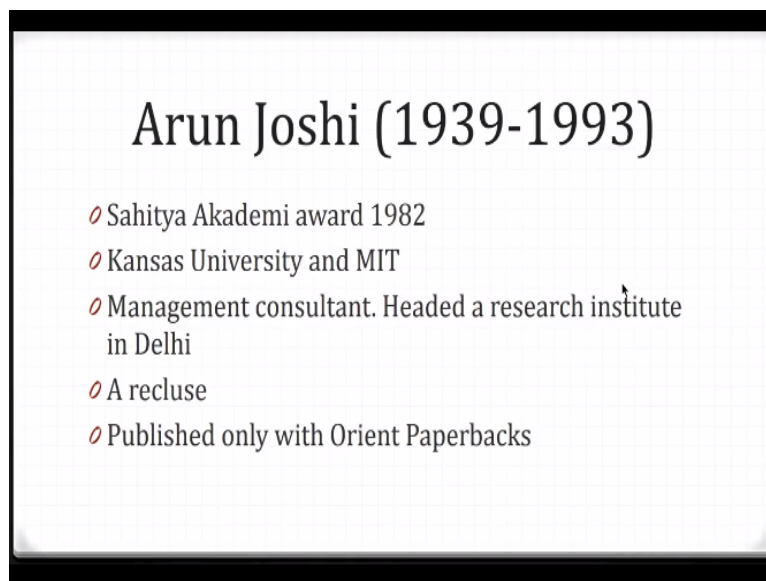


**Indian Fiction in English**  
**Dr. Merin Simi Raj**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology – Madras**

**Lecture - 14**  
**The Strange Case of Billy Biswas**

Good morning everyone. I am happy to welcome you to get another session of the NPTEL course titled Indian Fiction in English. As per the schedule today, we will be taking a look at a novel by Arun Joshi. It is titled The Strange Case of Billy Biswas.

**(Refer Slide Time: 00:31)**



As some of you may already know Arun Joshi is a well-known Indian writer in English who was born in 1939 and died in 1993. He was the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award in 1982 and we can say that he is then such a sense considered as one of the foremost writers as far as this field is concerned and he is taught as an important writer in most of the courses related to Indian writing in English.

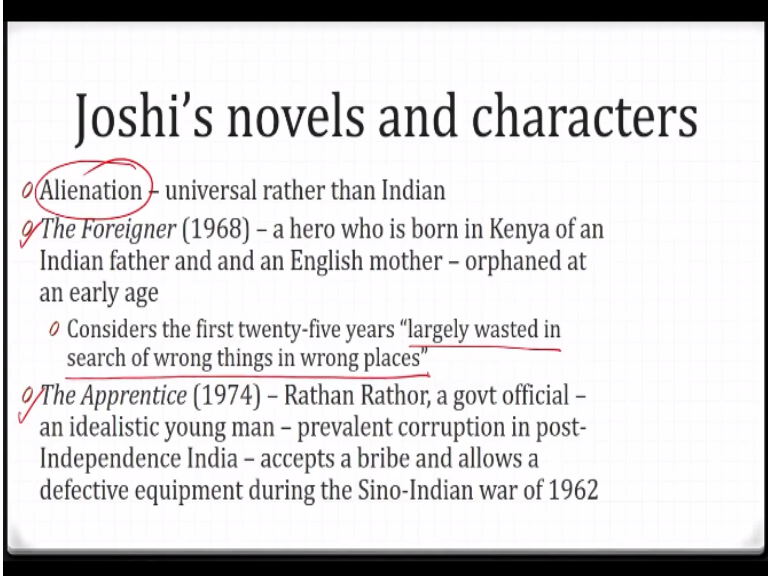
He was born in Utter Pradesh but however he completed his higher studies in United States of America. He left for the US and took his degrees from Kansas University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He returned to India to work in Delhi. Initially, he was working as a management consultant and then he also headed a research institute in Delhi and this also gives us an indication that he had a very different kind of a carrier.

His interests were varied and they were also quite unique because he moved onto lead a very different kind of life. He left behind a lot of conventional things and went onto become a writer for a very different nature and if you read up a little about his life and his works, we would also get to know that he led his life mostly as a recluse, very little is known about his private life.

And he also had very uncanny kind of unique characteristics much to his credit. For example, he published only with Orient Paperbacks and this was the leading local publisher for a longtime in India but even after the entry of global publishing house such as Penguin, it is rather strange and interesting that Arun Joshi continued to remain only with Orient Paperbacks.

And even today we can find that his novels are still the editions and re-editions of the original Orient Paperback Publications and if you recall even writer such as Anita Desai they began their carrier publishing with Orient Paperbacks. This varied nature in his personality, the recluse soul that he was and the kind of varied carrier that he had we can find it getting reflected in much of his writings as well.

**(Refer Slide Time: 02:53)**



**Joshi's novels and characters**

- o Alienation - universal rather than Indian
- o *The Foreigner* (1968) - a hero who is born in Kenya of an Indian father and an English mother - orphaned at an early age
  - o Considers the first twenty-five years "largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places"
- o *The Apprentice* (1974) - Rathan Rathor, a govt official - an idealistic young man - prevalent corruption in post-Independence India - accepts a bribe and allows a defective equipment during the Sino-Indian war of 1962

If we go through some of his novels and characters we will get to know that alienation is an important aspect of most of Joshi's characters and the kind of alienation that Arun Joshi talks about in his novels, they have a more universal trait. They cannot be reduced to Indian characters or Indian psyche alone. There is a certain universality which can be projected onto most of his novels and characters.

And here I briefly draw your attention to two of his major works, *The Foreigner* published in 1968 instantly that was also his first major novel and secondly *The Apprentice* novel published in 1974 and in both these novels we find characters' protagonist who are caught in a certain hypocritic society, left themselves they would love to be their ideal selves. They would love to be the perfect kind of citizens that modern India deserves.

But however we also find that their ideal selves are not able to live perfectly in this imperfect society. So we can even say that Joshi always had this feeling of undressed within him that he is also caught up within a certain hypocritic society where he is not able to live the ideal life that he would have loved. In this novel *The Foreigner*, the protagonist is a person who is born in Kenya to an Indian father and an English mother.

He also orphaned at an early age. We will not go into the details of the novel but there is an important aspect to which I want to draw your attention to. This protagonist he considers the first 25 years of his life largely wasted in search of wrong things in wrong places. This is a very typical of most of Joshi's characters and most of Joshi's plots. There are set of characters who are caught in particular situations and maybe we can sum up all of their lives to say that they were largely wasted in such wrong things in wrong places.

One may not always agree with a kind of definitions about the wrong places and the wrong things that these characters and protagonists were in search of but nevertheless what remains at the heart of Joshi's novels is that there are these characters who are caught in the post-independent nation who are disillusioned with the many promises that the moment of independence made to the young nation and the characters who are not able to retain the purity or the selfless ideas that they were initially quite enthralled about.

