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The Path of Non-Attachment: Exploring Advaitic Themes in Arun Joshi's The Strange Case of Billy Biswas

Abstract

In Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, the dialogue between Advaitic non-attachment and modern narrative techniques yields a rich exploration of self-identity and existential transformation. This paper investigates Joshi's narrative in the shadows of Advaita Vedanta, imploring classical texts such as Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* and modern insights by Deutsch and Sharma. Using qualitative textual analysis, principal moments of detachment and duality are highlighted throughout the protagonist's journey, helping to illustrate a synthesis of ancient non-dual philosophy and contemporary literary expression. The findings show that Joshi adeptly interlaces traditional notions of non-attachment into a tale expressing postcolonial identity woes and existential crises. This research adds to the understanding of non-attachment in modern Indian literature and places a renewed emphasis on the accessibility of Advaita and its relevance in current times. In short, the research adds to scholarly discourse on the crossroads of philosophy and narrative in the "becoming one's self" narrative.

Keywords : Non-attachment, Advaita Vedanta, Arun Joshi, The Strange Case of Billy Biswas, Self-identity, Modern Indian literature, Detachment.

Introduction : Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is an essential work for modern Indian fiction, seamlessly blending existential inquiry with the precepts of Indian philosophy. In the context of Joshi's wider project, the novel explores the conundrums of identity formation within a rapidly modernizing postcolonial milieu, deeply imprinted with the principles of Advaita Vedanta. At the heart of this philosophical system is the idea of non-attachment—an injunction to renounce the superficiality of material and emotional attachments in service of a deeper, unitive understanding of existence. The focus on ideas of non-duality and detachment has been a prominent feature of classical Indian texts, and its presence in contemporary narratives also serves as a guide to the shifting cultural and spiritual milieu.

While the philosophical foundations of non-attachment are, for obvious reasons, woven into the body of Joshi's narrative, there is an aspect of literary criticism that has continued to remain under-explored over the years, wherein the convergence of Advaitic thought with modern narrative technique marks the terrain. This paper attempts to fill this gap by closely analyzing the ways in which non-

attachment and non-duality manifest in Billy Biswas and how these ideas inform the protagonist's process of self-realization. More particularly, the study will be concerned with the following questions:

What particular manifestations of non-attachment appear in the narrative? How do Advaitic principles play a role in the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and Search for meaning? How does Joshi's narrative technique correlate with and engage with larger philosophical discourses on self-realization?

After this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. The Literature Review places the conversation in the context of both classical Advaita texts and modern literary discussions. The Theoretical Framework outlines the concepts through which this study views its sources, whereas the Methodology explains the qualitative approach taken to their textual analysis. The following sections will introduce the Analysis of salient narrative elements, a Discussion of wider cultural context the findings that emerge from the Analysis can be discussed in relation to, and a Conclusion to summarize what insights into philosophy and modern Indian literature this study contributes.

Literature Review

Foundation of Advaita Vedanta : The Advaita Vedanta literature and the close study of its Indian modernist influence

yields an integrated reading of non-attachment as it operates in Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, where non-duality has a central place. Foundational texts for Advaita Vedanta, like Adi Shankara's *Vivekachudamani*, set the stage for grasping the philosophy of non-attachment. The process of letting go of worldly desires to reach connate, ultimate truth is illuminised by Shankara, who also forms a new paradigm of the non-duality with which we still struggle today, helping to reform the reductive division of subject and object¹. Eliot Deutsch's *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction*² includes these classical ideas but fine tunes them, rendering a Nietzschean view that rings true for contemporary existential worries. A more supplemental text, the compilation of texts by Radhakrishnan and Moore in *A Sourcebook in Indian Philosophy* are handy excerpts and commentaries that set the historic and philosophical landscape of *Roots of Advaita*, and emphasize the last impact of this philosophical school of thought on Indian thought³

Advaitic Themes in Modern Literature

In the discipline of modern literature, Advaitic principles would work based on the concepts of non-attachment and self-identity. In "Non-Attachment and Self-Identity in Modern Indian Fiction," Arun Sharma discusses how the narrative

forms being utilized in modern texts often manifest a commitment to self-relinquishment, which runs counter to traditional ideas of selfhood and desire⁴. In "Advaitic Echoes in Postcolonial Indian Literature," Meenakshi Mukherjee expands this conversation by analyzing how writers writing postcolonially use the principle of non-duality in their texts in order to engage with the fractured modern identity⁵. Building on these perspectives, Amrita Desai's study of Indian narratives titled "The Aesthetics of Detachment: Non-Attachment in Indian Narratives" lays out how the use of aesthetic detachment as a narrative technique endows its modernity as a literary device that exposes non-attachment as a technique reflecting critical and deeper philosophical truths that foreshadow contemporary existential crises⁶.

