
Billy Biswas as a Rebel against Modern Society: A Study of Alienation, Cultural Discontent, and Anti Materialist Resistance in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

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Abstract

Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* presents a compelling critique of modern civilization through the character of Billy Biswas, whose radical rejection of urban middle class values becomes the central narrative conflict. Billy's transformation from a privileged, Western educated elite into a self chosen outsider reveals a sustained rebellion against the ideological foundations of modern society, including materialism, bureaucratic conformity, and the suppression of spiritual impulses. This article argues that Billy Biswas functions as a modern rebel not through political activism but through existential refusal. His rebellion is grounded in an intense inner discontent that exposes the hollowness of modern progress and the violent denial of alternative modes of being. By examining Billy's alienation, psychological restlessness, and eventual withdrawal into tribal space, the paper demonstrates that Joshi constructs rebellion as a critique of modernity's moral emptiness and cultural alienation. The study situates Billy's revolt within frameworks of existentialism, postcolonial cultural conflict, and the modern individual's crisis of identity. Ultimately, Billy's rejection of modern society represents a tragic yet meaningful resistance, suggesting that modernity fails to address the deeper human need for authenticity, belonging, and spiritual wholeness.

Keywords: Arun Joshi, Billy Biswas, rebellion, modernity, alienation, materialism, tribal space, existential crisis

Introduction

Arun Joshi occupies a distinctive position in Indian English fiction due to his sustained engagement with the psychological and moral crises of the post independence Indian middle class. Unlike narratives that merely record social changes, Joshi's novels interrogate the cost of modernization by examining the loss of authenticity in the modern self. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is widely recognized as Joshi's most provocative novel because it dramatizes a total rejection of modern society through a protagonist who abandons privilege, education, and urban status in pursuit of an alternative existential truth.

Billy Biswas represents the postcolonial subject shaped by modern institutions but internally haunted by an irreconcilable desire for meaning beyond capitalist and bureaucratic order. The novel traces his movement from elite spaces of education and government service into tribal life, a transition that appears irrational to the modern world but gradually reveals its philosophical and emotional logic. Billy's refusal to participate in modern society becomes an act of rebellion that challenges the idea of progress as inherently desirable.

Research Gap and Research Questions

Many readings of the novel focus on themes of primitivism and civilization, or interpret Billy's escape as psychological breakdown. However, a research gap remains in examining Billy's rejection specifically as rebellion against modernity's ideological structure. Billy is not merely escaping from personal trauma; he is refusing an entire cultural and economic system built on conformity, consumption, and institutional control. This article addresses that gap by arguing that Billy Biswas embodies rebellion as existential refusal, exposing the violence and emptiness embedded in modern social order.

Research Questions: (1) In what ways does Billy Biswas embody rebellion against modern society? (2) How does modern society appear as spiritually bankrupt and culturally oppressive in the novel? (3) Why does Billy's rebellion take the form of withdrawal rather than reform? (4) What does Billy's choice suggest about the limits of modern progress and identity?

Thesis Statement: This article argues that Billy Biswas represents a rebel against modern society through his rejection of materialism, bureaucratic conformity,

and Western rationalist identity, and that his movement into tribal space constitutes a symbolic and existential resistance to modernity's moral emptiness.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Framework

The study adopts qualitative close reading as its primary method, focusing on character formation, narrative description, and symbolic oppositions between modern urban society and tribal life. The analysis employs three interrelated theoretical frames: (1) Existentialist thought (alienation, authenticity, refusal of inauthentic living), (2) Postcolonial cultural critique (conflict between indigenous identity and Westernized modernity), and (3) Modernity criticism (materialism, institutional discipline, and consumer ideology). By integrating these frameworks, the article evaluates Billy's rejection not as escapism but as rebellion shaped by ethical and existential questioning. The approach emphasizes how rebellion operates culturally and psychologically in the novel.

3. Discussion

3.1 Billy Biswas and the Crisis of Modern Identity

Billy Biswas is introduced as a man of privilege and promise. His social location places him at the center of modern success: education, global exposure, and elite networks. Yet the narrative reveals that modern identity does not provide inner stability. Instead, Billy experiences intense dissatisfaction. Joshi portrays him as a subject who cannot be contained within modern definitions of success. Modern society constructs identity through career, status, and consumption, but Billy refuses these categories, suggesting that identity cannot be manufactured through social approval.

Billy's crisis is not superficial. It is rooted in the realization that modern living demands conformity at the cost of inner truth. His discomfort reveals that rebellion begins as internal resistance: a refusal to accept modernity's promise that material progress equals fulfillment. Billy's dissatisfaction represents a deeper philosophical crisis, exposing the gap between external success and inner meaning.

