, was astounding. Nearly hysterical, she was shouting at the top of her voice. Her words came so fast and thick that it was impossible to contradict her. What she implied, in short, was that Romi had cooked up this cock and bull story for some mysterious motives of his own.

Over lunch Romi started to tell them what had led Billy to this drastic break in his life. He told them about that incident of his boyhood, about Tuula, about their walk in Simla, and about their conversation in ruined temple. He had told them why Billy had decided to marry, realising in less than six months that it was a blunder; and how for four years he drifted between hope and despair trying his best to adjust to the life into which, for lack of a better understanding and a momentary surrender to convention, he had carelessly slipped. He told him about his desperate struggle with himself and his final breakdown. He tried to make them see from Billy's eyes, at Bilasia, at the forest and the silence of the Maikala Hills. Romi told them how high he was held by the tribal people and how he obviously was engaged in some spiritual pursuit. When Romi told them about Rima Kaul episode, colour faded from Meena's face. She looked shattered. It was clearly all news to her. He informed them that she died in an accident about eight years ago.

Romi was frantically trying to tell them something. He realised half way that he are not succeeding at all. They listened to him with attention and in silence, but it was obvious from their faces that for every evidence of Billy's strange life that he provided them, they immediately invented two to explain it away. They converted the story of Billy Biswas into a stereotype childish escapade, which was all that their ordinary minds were capable of. The whole story of Billy's surrender to his own life-force or *Urkraft* was converted into a conformist narrative by Meena.

What Meena said was like this. Billy had probably done something undesirable on a momentary impulse. Probably he did not have the courage to face his family. He might even have done it under duress. All along, he had wanted to go back to them but was not sure how he would be received. "Little does he know... that we would have forgiven anything, anything". (148) Probably, they explained, Billy was hanging about Bilasia because he must have felt he could not go back to them. Once they meet him, all will be well. Meena screamed suddenly, "You just don't want him to be happy. You are selfish and rotten." (148) Mr. Biswas also came up with his argument: "We are not going to drag him up to Delhi by force. He is not a child... All we ask is that we should see him once". (148) Romi felt it was odd that within hours of meeting Billy's people, who he cared for as much as he cared for his own family, they had nearly come to blows.

During teatime as Romi poured him a cup of tea, Biswas said, "I am like your father. You must try to help me. I must see my son. I will die on your doorstep if you don't let me see my son" (149). Finally Biwas said that he had no other option but to go to the Chief Secretary and request him to order Romi to find his son. Romi realised that the entire authority of the government would be brought against the hapless Billy. His mind agitated feverishly against the new net that was thrown over both Billy and himself. Romi once again repeated that such a course would lead to disaster. That night he went to see him off the station. He was deeply touched when he saw him hobble down the deserted platform looking at the coaches. It was the wistful hope of seeing his son again that provided him with the will and energy to travel such a long and arduous distance.

The next day he receives a call from the Chief Secretary asking him to help Mr. Biswas find his son. Initially he protested, later he begged him not to proceed with it, and at the end, he threatened to resign from the Collectorship. The Chief Secretary was furious and he called Rele the Superintendent of Police to do the needful. Over the phone, Mr. Biswas started to describe his son, his height, his colour, his approximate height and so on. Romi knew that all those indications have changed except the height. But Mr. Biswas was a man of intelligence and he had been a judge and he knew just what was to be emphasised. He told Rele, "You must make a point of this... He speaks English with a very pronounced accent, as a matter of fact. You can't miss him if you hear him speak." (152) Almost immediately Rele caught on and Romi knew the game was up.

That same evening Rele dispatched a police party of three constables to bring Billy Biswas home. Romi's emotions had reached the breaking point and he did not speak to the ladies. The next morning Mr. Biswas returned and came straight to Romi's Office and apologized for what he did. Before he could reply, he received a phone call from Rele informing him that one of the constables was killed and probably speared to death by Billy himself. He also said that he was going to the hills himself taking the armed police with him.