Literary Criticism on Arun Joshi's Works

There are also the specific works of literary criticism on Arun Joshi's creations which add to the rich discourse. Harinder Singh's article "Navigating Identity: Existentialism and Advaita in Arun Joshi's Novels" highlights Joshi's attempts to explore ways out of existential dilemmas through the lens of Advaitic thought, detailing how the protagonist in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* reflects the process of trying to reconcile worldly engagement and spiritual disengagement⁷. Ram Gopal's *Indian*

Philosophy and Literature: Convergence in the 20th Century, discusses the intersection of philosophical thought and literary narratives as well, providing insight as to how traditional doctrines, such as Advaita, are reimagined in modern literature⁸.

Identifying the Research Gap : Even with these extensive studies, there still exists a notable research gap. Despite the extensive research conducted on the influence of Advaita Vedanta on modern literature in India, there is a gap in the literature, which has explicitly examined the presence of non-attachment in *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Previous scholarship has either approached the philosophical underpinnings in classical texts or the general tendency of non-duality in contemporary narratives; none has crossed these two domains to explore how Joshi's narrative technique actively engages with Advaitic themes. To fill this gap, this study will engage critically with the text of the novel to unveil and interpret the nuanced play of non-attachment in the textual structure of the novel, thus, making a contribution to both, literary criticism and the philosophy of subjectivity.

Through its deriding together of classical philosophical treatises and modern literary criticism, this review not only sets the stage for a comprehensive analysis of the concept of non-attachment in Joshi's work, but also

highlights the relevance of Advaita in making sense of modern cultural, existential identities.

Theoretical Framework : The theoretical framework of this study is situated in the intersection between classical Advaita Vedanta and contemporary literary scrutiny, both of which serve as a polysemiotic tool to interrogate non-attachment within *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. Advaita Vedanta, in its essence, teaches renunciation as the path to overcome the false divisions of duality. Foundational texts like Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* and Eliot Deutsch's *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* present rigorous philosophical underpinnings, framing non-attachment as the release of worldly desires, the means by which one comes to see the essential unity of existence. This perspective stresses the transformative process of self-humanization whereby the self transcends the personal identifiers and material attachments that limit us.

The study utilizing thematic analysis, identify symbols, motifs, and narrative strategies as themes that articulate non-attachment and non-duality in the text, thereby, adopts such indicative paradigm to literary analysis. Particular narrative details in Joshi's oeuvre, like the moments of introspection, symbolic usage of space, character arcs that mirror the inner

conflict of the self, are analysed and decoded for their deeper Advaitic significations. Hence, the aesthetic constructs of the narrative can be systematically juxtaposed with classical Advaita principles.

In addition, these realisations integrate critical perspectives, merging philosophy and literary criticism. Modern Indian fiction thus also describes the emergence of a non-attachment, or *dhyāna* through the history of dwelling in the self through cognitive elements that tend to hint at an existential questioning⁹: and it also critiques it through narrative techniques that question constructions of the self. Mukherjee's and Gopal's postcolonial analyses, moreover, contextualize the relationship between conventional philosophical views, and present cultural and socio-political systems, revealing the way the plot negotiates tensions between cultural heritage and modernity. When examined cumulatively, these theoretical perspectives lend a very fruitful and multidimensional lens to gendered expressions of non-attachment in Joshi's narrative.

Methodology : This study is a qualitative research study, concentrated on a close textual criticism of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. The main method used is thematic analysis, a process of systematically turning the text into a series of codes, through which

common elements around the principles of non-attachment and Advaita Vedanta emerge in the motifs, symbols and narrative strategies employed.

The data for this research are collected from both primary and secondary sources. The core data is Billy Biswas's narrative text, and the periphery is the canonical philosophical texts, like Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* or Eliot Deutsch's *Advaita Vedanta: A Philosophical Reconstruction* and scholarly articles by Sharma, Mukherjee, Desai, Singh, and Gopal. They equip the attitude and historical background for a more sophisticated reading of the text.

The analytical process requires the close reading of the novel to extract citations that highlight non-attachment." Each passage is then coded for thematic relevance, and compared with the central tenets of Advaita Vedanta. Not only does this comparative analysis illuminate the intertextual echoes between classical philosophy and modern narrative, but it also reveals the nuances of Joshi's narrative style.

Lastly, the authors note some limitations of the study. Limiting analysis to a single text can constrain the breadth of findings, and the subjective nature of qualitative research is addressed through systematic coding across comments and corroboration with existing scholarly interpretations.

Analysis and Findings : A close reading

of *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* shows the work is riddled with Advaitic motifs that surface in the arc of the protagonist's journey and in the symbol of the duality/non-duality principle.