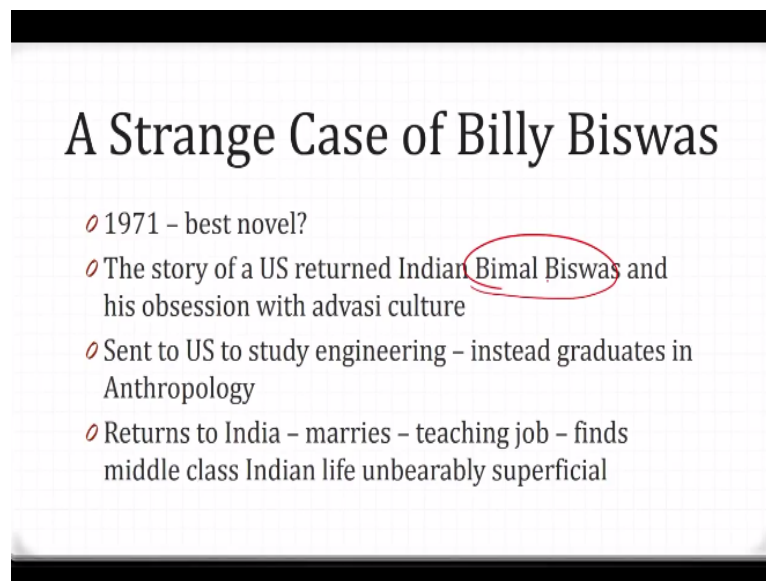
The other novel *The Apprentice* which was published in 1974, there is this character Rathan Rathor, he is a government official and he is also a very idealistic young man but however we also find that he is not able to live the life that he always wanted to rather he is caught in the prevalent corruption in post-independence India.

And here I also want you to remember that Joshi always draws attention to the many difficulties and the many challenges which are prevalent in post-independent India especially

in the 1950s, 60s and 1970s and the Rathan Rathor the character, the protagonist in The Apprentice, he succumbs to the pressures of the society, the corrupt world around and accepting of a bribe.

He allows defective equipment to be supplied during the Indo-China war in 1962, so we will not be going into further details of these works but however we find that if we take any of Joshi's novels we find characters who are caught in these difficult situations especially in the post-independence scenario.

**(Refer Slide Time: 06:58)**



A Strange Case of Billy Biswas, the novel that we propose to discuss today is no different, published in 1971, this is considered as one of Joshi's best novels and even till date this is considered as one of the most read novels of Joshi and also one of the most taught novels of Arun Joshi and here we also find a certain autobiographical element being built into the plot of this piece of fiction.

This is a story of a US returned Indian who is Bimal Biswas and he is fondly referred to as Billy throughout the novel by his friends and relatives and he has an obsession with advasi culture, the tribal culture in independent India and this forms the heart of the novel. A little bit of background to know Billy Biswas is important to understand this kind of unique and strange of sessions that Billy's character has throughout.

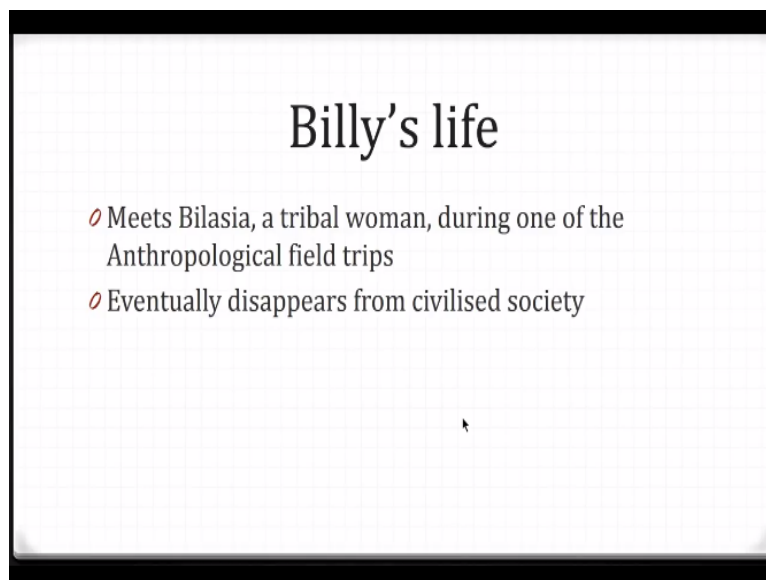
He was born in a middle class fairly well to do a family and he was sent to US to study engineering which was considered as a very prestigious and quite accomplished thing then

and instead of pursuing engineering he graduated in Anthropology because that was what he wanted to do in the heart of his heart and with this degree in Anthropology he returns to India. For a while, he settles down and he leads a very conventional, normal, domestic, middle class life.

He returns to India, he gets married to young woman of same family status, he also finds a teaching job in which he is not very happy but however he continues in that in the normal routine life for a while but however all throughout this he finds a middle class Indian life unbearably superficial and it is this hypocrisy of the middle class society, it is this redundancy of the middle class society that Billy Biswas always tries to break out.

In certain ways, we can even say that it is Arun Joshi himself who is always trying to break out of the redundancy and the superficiality of the middle class life that most Indians find themselves in.

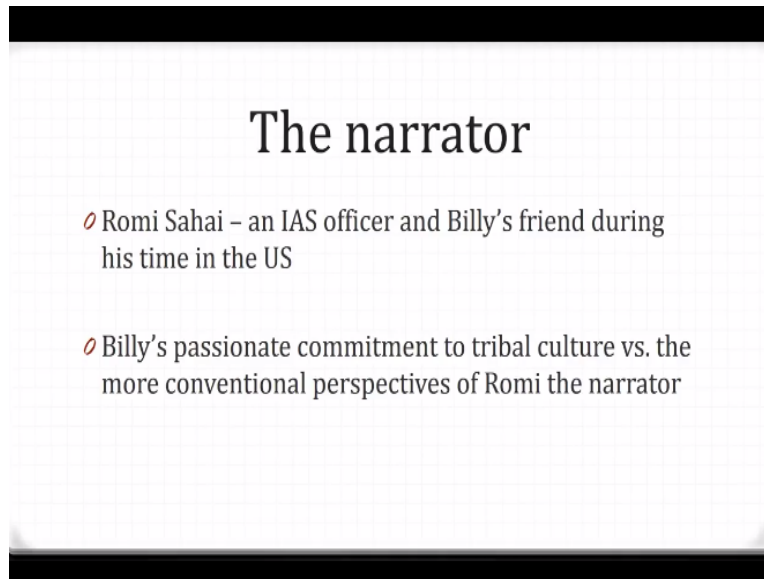
**(Refer Slide Time: 09:18)**



And Billy's life after that it is quite tumultuous, it is extremely difficult for his family and it is a challenging in multiple ways to everyone who is associated with him. We find him meeting Bilasia, a tribal woman during one of his Anthropological field trips. He gets passionately involved with Bilasia and he also disappears from civilized society to continue his life with the tribals and he also is quite comfortable, he is quite at home when he is away from this modernized, civilized society and while he is living with the tribals.

And again we will not divulge more details about how the novel ends and what happens to Billy towards the end perhaps I leave it to you for you to read upon your own and figure out.