Romi had no idea of what was going to happen or what Rele proposed to do. He did not trust Rele and his men. Romi was the Collector of the district and he could not possibly sit around while this strange search took place. He decided to join them. Romi was just in time to catch Rele who was getting into his jeep with a surly havildar with a stengun at his lap. Rele was both surprised and puzzled, and did not like Romi's intervention. "It is not that he resented me; the fool was only afraid that I might split with him some of the glory that might accrue for hauling Billy in." (154)

The road leading to the hills was narrow, eroded heavily at the edges. They reached the edge of the forest. The road wound through the string of little villages that precariously cling to the base of the hills like a girdle of brown-green beads. They are neither tribal nor non-tribal but hang perpetually in that uncertain world that lies in between. Mostly they are little trading centres where primitive denizens of the mountains periodically descend to look at the bright glossy face of society and, in exchange of their forest produce, take back such tawdry nick-nacks of civilisation as may happen to momentarily please their fancy. Knots of men, women, and children greeted them at each village as though they were part of a grand procession whose itinerary had already been announced. At one point, they had tea. At another, Rele had a longish discussion with some old men about the best route to Billy's hamlet in the light of the rather impassable condition of the road. The incident of the constable's death was by now quite well known, and everyone Rele questioned made haste to assure them of the necessary support. When they proceeded further, Rele asked Romi, "What is he to you, if I may ask?"... "You won't understand, Rele. But that is beside the point. I am not here because he is something or the other to me personally. I am here because I think that man's position is being grossly misunderstood; because his freedom is threatened... By his father, his wife, my wife, by the so-called organized, civilized society and its instruments, by the people like you and the Chief Secretary, by that awful squad of armed police, by the old men you just spoke to." (156) Rele insisted that he was only trying to do his duty. Romi retorted that such an excuse is often a common enough reason for such witch-hunts. Rele defended his position by saying that the armed police were only a standby as they had a casualty.

Rele appeared a little petulant. He was younger to Romi by five years and had seen little of the world. He was much too keen to do the bidding of his superiors and in every sense an emissary of the world of conformists. He was probably going to make a very good police officer. At the moment, however, he hardly had the faintest idea of what he was doing. Rele was put out by Romi's remarks, that he was threatening Billy without understanding his position. They did not speak much after that.

The road rose sharply for half an hour, reached the top, then started to descend ending abruptly in a mountain stream that gushed by in the narrow valley, which separated it from the next row of hills. It was this very valley, a few miles to the south that the village where Romi had first met Billy lay. A dark, damp footpath rose, winding snakelike along the side of the hill. That was the path that Billy had led them on in search of water on that scorched day. The heat was gone, so were the aridity and the blinding light. It all seemed terribly long ago to Romi. As they stepped out of the jeep and stared about, he became aware of the childish longing within him that some insurmountable obstacle would somehow arise and put a stop to the senseless hunt. Harassed by Billy's family, unable to make the Chief Secretary understand, he had never been in lower spirits. If he felt helpless, Rele certainly was very much on top of the job.

At one point of the journey, they began crossing a stream no deeper than a foot by jeep. It was after they had cleared the stream and the front wheels were already on solid ground on the other side that the rear wheels sank into a pit of loose sand. Its chassis tilted at an angle, the jeep madly spun its rear wheels. All except the driver got out. The surly havildar swore and started to dump pebbles under the tyres. The havildar let lose a stream of filthy invective that surprised and annoyed me. Speaking like that in the presence of the Superintendent of Police and the District Collector was absolutely unheard of. Rele asked Romi to spare him, as he was the cousin of the constable who was speared.

The approach to the second hill was even steeper. The underpinning of the road had been greatly weakened resulting in the wide fissures on the metalled surface. Then we went around a hairpin bend, and quite unexpectedly, Rele called for a halt. The jeep came to a standstill. There was a little clearing on the side of the road. Except the four of them, there was no sign of life. Romi alighted and walked towards the clearing. He looked down into the valley. The stream where we had been stuck was only a fine line of silver shining in the sunlight. He looked to the right and to the left. And there, staring him in the face, was Chandtola, the grim chalk-white granite face that on moonlit nights dominated the bastions of civilization from where they had come.

A new mood took hold of him. He realised that for the first time he was face to face with Billy's world. Here was the jungle that had wrought in him such magical change. Through those chaotic daubs of green and brown and black, a million eyes, watched them, eyes that belonged to that living world that was not human and that perpetually threatened to swallow man's piteous principalities. He felt as though the presence that he had felt in the temple and night had crept upon him again, and quite suddenly, he was afraid. He was afraid not of the bizarre unintelligibility of Billy's world but of what may happen when, like shield against a sword, it clashed with the havilar, the pose of armed police; in brief, with all that they stood for.