3.2 Rejection of Materialism: Rebellion against Consumer Modernity

Materialism is one of the central values Billy rejects. Modern society is portrayed as obsessed with property, money, and social display. Billy's alienation grows precisely because the modern world measures worth through possession. Joshi uses Billy to critique the middle class ideology of accumulation, where life becomes a race for comfort rather than a search for truth.

Billy's rebellion is therefore anti materialist. He refuses to treat life as economic advancement. His rejection exposes a moral contradiction in modern society: it celebrates freedom yet enslaves individuals to consumption. Billy's withdrawal becomes a refusal to participate in this disguised slavery. His rebellion challenges the modern myth that economic success equals human progress.

3.3 Opposition to Bureaucratic Life and Institutional Control

Billy's career in government service symbolizes modern institutional power. The bureaucratic system represents regulation, discipline, and the reduction of human life into files and procedures. Billy's rejection of this world signals his rebellion against institutional control. Joshi presents bureaucracy as a cultural machine that destroys individuality by rewarding obedience.

Billy refuses to become an efficient part of this machine. His rebellion exposes that modern institutions do not nurture the human spirit; they standardize it. His inability to adjust is often misunderstood as instability, but Joshi suggests it is a form of insight. Billy recognizes that modern institutions demand surrender of authenticity, and his refusal is therefore ethical.

3.4 Civilization versus Tribal Space: Cultural Discontent and Alternative Belonging

A major symbolic structure in the novel is the contrast between civilization and tribal life. Modern society views tribal space as backward, irrational, and uncivilized. However, Joshi reverses this hierarchy. In the tribal world, Billy discovers belonging, immediacy, and spiritual meaning. Tribal life represents a mode of existence not governed by capitalist competition.

Billy's movement into tribal life is rebellion because it rejects the superiority of modern civilization. He refuses to accept the modern myth that tribal cultures are inferior. By living among tribal people, Billy challenges modern society's arrogance. His rebellion becomes a postcolonial critique: the colonized world and its indigenous cultures possess values that modernity has destroyed.

3.5 Billy's Rebellion as Existential Refusal

Billy is not a political revolutionary. He does not attempt to reform society. His rebellion is existential, grounded in refusal. Existential rebellion is characterized by rejecting the system rather than negotiating with it. Billy's withdrawal can thus be understood as a radical act: he denies modern society the power to define his existence.

Joshi portrays rebellion not as loud protest but as inner refusal to live inauthentically. Billy's act resembles existential resistance because it asserts the right to choose meaning over comfort. The rebel in this novel is the person who refuses the comforts that demand spiritual death.

3.6 Tragedy and the Violence of Modern Society toward Rebels

The novel ultimately presents the modern world as intolerant of rebellion. Billy's disappearance and later death suggest that modern society cannot allow alternative ways of living to survive. Rebels threaten modern order because they expose its emptiness. Billy becomes dangerous precisely because his life proves that modernity is not inevitable. His presence challenges the social myth of progress.

Joshi's ending reveals the tragedy of rebellion: modern society destroys what it cannot assimilate. Billy's fate indicates that rebellion in modernity is costly, because institutions will eliminate threats to conformity. Therefore, Billy's rebellion becomes both meaningful and tragic.

4. Conclusion

Billy Biswas stands as one of the most powerful rebel figures in Indian English fiction because his rebellion is not political but existential and cultural. Through Billy, Arun Joshi critiques modern society's materialism, bureaucratic oppression, and spiritual emptiness. Billy rejects the modern ideology that happiness lies in progress, wealth, and conformity, and instead seeks authenticity through an alternative cultural belonging. His withdrawal into tribal life becomes symbolic resistance to modernity's arrogance and ethical decay.

Joshi presents modern society as incapable of understanding rebels. The modern world labels Billy irrational because it cannot imagine existence beyond its own values. Billy's fate demonstrates that modern systems eliminate those who challenge their ideological foundations. Yet despite tragedy, Billy's rebellion affirms a deep human truth: the desire for authenticity persists even within oppressive modern structures. The novel thus becomes not merely a narrative of escape but a sharp critique of modern civilization's failure to fulfill the human spirit.

Findings

The study identifies that Billy Biswas embodies rebellion against modern society through multiple interlinked dimensions. First, his alienation reveals the crisis of modern identity, where external success fails to provide inner meaning. Second,

Billy's rejection of material accumulation operates as resistance to consumer modernity and capitalist value systems. Third, his refusal of bureaucratic life exposes institutional modernity as a mechanism of control that erases individuality. Fourth, the tribal space functions as an alternative ethical and cultural order through which Billy challenges civilization's superiority myth. Finally, Billy's tragic end confirms Joshi's critique that modern society cannot tolerate rebels because they expose the emptiness underlying modern progress narratives. Collectively, these findings establish that Billy's rebellion is best understood as existential refusal and cultural resistance rather than escapist withdrawal.

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