**(Refer Slide Time: 10:11)**



And having said that I want you to pay attention to the way in which the novel gets narrated. Billy Biswas is not the narrator of this novel, we have a different narrator who is Romi Sahai, he is an IAS officer in India and he was also Billy's friend during his time in the US. So Romi is someone in that sense who is with Billy when he was undergoing this transformation.

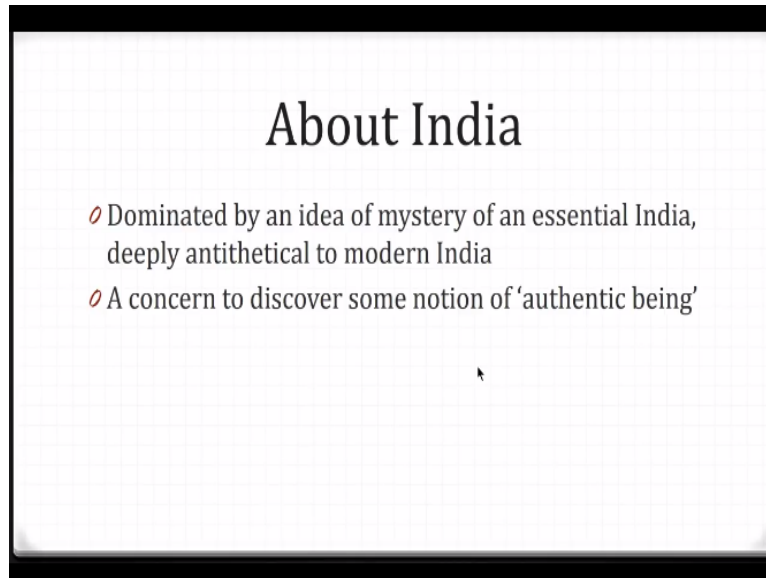
Because until he was sent to US to study engineering perhaps he himself had no clue that he would eventually shift to study Anthropology and that his life will begin to take such a tumultuous and challenging turn. So Romi Sahai emerges as this perfect narrator who is in charge of all the events that holds to gets to know what happened in Billy's life while he was in US and also someone who is able to follow with these changes even after his return to Delhi.

And the narrator and the protagonist in this novel we find that there is a certain way in which they are placed in contrast with one another. On one hand we have Billy's passionate commitment to tribal culture and on the other hand there is this figure of Romi Sahai who is the spokesperson for the more conventional perspectives and Romi in fact is the kind which we would better we would perhaps more relate ourselves also with.

He is this perfect middle class successful person who is well educated, who is into a successful carrier, who is leading a normal peaceful family life so he fixes the bill in every

sense and Billy is the antithesis to what Romi is and in this contrast we can also find a certain way in which Billy's character begins to emerge. We also find that it is in this contrast that Joshi is able to build in a lot of narrative techniques and also play with a lot of modernist techniques as well.

**(Refer Slide Time: 12:16)**



But we talk about the themes which dominate Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. It is possible to say that at multiple levels it is about India; it is about post-independent India. The novel, the narration of the novel, the plot, the many details which are built into it, the character change that Billy Biswas undergoes throughout his life, all of these are dominated by an idea of the mystery of an essential India.

And this is deeply antithetical to modern India. Here we find a certain kind of a continuation of the rhetoric of orientalism being written which perhaps indicates that Arun Joshi is a writer, a modern Indian citizen who believes that there is a certain mystery, there is a certain essential India which has got lost in this race towards modernization. It would be rather naïve to say that Arun Joshi is against modernization or even Billy Biswas is against modernization.

But what they are reacting to, what they are responding to is this the process through which the certain essential part of mysteries of India were lost in this entire process of building a modern nation whether we agree with this or not we perhaps have to agree with some of the critics who have pointed out that in most of Joshi's novels, we find the consent to discover some notion of authentic being.

Whether it is an authentic India or an authentic person or a sense of an authentic feeling or an authentic culture, we find that in Joshi's novels the protagonist is always in this pursuit to discover some notion of an authentic being whether this is a real notion or not that is a different thing altogether perhaps it is entirely an effective thing that Joshi's characters are in search of.

But nevertheless Joshi and his characters we find them always obsessed with and in pursuit of an authentic being which may or may not exist.

**(Refer Slide Time: 14:31)**

## Background and Context

Set in the tradition of the Ghurye-Elwin anthropological debate

- o Ghurye - tribals should be mainstreamed
  - o 3 types of tribes
  - o Do not want to change despite their interaction with non-tribal societies
  - o Want to isolate themselves from non-tribal societies
  - o Willing to assimilate with non-tribal societies
- o Elwin - called for maintaining a distinct identity

It is also important to give you a certain sense of a background in context. When we talk about the setting of this novel, some of the critics have pointed out that Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is set in the tradition of the Ghurye-Elwin anthropological debate. Ghurye was an Indian sociologist. He was a renowned academic as well and in the post-independent period when the nation and the administration had to take decision about the issue of the tribals the question of the tribals.

There were two different kinds of camps, two different opinions about what to do with them, how to assimilate them into the "mainstream" whether to assimilate them or not, so there were two distinct camps and Ghurye the Indian sociologist he believes that the tribals should be mainstreamed and based on his studies and based on his field work he also had identified 3 different tribes of tribal groups.



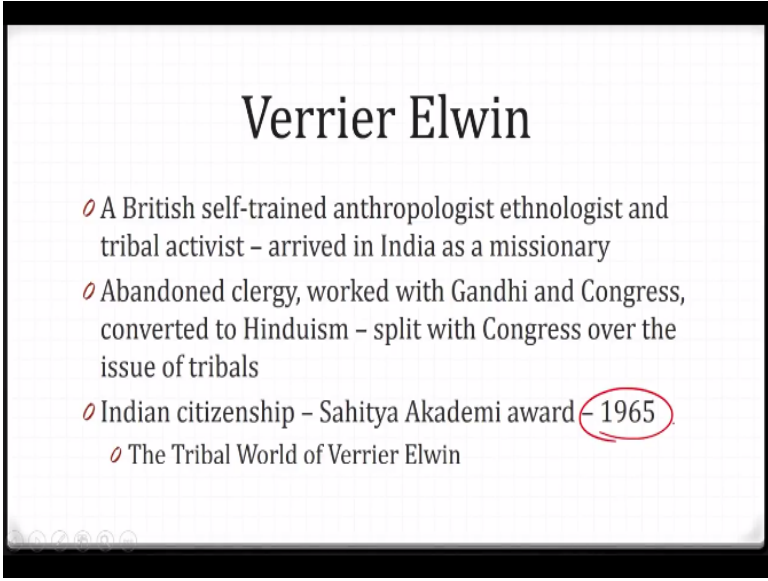
The first kind who do not want to change despite their interaction with non-tribal societies, they were rather retain all their primitive practices and all their indigenous practices respective of the contact that they had begun to establish with non-tribal societies and the second kind the second tribe would want to isolate themselves from non-tribal societies and minimize all kinds of interaction with the non-tribal societies.