The truck arrived half an hour later, and almost immediately, they started through the forest. What struck him was that even though they were hardly a couple of miles away from the road, it looked as though they were in a different world all together. The surly havildar with two constables led the way. Around three in the afternoon, they came upon Billy's village. It was a cluster of twenty odd mud huts erected around an oblong clearing. In the middle of the clearing stood a very tall bamboo pole supported by three shorter ones. At the top of the pole flew a triangular saffron flag. I knew it was Billy's village without Rele telling him, because the first person he saw was Billy's son. He also knew that somehow, word regarding their party had already reached Billy and that he was gone. Neither Rele nor his havildar had realised this. They deployed the armed police to encircle the village. Romi told Rele that Billy was not there. What Romi wanted to do most of all was to meet Bilasia. It had been obvious to him for some time that the only hope of resolving the crisis lay through her.

The boy looked up at Romi steadfastly as he approached him. He appeared to Romi a young replica of Billy: proud, intelligent, and unflinchingly brave. Remarkably for his age, he appeared to recognise Romi. He learned from the boy that Billy was not at home and he asked the boy to take him to his mother. After some hesitation, he started to move towards the centre of the village. As he followed, Rele fell in step with him. He told Rele he would rather see his wife alone. When he started to remind him of the Chief Secretary's orders, Romi said, "Hell with the Chief Secretary, Rele. I am the Collector of this wretched district, and I am ordering you and your men to stay out of this village until I tell you otherwise. For God's sake, don't create a greater mess than what already exists" (161)

His first meeting lasted barely thirty minutes. He was to see her again under circumstances that were anything ordinary during the night and the following morning. It might be the fact that he knew what she had meant to Billy, or it might be the traumatic impact of the events, the fact remains that he would never be able to forget her. As he looked at her from the doorway of the hut, his back to the declining sun, Romi was reminded of that passage that Billy had once written to Tuula: "A strange woman keeps crossing my dreams. I have seen her on the streets of Delhi, nursing a child in the shade of a tree or hauling stone for a rich man's house. I have seen her buying bangles at a fair. I have seen her shadow at a tribal dance, and I have seen her, pensive and inviolable, her clothes clinging to her wet body, beside a tank in Banares ... Yes, this woman keeps crossing my dreams causing in me a fearful disturbance, the full meaning of which I have yet to understand". (162) Romi was certain Bilasia did not move Romi as she must have moved Billy. But as he stepped forward, he had

the distinct feeling that he was facing not merely a human being but also "the embodiment of the primal and invulnerable force that had ruled these hills, perhaps this earth, since time began that, our proud claims to the contrary, still lay in wait for us not far from the doorstep of our air-conditioned rooms ." (162) She looked at Romi, still as a rock, her left hand resting on the head of her younger child who tugged at her lugra staring at Romi all the while out of large black eyes. Romi introduced himself as an old friend of her husband. Her reply was quick and thought provoking, "Where you come from my husband had no friends". When he said he wanted to see her husband immediately, she questioned him on the purpose of his visit. Romi was almost prepared to reply, and then, quite to his surprise, he discovered that he had no answer. Therefore, he turned my eyes away. The conversation that followed this initial encounter reveals much of Bilasia's strength of character:

'I know you have come to take him away'.

'That is not true'

'What have you come for then?'

Once again, I was without an answer. Behind me I could hear a crowd gathering around the door.

'He used to say you had a heart of gold (*some ka dil*) clear as the water of our fall. Why don't you say what is in your mind?'

I remained silent, looking at the child. Suddenly she pushed him forward.

'Here, put our hand on my son's head and say you will not take him away'. (163)

Romi said that he had come to explain something to him and that he may even have to take him with him for a day or two. He told him that his wife and father have come from Delhi to meet him. He affirmed that all he wanted was, he should go back with him and tell his people that he didn't want to be with them anymore. He warned her that something bad could happen, If he did not agree. Then she cried that she knew how it was going to end and then collapsed on the floor with a series of violent sobs raking her body. Her younger child started to howl, too. The older boy looked on grimly. A hush fell on the crowd behind Romi. He stepped forward and touched her shoulder. "Don't touch me," she screamed. An old woman now stepped out of the crowd pouring out a libation of curses. She took Bilasia's head in her lap, and presently she quietened down. She sat up against the wall, her chest continuing to heave.