Identification of Advaitic Themes

Non-Attachment in Character Development : The break with conventions of society and material-driven pursuits is revisited throughout the book, with the protagonist's journey encapsulating moments where she deliberately seeks out detachment from them. Key passages show the gradual process of Billy Biswas shedding layers of self-identification that are associated with external achievements and social roles. His internal reflections, framed in spare, relentless prose, become narrative markers for the walk of non-attachment. Such moments resonate with central Advaitic injunctions visible in classical works like the *Vivekachudamani*, whereby rejection of worldly attachments is presented as necessary for the realization of true knowledge.

The Narrative of Duality versus Non-Duality: The piece contrasts a battle of dualistic thinking—represented by the tension between ego and self—with glimpses of a more holistic, non-dual consciousness. The narrative form, moving between external realities and internal monologues, parallels the philosophical struggle between a lateral view of the world in contradicting

dichotomies and a wholistic understanding of existence. Recurring imagery and symbols that reflect Advaita Vedanta's philosophy of transcending apparent oppositions further underscore this dualistic tension.

Thematic Exploration of Self-Identity and Existential Dilemmas : The hero's journey toward self-discovery is depicted as an eternal struggle between the longing to be included and the need to detach from identities thrust upon them. This existential dilemma not only drives the character's arc but also mirrors a wider socio-cultural angst that is currently present in contemporary Indian society. The text proves that in Billy's process of disentangling his place, his moments of being estranged are a pointer towards a state of existence that challenges us with the advaitic view of the self not as an illusion of affiliations.

Comparative Insights with Advaita Texts : A comparative analysis with excerpts from Advaita texts affirms the former's message of transformative Non-attachment. The symbolic language found in Joshi's own writing has clear resonances in classical Advaita literature, where similar imagery is employed to signify the breakdown of the ego¹⁰.

Postcolonial and Cultural Dimensions

To make sense of the narrative's treatment of non-attachment goes beyond personal identity and speaks of the postcolonial context of modern India.

The protagonist's disconnection can be an allegory for an all too deeply felt signifier of a post-hipster world becoming increasingly cynical about the old pink elephant in the black velvet room of death dispossession: Traditional hierarchies and fangs of colonial modernity. This additional layer invites the reader to place the text within a cultural framework where the balance between tradition and modernity is an ongoing negotiation.

Synthesis of Findings

In short, this analysis reinforces that *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is a lucrative text for discussions of Advaitic principles. It's a kind of non-attachment, and Joshi weaves it into such a finely grained, personal narrative that his own statement feels very much like a cultural act, too, a moment that lingers in this land. These results confirm the thesis that, while the continual dualistic struggles and occasional unitive insights serve to accelerate the inner evolution of the protagonist, they also provide commentary, through spatial and temporal narration, of modern significant existential and cultural challenges.

Discussion : The results of this analysis reflect how *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, therefore, does not only respond to traditional Advaitic principles but also re-configures them within a contemporary narrative framework. The research questions which run—these are

not listed in the same order as above: what are the manifestations of non-attachment; how does Advaita Vedanta affect the protagonist's subjectivity/identity; how does the textual narrative promote non-duality? This contradiction between earthly dualities and an inward, transcendental sense of self validates Joshi's twisted use of narrative devices used to reflect advaitic ideas.

These insights have wider implications both for literary criticism and for philosophical inquiry. They argue that contemporary Indian literature can be a critical arena where ancient philosophies are reframed to respond to 21st century questions of identity, alienation, and cultural change. Consequently, this study contributes malleably to the discourse on both postcolonial studies and philosophy, by showing how non-attachment functions as narrative technique, and the metaphor of societal non-attachment to traditional structures.

This line of investigation may be taken further in future research to compare the same and similar themes in the other literary works from India and further explore on aspects including the cultural and philosophical nuances of non-attachment as well. Comparative studies like these would help both deepen the methodological project and also cultivate a better atmosphere for comprehending Advaita Vedanta's role in modern narrative art today and why and

how it has remained relevant across countries and centuries.

Conclusion : Based on the examination of Arun Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, this study finds that Advaitic principles, particularly the construct of non-attachment, are intricately woven into the narrative structure of the text. The protagonist's journey of self-realisation and the contrasting dance between duality and non-duality in the plot showcase a meaningful synthesis of ancient Indian thought and contemporary literary expression. The analysis highlights that while Joshi engages with classical epistemology of Advaita Vedanta, he also reinterprets the epistemological preoccupations of classical Advaita Vedanta to address contemporary existential puzzles of modern subjects and postcolonial subjectivity crises. This research enriches our understanding of the cultural implications of non-attachment and its literary manifestations by bridging classical philosophical thought with modern narrative techniques. For all these merits, the study, as a scholarly exercise, amplifies the relevance of Advaita Vedanta on modern Indian literary discourse — a combination still deserving of greater intellectual attention than it has, so far, commanded.

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