And there was a third kind which Ghurye thought would be in majority and was also much in favor of. The third kind was willing to assimilate with non-tribal societies and in this sense Ghurye also believe that the answer to the question of the tribals, it was in the process of mainstream in the tribals into the civilized society but there was his other group led by Verrier Elwin.

And he argued he called for maintaining a distinct identity, a tribal way of life and leaving the tribals alone and not interfering with their lives or with their indigenous practices and not forcing them to assimilate with what we now call as mainstream. So this novel we can say that it is second the tradition of the Ghurye-Elwin anthropological debate, this was a famous debate which also had changed the character, they changed the nature of the character of the studies related to the tribal societies in India.

And here it is also important to recall that Verrier Elwin, he has a role to play in the history of Indian writing in English.

**(Refer Slide Time: 17:10)**



**Verrier Elwin**

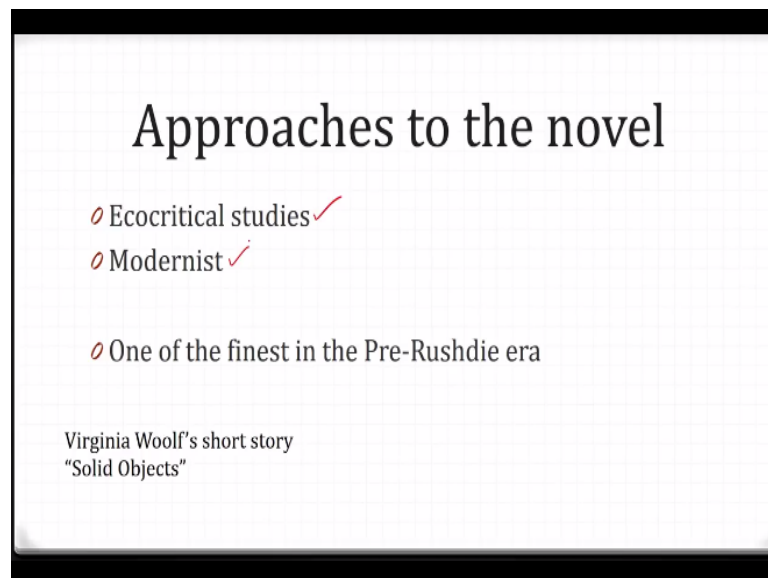
- o A British self-trained anthropologist ethnologist and tribal activist – arrived in India as a missionary
- o Abandoned clergy, worked with Gandhi and Congress, converted to Hinduism – split with Congress over the issue of tribals
- o Indian citizenship – Sahitya Akademi award – 1965
- o The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin

Verrier Elwin was a British self-trained anthropologist and ethnologist and a tribal activist. He first arrived in India as a missionary during the British colonial rule and then he went through a series of changes during his life in India. He led a very eventful life in that sense. He abandoned clergy. He then worked with Gandhi and International Congress. He even lived in the ashram with Gandhi.

And he also converted to Hinduism during this period and eventually over the issue of tribals especially in the post-independent period, he split with Congress and he also devoted the rest of his life to his work to the anthropological work on the Indian tribals. He acquired Indian citizenship, his writings were well-acclaimed and his autobiography *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, it won the Sahitya Akademi award in 1965.

So Verrier Elwin in that sense is very important to the history of Indian writing in English as well. So coming back to a discussion, this is a background and context which sets the tone for the setting in this particular novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 18:20)**



If some of you already read the novel and if you have been trying to locate some critical material on this novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, you will begin to see that if there are different approaches to this novel and most of them are limited to either ecocritical studies and there are number of critics, number of critical material which also addresses which also approaches this novel as a typical modernist work.

And it would be possible to say that Arun Joshi is clearly one of the finest writers in the pre-Rushdian era and this novel *A Strange Case of Billy Biswas* and there are some critics who were also have the opinion that Arun Joshi and most of his writings they were over shadowed in the post-Rushdian period because Rushdie was such a huge influence, Rushdie was such a trendsetter in the 1980s that it was impossible to go back and review some of the writers who had left to mark until the 1970s.

So even when some of the writers such as Arun Joshi they continue to write in the 1980s. Their writings did not get much of an acknowledgement given the kind of huge influence that Rushdie had brought in already and talking about the modernist elements in this novel here I also recall this fine story written by Virginia Woolf, a typical modernist writer. Her short story *Solid Objects*, it has got something quite similar in theme with that of Arun Joshi's *Strange Case Billy Biswas*.

In *Solid Objects*, we have a protagonist who gives up a promising carrier in politics and he goes in search of solid objects, goes in search of rocks, pebbles, shiny stones and those sort of things and this becomes his passion from then on and he had given up on a very promising carrier in politics and just like we mentioned in the beginning about Joshi's characters who are caught in the wrong places pursuing the wrong things in life.

Here we also find Virginia Woolf's protagonist eventually identifying the one thing which is important in his life that is acquiring solid objects and from a very conventional point of view it may appear as if this protagonist he becomes insane towards the end (( )) (20:53) because there is no way in which one could bring him back to normal life and tell him that you too have a carrier, you too have a promising life over here and get rid of these insane hobbies and come back to life.

Perhaps in the same way Joshi's characters particularly Billy Biswas. He is also caught in this dilemma of having to choose something with the world which a society thinks very promising but in the heart of his heart what perhaps catches his fancy what perhaps he identifies as the soul object of his passion and his ambition is the life that he finds the passion that he finds in his life with the tribals.

**(Refer Slide Time: 21:37)**

- o Not against modernity
- o Only against the pseudo-Western values
- o Does not consider the tribals uncivilised – a set of people with distinct practices and identities

He will also need to clarify this aspect. Billy Biswas is not against modernity and this is something that we need to make a distinct note of. At no point is Arun Joshi asking us to wage a battle against modernity and this is not a call to go into the primate of the indigenous elements at the cost of giving up on everything related to modernity because modernity as we know is also one of the finest things that happened in the 20th century.

It is also something which introduced us to most of the good things that we know of in today's world and modernity as we also know it was a turning point, it was the crucial crucible within which even set of writing such as these began to emerge. So in that sense modernity was extremely important in defining and redefining the world from the 20th century onwards.