Suddenly he was startled by the strident voice of the havildar heard in the distance. Romi was desperate and wanted her to respond to him quickly:

'Tell me where Billy is,' I cried hoarsely... I give you my word no harm will come to him...'

' You and your word. Was it not you who promised him you would not tell anyone that you had met him'...

'You don't understand. I could not help it... You are like my sister. You must not think I want to trick you...'

His attention was diverted by another order. The constables had more or less crossed the yard. Rele came in at the end saying that they have information that Billy is in an area about two miles east of that place. He bluntly told Romi that they are going there to get him. He meant to follow the special instruction of the Chief Secretary rather than the Collector's biddings. Romi recalled the instructions that Mr. Biswas himself many years earlier. He had advised Romi never to displease his boss and never let the police get an upper hand. It was one of those ironies of fate that this was precisely what Mr. Biswas had managed to achieve by his visit to the Chief Secretary. It is obvious that it was Rele and not Romi who was in command.

Romi could observe that the constables fanned out along the base of the hill, while the havildar issued orders in quick succession. He had no idea what they intended to do. Every few steps Romi stopped and shouted at the top of my voice: "Come back, Billy. Come back. I want to talk to you." The path along the hillside ran in a spiral. Romi was in the last loop gloomily wondering what was to be done next, when he heard the short quick burst of the stengun. Everyone was clustered around this edge of the bridge. The very near the far end Billy, a spear in hand, zigzagged across the narrow gangway as though drunk. Romi ran after him. Before he reached him, Billy had collapsed. He lay on his back, the blood spouting from his chest in time to his heartbeats and dripping into the gorge below. "Billy," Romi cried. "Billy". He opened his fast-glazing eyes for a moment and appeared to look at Romi. "You bastards", (167) he said hoarsely and died.

Rele's training not seasoned by experience and wisdom could not have resulted in anything different. Just when Rele's men were about to start combing the hill in search of Billy, he had dashed out of a recess in the mountain and made a run for the rope bridge. As he tried to break the police cordon, one of the constables tried to stop him. With a quickness that took everyone unawares, Billy knocked him cold with the wrong end of the spear. When others tried to tackle him, he threatened them as well. He was halfway down the bridge when

havildar opened up with the sten-gun. His intention, he said afterwards, was to hit him in the leg and incapacitate him. He also maintained that Rele had only told him that the man had to be somehow taken back. Besides, he had no idea who Billy was.

Rele and Romi lifted him. His blood covered their hands and soaked their clothes. A little later, the havildar lent a hand. Rele looked greatly perturbed. He had difficulty holding Billy out of sheer nervousness. The havildar looked dumbfounded. At one point, Rele, in almost hysterical despair, shouted at the havildar: "Who told you to fire? Who told you to take things into your own hands?... I am going to have you arrested for murder, do you hear? His father is a governor, do you know that?... 'I don't know who he was. You never told me, sir, who he was.'" (168) This only irritated Rele. He was about to scream some more when Romi told them to stop shouting over a dead man.

It was late evening when they carried him back to the village. The news once again preceded us. A mile this side of the village they were met by a crowd of silent men. Bilasia, whom Romi dreaded to meet, was not among them. She waited for them in her hut. She had undone her hair and thrown away her bangles. She was entirely composed until she saw Billy's body. Then she let out a wail that was more like a roar of an enraged gale than the cry of mortal men. "I told you not to go", she wailed, flinging herself on his body. "I told you not to go". (169) The boy too young to understand looked on, bewildered. Bilasia ignored Romi completely. He sat down on the rock outside her doorway, feeling very weary and sad. Several times Rele tried to speak to him, but he waved him away. The wailing went on. The crowds swelled, thinned, and swelled again. They were mostly from his own village. At one point, an old man said to a younger one: 'Go tell them Bhैया is dead'. (169)