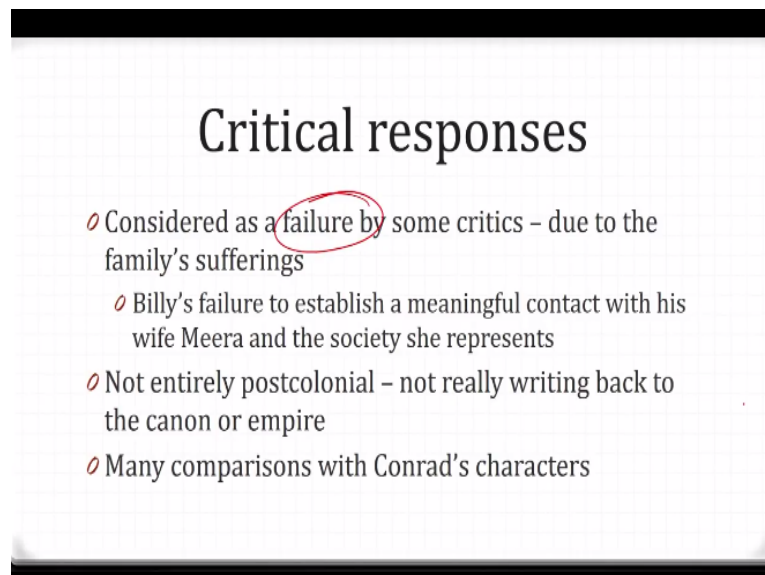
So in that sense this novel is not against modernity. Billy Biswas is not against modernity but the fight, the discomfort, the annoyance and the alienation is against the pseudo-Western values. One may have multiple opinions about this and we will not get into those debates and one important thing, one very fine thing about Joshi's novel is that the novel does not consider the tribals as being uncivilized.

So contrary to the popular opinion especially in the 1960s and 70s about the tribals been away from the mainstream and hence not civilized enough to be assimilated or not civilized enough to be acknowledged. Arun Joshi's novel ask a certain important questions about what civilization is, what modernity is and what modernity does to the multiple and layer definitions of civilization.

And in that sense, this novel is a trendsetter, it begins to ask a lot of uncomfortable questions, it also identifies, it also begins to acknowledge the tribal communities as a set of people with distinct practices and identities and it is in this aspect that we find this novel a beginning to challenge a number of accepted practices but nevertheless it also needs to be set that apart from the immediate success that it enjoyed.

And apart from the kind of awards and accolades that Arun Joshi received we do not find this novel being discussed much especially in the post-Rushdian era and the reasons for this again could be varied and multiple enough.

**(Refer Slide Time: 24:26)**



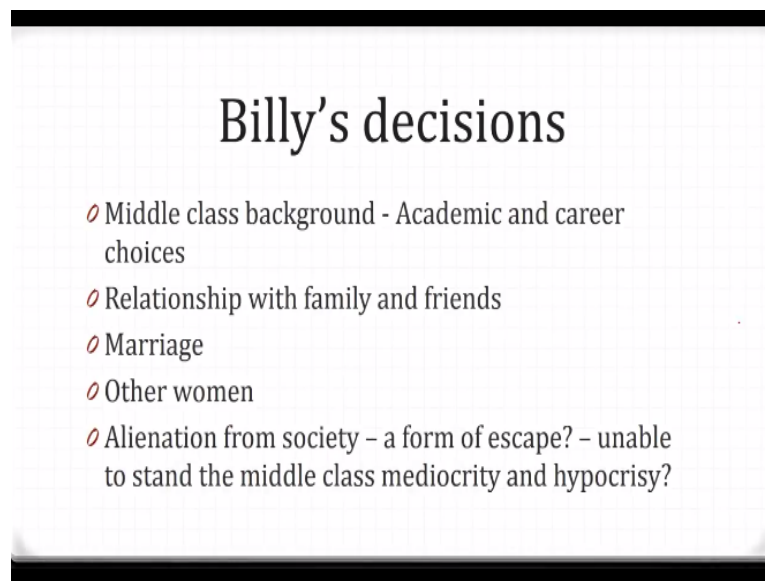
And talking about the critical responses regardless of the fact that Arun Joshi was a recipient of the Sahitya Akademi award and regardless of the fact that he continues to be rated as one of the finest writers that Indian writing has ever produced. This particular work A Strange Case of Billy Biswas, it was considered as a failure at least by some of the critics and this was primarily due to the plot structure that it did not give, it was not attentive enough to the family sufferings.

Because Billy throughout we find the character of Billy being unable to establish a meaningful contact with his wife Meera and the society that she represents. So this hardly anything that we get to know from the perspective of the family or from the perspective of Meera. At some level when the novel continues to project Billy Biswas as a victim, we have a failure, we are unable to see what the family is going through.

And the other thing is that this novel cannot be seen as entirely postcolonial. We mentioned at the beginning of this lecture that there is a certain kind of a continuation of the orientalist or rhetoric that we can see in the narrator and in the predominant themes and this work is neither writing back to the canon or empire nor is it a setting the postcolonial nation in any form.

And we can also find the number of comparisons with Conrad's characters which also elevates Joshi as a writer to a different level altogether.

**(Refer Slide Time: 26:02)**

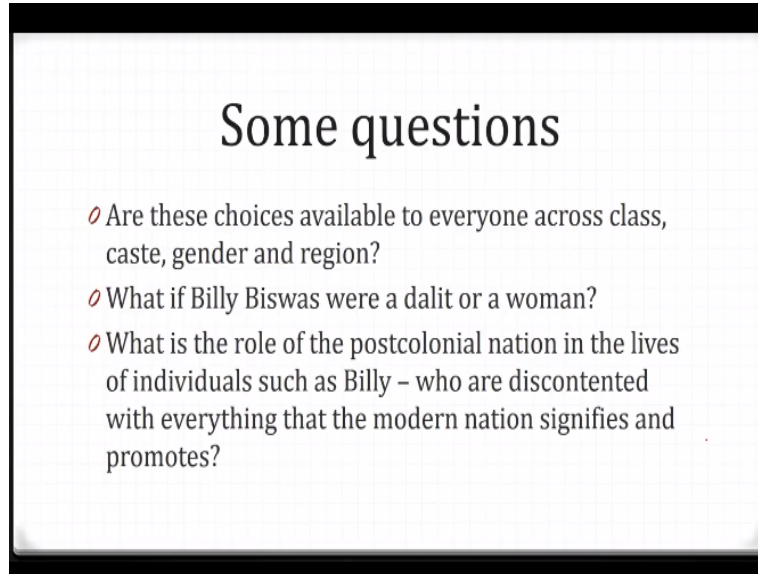


Now talking about Billy's decisions, he comes from a middle class background as we know and that also influences his academic and carrier choices. His relationship with family and friends whereas a way in which we can see the nature of these relationships in contrast to the tribal values and tribal culture because predominantly Billy belongs to a middle class affluent background.

So the foil against which Billy's decisions are being set that could be seen as a problematic perhaps when we discuss in novel we can get into some of those aspects as well and about the idea of marriage and how Billy is unable to honor the commitments that he made as part of this marital relation and the other woman who a part of Billy's life has passionately involved especially with Bilasia, the tribal woman.

And underlying all of this Billy alienation from the society, how do we begin to understand that, is it a form of escape? Is Billy unable to stand a middle class mediocrity and hypocrisy or is it just about the kind of many, many choices that he can afford to have.

**(Refer Slide Time: 27:16)**



We may not have easy answers to this but I also leave some of these questions for you to discuss. Are these choices available to everyone across class, caste, gender and region? Imagine a protagonist like a Billy Biswas and what if Billy Biswas were a dalit or a woman? If you remember the discussions that we had as part of Cry, the Peacock. We also realize that there is again a female protagonist who is caught in the middle class hypocrisy and mediocrity and the middle class value system.

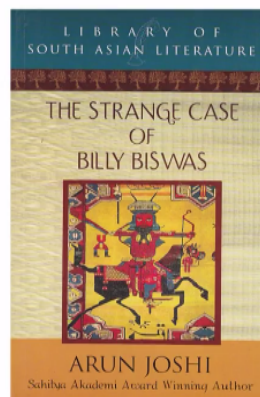
And unable to express herself as an individual but the choice of running away which is what eventually Billy Biswas does, this choice of running away and finding the right kind of passion, finding the right kind of place that one needs to be, are these choices available to everyone. We find that this unfortunately is not a luxury that many can afford, what is not really negating the dilemma and the difficulty that Billy Biswas dwells through but just trail the question the selfhood which is attributed to Billy Biswas in the context of the novel.

And finally what is the role of the postcolonial nation in the lives of individual such as Billy who are discontented with everything that the modern nation signifies and promotes. We are unable to accept Billy Biswas for what he is but we are not in the position to entirely negate what he proposes to do and say and indicate either. So this is perhaps a postcolonial dilemma that we are also caught whether.

As we begin to wrap up the session, I hope we already have a sense of the frameworks within which this novel is situated. I strongly encourage you to read the novel on your own before you listen to presentation by one of our students. She will be talking to us in detail about some of the aspects of the novel and how the novel can be situated in the larger framework of Indian Fiction in English.

She will be talking about a couple of major themes which are part of the novel and giving as a sense of the many critical approaches which have been followed up to understand and appreciate the novel in an academic framework.

**(Refer Slide Time: 29:34)**



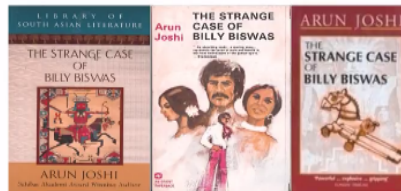
P. SUMA  
HS15H024

Good morning everyone. So today we will be doing about the novel, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas by Arun Joshi. So I will be taking you through the objectives of my presentation.

**(Refer Slide Time: 29:47)**



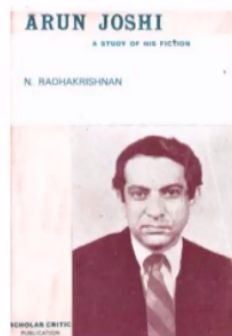
- Biographical sketch
- Locate the author within the larger framework of Indian Fiction in English
- Major themes



So firstly, I will be giving you a biographical sketch about the author. Then, we will try to locate the author within the larger framework of Indian Fiction in English and then we will give you know brief idea of the major themes that go on through the novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 30:01)**

*“He sees lives as labyrinths...hopeless mazes where you may get irretrievably lost or discover the shining secret at the core of life”*



- 1939 - Varanasi
- Family of Scholars
- Higher education - Kansas University and MIT
- Executive director (1965) - Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources(Delhi)
- Premature demise in 1993

Arun Joshi was born in 1939 in Varanasi. So he belong to a family of scholars and he had completed his higher education in Kansas University and MIT and it is important for us to note that he had this diasporic experience which played a really important role in forming his characters and then he had held a position of executive director in 1965, Shri Ram Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, Delhi and he was actually sadly he died very early in 1993.

**(Refer Slide Time: 30:34)**



### NOVELS

- The Foreigner (1968)
- The Strange Case of Billy Biswas (1971)
- The Apprentice (1974)
- The City and the River (1990)
- The Last Labyrinth - Sahitya Akademi Award (1982)

### SHORT STORIES

- The Survivor and Other Stories
- The Only American From Our Village
- The Homecoming

If you look at his literary output, it is very small as when compared to the other authors of his time. His literary output was very small, so if you notice his novels, there are only 5 novels which span his literary carrier. So you have The Foreigner, it is his first novel which he had written in 1968 and then of course you have our novel The Strange Case of Billy Biswas in 1971 and his last novel was The Last Labyrinth, it won a Sahitya Akademi award in 1982.

**(Refer Slide Time: 31:09)**

*The quest of an individual making sense of himself within the complicated web of modernity and tradition*

- The character of Billy Biswas - professional life, personal relationships (Tuuala Lindgren, Meena Chatterjee, Rima kaul, Bilasia)
- Friendship between Bimal Biswas and Romesh Sahai (Narrator)
- The metamorphosis of Billy Biswas - From alienation to self discovery

So if I have to talk about this novel in a single sentence, I would like to say that it is a quest of an individual making sense of himself within the complicated web of modernity and tradition if I have to put it in a sentence and I will be talking about the plot through 3 important story lines which are important for us to understand the novel as a whole. So the character of Billy Biswas of course it is the heart of the novel.

And I am going to talk about his professional life and his personal relationships which he shares with the woman of his life to Tuaala Lindgren, Meena Chatterjee, Rima Kaul and Bilasia. So if you notice right from the start we have this you know Billy is presented to be a kind of an unconventional individual who is located in his life (( )) (31:50) his professional choices where he had chosen anthropology instead of going for a major kind of accepted thing like engineering.

And he defies his father and he comes to US to do Anthropology and when it comes to his personal relationships, throughout the relationships we can see the kind of changes which happen within his character. So if you notice Tuaala Lindgren, here he is kind of like this person who is really his friendship with Tuaala is based on this idea that he is interested in, both are really interested to know about the primitive life of the world.

And when it comes to Meena Chatterjee, you can find Billy becoming really desperate to fit into the society. So that is when he marries Meena and I think the relationship with Meena does not really last long and he starts feeling desperate and then he gets into an affair with Rima Kaul and that is when he starts realizing that he is becoming some kind of an inhuman person and he is undergoing this disintegration as an individual.

And finally we can see that he has a happy ending with Bilasia but of course that does not last long because he is unfortunately killed in the end. So second theme I would like to talk about his friendship with Bimal and Romesh Sahai. So you can see Romesh Sahai is our narrator of the story and that was really interesting because the title is The Strange Case of Billy Biswas but we have major portion of Billy being like told to us by Romesh.

And the friendship between Romesh and Billy is really, really different because they both like are really different as individuals because Billy is the person who does not fit into the society and he is quite suffering, you can see his suffering very prominently but when it comes to like Romesh he is actually located within the social structures. So he is married and he is into doing a particular job and he is following all the conventions but still he can understand what Billy is going through.

And I really feel that this kind of relationship is what takes the novel much forward. You can see the conversations are really heartfelt and then you have the other theme of course the

metamorphosis of Billy Biswas what the whole plot is about. So right from the first place from being alienated to the path of self-discovery you can see the Billy's character undergoes a really dimensional change which goes throughout the novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 34:10)**

**LOCATING ARUN JOSHI WITHIN THE LARGER FRAMEWORK  
OF INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH**

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

- 20th century - Age of Industrialization and technological development - Man reduced to the state of mechanization
- Cross cultural interactions - Transcultural individual - Rootless, alienated beings
- One of the first authors to give a fictive form to the inner chaos of the self. psychological dimension to the Indian novel in English
- Themes in his work still hold contemporary significance, still obscure within literary world ?