At midnight, the character of the crowds started to change. Dark, semi-naked tribal people started to pour in from other villages probably from the deep interior. Crowds gathered outside Billy's hut. Romi moved and went to the end of the square. Then the square also filled and overflowed so that heads could be seen bobbing in the night as far as the eye could see. Gradually it dawned upon them that what they had killed was not a man, not even the son of a 'Governor', but someone for whom their civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though they had killed one of the numerous man-gods of the primitive pantheon. Dhunia was indeed speaking the truth when he said, "He is like rain on parched lands, like balm on a wound. These hills have not seen the like of him since the last of our kings passed away". (169)

During the night, the question arose as to what was to be done with Billy's body:

'Should we take it back with us?' Rele asked.

'It depends on Bilasia.'

'But his wife is down there.'

'Bilasia is his wife, as far as I am concerned.'

'There will have to be a post-mortem.'

'Try and see if they will let you.' (170)

With the first light of dawn they took him to the edge of the gorge and made him a pyre of the forest wood. His son set it on fire. The wood was wet but it burned for him, consuming him, reducing him to ashes. In the afternoon, they gathered his ashes and Romi put a handful in a pot. That was all of Billy Biswas that they were destined to take back. Before starting, Romi asked Bilasia if she and her sons would like to come back with him. She looked puzzled. She said, "The forest has looked after me until now. The forest will look after me for what little remains of my life". Then she turned and looked at her elder son and said, "He is young and clever like his father. He will make a mark on these hills." Romi knew they would suffer from hunger and oppression, and from privations, they in Delhi had not even heard of, but he could not say anything more.

Just as they were leaving, Dhunia emerged from the crowds. He had hastened overnight but had arrived too late for the funeral. He stood before him with folded hands, tears running down his withered cheeks. His eyes were bleary so that Romi wondered if he could see him properly. "So you killed him Collector sahib," he sobbed. "You are our mother and our father, and you killed him. But Bhagwan sees all. He will see that justice is done". (170) Romi admitted that there was a great mistake and then left the place.

It was midnight when Romi reached his bungalow. They all rushed out on the veranda at the sound of his footsteps. Meena rushed forward and started to take hold of his hands. She stumbled at the sight of the pot. Unable to tear her eyes from the pot, she cried out, "Where is Billy?" Remaining calm, he said that Rele's men shot him dead. Then raising the pot to her eye level, he asked her to take it as it holds Billy's ashes. Situ came forward and put her arm around Meena. The two women stared at him through terrified eyes. He put the pot on the side of the table. Billy's life had to end before Meena could finally have "a glimpse of the phantoms that had driven Billy out of her life and now out of this world". (171)

For two days, Meena and Mr Biswas alternated between a crushing gloom and a state of perplexity. At other times, Meena was sunk in a sorrow that was no less profound than Bilasia's. One night, for several hours, she described the details of their courtship in Simla. While Situ cried, Biswas and Romi listened, greatly moved. Romi felt like saying many harsh things but he restrained himself. Once, while he stood alone in the veranda, Biswas came up and said in his halting but diffident voice: "You must forgive me, Romesh... I don't know what came over me. I had loved him so much. He was our only child." (172) On the third day they left.

Romi sent a brief report on Billy's death. He felt there is no point in saying things of which none would have understood. The strange case of Billy Biswas had thus been disposed of. "It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers. Sitting there, watching the shades of evening settle slowly on the drab little town, it seemed to me that nothing but blind blundering vengeance, howsoever camouflaged, awaits all those who dare to step out of its stifling confines. It is a confrontation whose outcome is as certain as the end of a solitary boats beating against a maelstrom." (172) Billy must have been aware of all this when he for the first time stepped out of the sanctuary of the great god of the primitive world. This world had until then guarded him as his own. He also must have been aware of the impossibility of saving men from themselves in the world that he had abandoned. The absolute power of society disciplines its subjects through the imposition of conformity. For Romi, this made his end unbearably tragic.