So how do we locate Arun Joshi within the larger framework of Indian Fiction in English? So as I have come across through when I read the material you notice that his name is being just passed by I mean his mention and his works are like just noted down there but I do not think there are much critical discussion happening about him and now I would like to talk about the kind of historical context in which the novel came about.

So it started about in 20th century age of industrialization and technological development. So here of course man is reduced to the state of being you know mechanized sort of an individual and simultaneously we also observe that several cross cultural interactions are happening which leads to a kind of transcultural individual and he is very rootless and alienated.

That is it becomes difficult for an individual to make sense of himself within the world and of course Arun Joshi becomes important here because he is I think one of the first authors to give a fictive form to the inner chaos of self and that he does it very effectively and it is very directly implied from his work that he is trying to observe the kind of psychological changes in human beings.

And if you are talking about his themes even let it be his cultural conflict or lack of you know identity and anxiousness and all that are really, really relevant in today's time event but then why do you think that he is not much discussed.

**(Refer Slide Time: 35:29)**

#### PUBLISHING HOUSE AND VISIBILITY IN THE INTERNATIONAL MARKET

- Difficulty with regard to availability of the novels( out of print)
- Trace the publishing history - Confined to local publishers( Orient Paperbacks)
- Personality of author - Nationalist inclinations

*"I can't imagine a foreign publishing firm being interested in my type of writing. Even if they were, I am not sure I would want to give it to them. I guess it would hurt my national pride." ( In a letter to M.R Dua dated September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1971)*

I am going to look at the publishing house and the visibility in the international market, so first of all this is a very common problem which is seem that is difficulty with regard to the availability of the novels. They are pretty out of print and of course you do not even get a kindle version of his works and then looking at the publishing history, it is noticed that it is highly confined to local publishers.

Orient Paperbacks is the copy of which I have of the book and also maybe it is because of the personality of the author because he is tending to having you know nationalist inclinations because in the letter written to Mr. Dua dated September 3rd 1971, so he talks about this that I cannot imagine if foreign publishing firm being interested in my type of writing even if they were I am not sure I would want to give it to them, I guess it would hurt my national pride.

And along with it even his personality itself is very you know he is recluse and he is isolated and he prefers to be you know he is an introvert and it said that he even does not like his neighbors to know that he writes. So I am going to talk about some of the major themes which are present in the novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 36:42)**

## IDENTITY

- Beginning of the novel – Line no. 41 of Matthew Arnold's *Thyrsis* "It irked him to be here, he could not rest"
- Cultural colonialization – Shrinking of the world
- K R Srinivasa Iyengar calls Indo English writer " a confused wanderer between the two worlds"
- Identity crisis and form of rootlessness – Alienation in the character sketch of Billy

So firstly I will talk about the theme of identity and right at the beginning of the novel you have this line number 41 of Mathew Arnold's work, it irked him to be there, he could not rest and I think that is how the novel starts and also like this theme of identity is something which runs very consistently throughout the novel because you can see him trying to make sense of what he is.

And of course as we have already said the historical context, there is a cultural colonialization and shrinking of the world and man simultaneously has his problem of making sense of himself and of course what K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar refers to this Indo-English writer to be this confused wanderer between the two worlds, the two worlds being the west and the east and identity crisis and form of rootlessness, alienation in the character sketch of Billy.

So I am going to talk about a particular paragraph, so this is a letter to his friend Tuaala. So he kind of writes the kind of anxiousness which he feels or the kind of loneliness which he feels when he is with everyone. So he writes this, it seems my dear Tuaala that there are certain questions popping up from the deep layers of my mind, who am I? Who are my friends, my wife, my child?

At times, I look at them sitting at the dining table and for a passing moment, I cannot decide who they are or what accident of creation has brought us together. So every time he keeps wondering about like why he is there in this particular world, so that theme is something which consistently runs throughout the novel.

**(Refer Slide Time: 38:14)**

## PHILOSOPHY

- Influenced by Western and Indian Philosophical systems
- Inner conflict - Existential philosophy
- ✓ Alienation
- ✓ Anxiety – Marriage with Meena, Affair with Rima
- resolution of inner conflict - Indian Philosophy – Predominantly Hinduism
- ✓ Prakriti and Purusha (Sankhya system of Indian Philosophy)  
: Bilasia and Billy
- ✓ Principles of attachment and detachment ( Gita)
- ✓ Dharma

And the work is pretty much rich in philosophy if you look at it from that aspect and it is influenced by two major kind of philosophical systems, the Western and the Indian. So you can see Billy as is kind of Buddha who leaves his family and he leaves his you know his earthly you know bonds and then goes to a kind of a different life to attain salvation and of course dharma.

So here the sentence is really interesting. He tells that I have greater duties towards my soul rather than anything else unlike what you see in case of the other kind of works which we have seen so far it was more oriented towards the national identity or kind of like this collective identity. So here you see Billy drifting apart from this sort of a narrative and you can see him assume a kind of an individualistic mode of thing identity making.

**(Refer Slide Time: 39:02)**

## PSYCHOLOGY

- Technique of self introspection and theme of Individual consciousness –an insight into the mind of a modern middle class men
- Hallucinations and delusions
- ✓ Indicative of internal space of the character
- ✓ Freud – Indicative of “a process of regaining memories long repressed in the unconscious”
- ✓ Kolb and Brodie (1982), hallucinations - breakthrough of unconscious into consciousness
- The realm of unconscious – Primitive
- Theme of Madness

So psychologically it is very influenced by Freud and if you notice the technique of self-introspection and theme of individual consciousness becomes very important in the particular novel and especially it gives you an insight into the mind of a modern middle class men and what kind of anxieties or what kind of problems that he is actually facing by and this is very different from the narratives which we have seen previously.

Because there were more about individuals who were located within a national narrative and what were the problems which are faced by them. So here we have this new shift which is talking about middle class men. I will read out a paragraph from the novel, so it kind of shows you how much the character is self-analytical. This is what Billy narrates to Romi about his affair with Rima and you can see that how much he is aware of what he is doing.

The worst of it was that in spite of this knowledge of my degradation, I continue to behave as before, I continue to wine and lie and sham, I found that I could not stop, I met her 3 or 4 times after that, each time I would determine to be honest with her with myself and each time I would start to play the part as soon as I got the chance, you have no idea how ridiculous fraudulent it became.

I offered to divorce Meena and marry her even though Rima herself never hinted at such a thing. So he is aware of the fact that he is doing something you know like abnormal at the same time he is very reflexive of what he is doing. There is a theme of madness which runs within the novel, it is very amusing to read that Billy really finds you know madness to like Billy works in a mental hospital.

And he interacts with the people who suffer from madness and this is very similar to what Arun Joshi's life was because he too worked in a mental hospital where his uncle was a psychiatrist and the theme of madness was discussed in such a way that you can find Billy telling that I find them to be the most amusing people to talk with I mean he tells that he is really comfortable talking with mad people and that is something which is really different.

And all these problems whether be it psychological or philosophical the kind of changes in the characters happen primarily because of this civilized and primitive kind of interactions which are happening in 20th century.

**(Refer Slide Time: 41:21)**



## PRIMITIVE AND CIVILIZED

- Two different worlds
- ✓ Geographical space
  - Black Harlem and Manhattan area
  - Delhi and Maikala hills
- Psychological space
- ✓ Unconscious and rationality
- ✓ Critical of modernity - Rationality, Upper middle class lifestyle
- Fascinating account of the Primitive idea - supernatural, magic

So it is presented to us as two different worlds and this split across I mean in geographical space you can see that there is a discussion of Black Harlem area and Manhattan area and when it comes to the second part of the novel you can see Delhi and Maikala hills of that where the tribals live. So there is a split between the primitive and the civilized which is always maintained throughout the novel.

And in case of psychological spaces also quite split, on one hand you have this unconscious realm and on the other hand you have this rationality which is predominantly you know there in the novel it is shown as other side and it is very critical of modernity and rationality and you know upper class lifestyle and it is said to be that the upper class life style is something which is hypocritical and which is artificial and you find that resonating it every part of the book be it talking about Bilasia and talking about Meena Chatterjee.

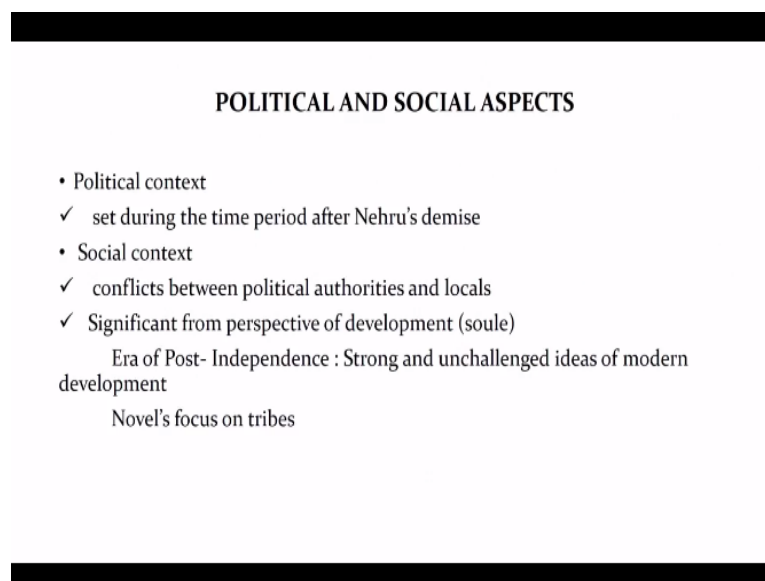
You can find the difference clearly where Meena is shown to be this hypocritical and artificial and she is very boring in nature but when it comes to Bilasia you can find her to be this mysterious person and who just makes the life beautiful and then you have this account of the primitive idea, right from the beginning of the novel you can find theme such as music, dance.

And all the other things associated with this traditional kind of life is shown to be really exciting and the experience is kind of described in such a way that you actually feel that there is some kind of magic around it and then you have this element of super naturalism which

runs throughout the novel. So there is this one incident in the particular novel that you have Billy defending a Krishna murder case.

It is a child sacrifice case and you can see him tell that of course there are loss of the other world, even though being a modern individual and educated abroad he still believes in this idea of the other world and then magic of course Billy is elevated to this kind of a magical healer when he goes back to the tribal area and he seem to have this mysterious healing powers.

**(Refer Slide Time: 43:21)**



**POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ASPECTS**

- Political context
  - ✓ set during the time period after Nehru's demise
- Social context
  - ✓ conflicts between political authorities and locals
  - ✓ Significant from perspective of development (soule)
    - Era of Post- Independence : Strong and unchallenged ideas of modern development
    - Novel's focus on tribes

When it comes to the political context on a national level quite less is discussed I mean if you look at it from a whole view at one point of the novel they just discuss about the recent events when it comes by and passing that we understand that it was set in a time period after Nehru's demise and more over than that I do not think that anything of national level is particularly you know discussed in the novel.

And when it comes to social context, yeah it becomes a bit relevant because you are talking about conflicts that are at the local level between political authorities and locals and it is significant from the perspective of development according to a paper by Soule. So he talks about the fact that this is an era of post-independence, a novel came after independence and that was when there were strong unchallenged notions of modern development.

And like there was displacement of tribal people and like all other phenomenon. The novel becomes important in the sense that it brings about a focus on the tribal. So this was unlike

the kind of the dominant you know kind of events that were happening. So this brings in to this idea of the tribals, the lifestyle and the kind of conflicts which they undergo.

**(Refer Slide Time: 44:36)**

### ORIENTALISM

- Pro-orientalist discourse in the fiction of Arun Joshi – Path to resolve problems of modernity associated with Oriental knowledge
- ✓ “The East as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive (Peter Barry)
- ✓ Liberation of India from evils of modernity only possible through invocation of spiritual
  
- Idea of recourse to tradition is problematic
- ✓ Post colonial era – Multiple identities - Monolithic culture is not possible
- ✓ Culture represented determined by dominant section
- ✓ Pre-colonial Indian culture as “pristine and pure”
- ✓ Primitive vs civilized – reinforce cultural stereotypes

So I am going to talk about the orientless tendencies within the novel and this is really interesting to find out that though Arun Joshi talks about you know like the existential theme the idea of modern man being anxious and all and you see that it is very universal nature if you look at it from that point of view but then however the path which Arun Joshi develops in order to resolve this conflict is predominantly Hinduism and predominantly associated with the like oriental knowledge.

So this was very interesting because throughout the novel I had this feeling when I was reading it because the East as a fascinating realm of the exotic, the mystical and the seductive. So I think this kind of like kind of translated throughout the novel if you read about various descriptions of you know the dance or the moon rising and it was described in the mysterious sort of a way.

And even if you look at the way in which Bilasia was described she was shown to be the sort of some mysterious woman and like Billy suddenly undergoes his realization that she was all he was ever looking for and so there is an invocation of the spiritual to you know like separate India from the evils of modernity and there is this monolithic tradition which is quite emphasized in the novel and it is a bit problematic.

Because postcolonial era you have multiple identities and monolithic kind of an understanding of a tradition is not possible and then you have this culture if it is so and it is represented if a particular culture comes into the same it is represented by a kind of dominant people or dominant section is what is said to be you know representing this particular culture.

And this idea of pre-colonial Indian culture as pristine and pure, so when you read about the tribals you really feel that at one point of time he talks about them being happy irrespective of whatever happens, drink, wine and woman and like they are really you know happy and self-satisfied in their own world. So this kind of a very you know closed kind of a structure is emphasized when he talks about the tribals.

And primitive versus civilized is of course throughout the novel you can see that there is a clear distinction so Black Harlem and you have Manhattan area or you have supernatural and you have rationalism. So I think it does reinforce a sort of cultural stereotypes again in a different sort of way. Thank you. So with this we wind up today's lecture. I thank you for listening and look forward to see you in the next session.