There was no mention of Billy's death in any of the papers that only ten years earlier had made such a capital out of his disappearance. There was much talk in the town as might have been expected. One day the drooling old advocate came to see Romi and said. "This is a strange place...These hills do strange things to some men. But your friend was a Prince, Ah yes, ... he was no ordinary man". (173) The surly havildar was suspended and asked to face a court of enquiry. However, before the court could assemble, he was one fine morning found dead in a ditch, with a poisoned dagger in his side. Rele was transferred. A few years later Romi too was transferred. Before he left the district for good, he decided to make one final visit to the hills. They took the same route as they had done that fateful day. He stopped at the same dark bungalow and the same ridge. They arrived at the village in the early afternoon. A high sun warmed the mud huts. Except for an old man sitting on a cot, the village square was deserted. The saffron flag flew on the bamboo pole. Romi made for the hut. Its door stood ajar. It was empty except for a pile of three round stones daubed in Vermilion at one end. A few grains of rice clung to their smooth surface. He stared at the stones. The old man said, "It is a shrine to Billy Bhai"(174). Romi stayed in the hut a while longer. Billy's wife and children have gone away with her uncle. He paid a visit to the bridge. He walked over to the spot where Billy had fallen but time had already erased all evidence of the great tragedy. Romi's driver had learned from the old man that it was Dhunia who had killed the havildar. After Billy's death there was a rumour that Chandtola had ceased to glow. However, the old man claims, Chandtola started to glow again after the havildar met his end. For Romi there was nothing more to be done except to finish what remained of the packing.

II. Conclusion

Ample textual evidences shown above prove how concepts *Urkraft*, "Social Conformity" and "Site" constitute the plot structure. It may be important at this point to make general assertions on the appropriate ambience where "*urkraft*" thrives. It is a fact that the more we rely ourselves on technology and information, the less we tend to tap this source of unspeakable strength we all possess. The social safety mechanism, which the society has developed in the course of history, has removed almost all immediate threats that have been a part of everyday living. Human development has always been measured to the extent it can make our lives better, safer, more comfortable and pleasant. We cannot claim we have reached an apex point of this process with no more natural adversities to conquer but we are certainly on the comfort zone. We already have everything we could possibly need: food, shelter, clothing, security from wild animals and so on. Therefore, we turn to the last step of Maslow's hierarchy of needs: self-actualization. Some seek it in entertainment, others in sex, some in status, a few others in drugs, and quite a number of people in games and sports. However, some, the rare few, who consider the above popular understanding of human development as a case of deterioration of basic human faculties, strive towards self-actualisation by getting back to the roots, to the primitive existence. Billy Biswas chose to abandon the comfort zone of the so-called civilized world of Delhi and to live more fully in the primitive mode existence in which he experienced real pleasure. It is true that the experience of pleasure is subjective and different individuals will experience different kinds and amounts of pleasure in the same situation. His awakening to the primordial force in early childhood as he visited Bhubaneswar and the temple at Konarak gave him a positive feedback mechanism motivating him to recreate it in similar situation in future. Later in life, his encounter with Tula Lindgren and Dhunia reinforced his desire to be engulfed by this force. His identification with the Harlem symbolizes his courage and conviction in choosing to be isolated from the common run of humanity of the civilized society where man is drawn into the world of objects. The confusion and compromises lead into intense suffering. He felt a gap of communication between his father and himself, his wife and himself and the society around him. His letters to Tuula confirmed his confusion, boredom and

meaningless existence. "It is days before I can shake off the sounds and smells of the forest" (96) The pleasure he experienced in the world of tribal people then was not just in the satisfaction of biological drives. This was more associated with social experiences and social drives such as the experience of accomplishment, recognition, and service. "Urkraft" has lot to do with the consciousness of ourselves, which drives us about a world. His peaceful tribal life indicated remarkable change in contrast to his earlier restlessness. All the process of becoming a tribal was for him a quest for something beyond oneself. It was not escape from order and form into reckless freedom and wilderness that we see in his life. As a tribal he reveals a different kind of order and form. He became a priest, magician, and mystical king of hearts of tribal people. He was happy living with the people who are closer to the elements and ways of nature.

The "urkraft" can be dangerous in many ways. We may make some subjective assumptions of its impact in world history: the Roman generals must have cursed it as they stood against the ferocious hordes of Picts, Celts, Gauls and Germanians; the Persian emperor Xerxes possibly cursed it as he could not enter the pass of Thermopylae with the greatest army, the world had ever seen due to a few thousand Greeks armed with skill, courage and Urkraft; the medieval noblemen of Europe must have cursed it as their peasants rebelled against high taxes or other injustices, and so on. However, in the end, the despots, Emperors and Kings had their victory. They managed to snuff out, strangle, and suppress the Urkraft for good in all of modern societies. There could be two major reasons for their success, namely technological advances and social insularity of communities and religious groups. For instance, when technological advances such as firearms and industry started to appear, then the power of the ruling and owning elite turned ultimate and irreversible. Most meta-narratives and social systems ensured conformity in their members by creating an exclusive ensemble of docile bodies pertaining to each system. In the novel, we find that the society of Delhi which included Mr. Biswas, Meena and the numerous agents of establishments tried to tame the primitive in Billy Biswas. Billy was the site of conflict for these two contrary forces to fight and resolve their differences.

Getting back to history again, we find feudal lords and religious hierarchies until modern day governments have very thoroughly succeeded in uprooting and suppressing one of the most central aspects of being human. Hence, there is an urgent need for humans today to go to any length in order to be exposed to the primal inner strength. Moreover, in order to do so in a modern society, one possibly would need to undertake two significant measures. Firstly, the everyday lives of ours could be so arranged that we get to express "urkraft" in at least a controlled and simulative environment. For instance, some might get strength through training in the gym and Martial arts. "urkraft" has been like a snorkel of fresh air under fathoms of the heavy waters of civilization. "urkraft" has many shared properties with the sex-drive, for instance; the saying Use it or lose it goes well with it. If one's body and brain never has to use "urkraft" in everyday life, this faculty is likely to be degraded. Romi in the novel is placed in a peculiar situation. He appreciated Billy in his courage to risk all to the realisation of the inner force but Romi does not want to involve himself fully. He limits his pleasure merely to the intellectual gaze he had into Billy's life like the most educated lot of our society.

As mentioned before, the fact that we have everything we need at an arm's length, it domesticates and softens us. In order to meet reality and humanity we need to shed off those comforts. This can be done in a variety of degrees but does not have to be that extreme in order to get an effect. Risk heat, shelter and security then you will love it, risk being crushed in the ring, then you will be euphoric for standing on your two feet at the end, victorious. The ancient peoples of the world, who faced much larger risks and often lived a life close to death, enjoyed the benefits of this power more satisfactorily than people of the postmodern society. Every second must have been made the more valuable by certain consciousness of the risk involved, and so, every moment of passion or strength possibly cherished as their last. In the novel, we find that Billy Biswas lived a fuller life than most other characters including the tribal people like Dhunia or Bilasia. Billy tried to affirm his faith and belief in the people whom his modern society called the savage or the uncivilized. Every moment of Billy's life with the primitive people was lived out more fully owing to Billy's brinkmanship which involved unattainability of the life he so much desired and impossibility of totally escaping from a world that had bred him in his younger days.

Having discussed more than what is necessary on the concept of "urkraft", readers shouldn't get the impression that fiction to Joshi, is either a source of entertainment or an instrument for publicizing some set of ideas. His genius is not for propagating any political or social creed or escapism from human endeavours and seeking resort in imaginary places as R.K. Narayan did. His novels are essentially attempts towards a better understanding of the world and of himself, and generally provide an insight into how best we can live in the world around us. If he had not written, he would have used some other medium to carry on his exploration. As Martin Esslin would say "... for the artist the compulsion to express his intuition of the world is a condition of his very existence". (Esslin) Hence, we see that Joshi's venture into writing is an inborn call to express his ideals just like a liberal humanist who is not politically radical and hence generally evasive and non-committal on political issues. Joshi cannot be labelled as Marxist, feminist, theoretical but can be showcased as a believer in human nature endowed with a timeless and universal significance.

Not all of us are unaware of the fact that life today has become alarmingly insecure. The industrial revolution, the race for armaments, large scale manufacture of nuclear weapons and the greed of political tycoons and straws have shaken the very foundation of human existence. As civilization has advanced, culture and tradition of ours has disgracefully declined. Despair and a sense of alienation have haunted the sensitive souls. In this sense, the novel provides a reader with an opportunity to think that this is his story and he consciously or unconsciously is reading his/her own life. The readers develop the faith that they too are sailing in the same boat; they too are misunderstood and a sense of loss of belonging haunts them too.

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