

THE ROUTE FROM SOPHISTICATION TO SIMPLICITY

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CHAPTER THREE

THE ROUTE FROM SOPHISTICATION TO SIMPLICITY

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English

defines “sophistication” as the “quality of being sophisticated” and “sophisticated” as “having a lot of experience of the world and knowing about fashion, culture and other things that people think are socially important” (def. 2). The same dictionary defines “simplicity” as “the quality of being natural and plain,” and the example given is “the simplicity of country living” (def. 2). In the novel *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, Arun Joshi portrays the “strange” and “strong” urge of Billy Biswas to discard the sophisticated standards of the modern society, and accept the solace of a simplistic living in the primitive world.

In the introductory lines of the novel, Romi, the narrator roaming about among the bhils of the Satpura Hills sings: “I came a thousand miles to see your face, O mountain, A thousand miles did I come to see your face” (7). Biswas’s American host introduced him to Romi, as an engineer, anthropologist and anarchist who was “thoroughly crazy” (8). Biswas belonged to a rich and respectable family, his father, being a judge of India’s Supreme Court. He was sent to

America to take up engineering as a career. Against his father's wish he earned his Ph.D. in anthropology because that was his secret obsession and his first love. Moreover, he thought that the field of engineering was just a status symbol in the sophisticated society, whereas the subject of anthropology was a study of the primitive and the simple. As he studied the tribal attitudes and customs and was deeply interested in the places described in the books, he desired to return to India, travel through the wilderness and learn the life of the aboriginals: "Travel, travel, travel. A little bit here and there but mostly in India. You have no idea what fascinating societies exist in India" (12).

Another striking element that reveals Biswas's love for simplicity was the place he chose to stay in America. Though most of the American societies were sophisticated and stylish, he preferred Harlem, one of the worst slums of New York, as his residence. The description of the place clearly envisages Biswas's craze for simplicity and primitivism:

Such paint as still remained on the walls peeled day and night; falling in pinch-sized heaps of powder. The shutters hung loose; so did the mail boxes in the hall. Nearly all the glass in the front

door had been knocked out. . . . At night you could hear the rats scampering among the garbage drums. Inside it used to be terribly hot so that, as far as possible, everyone stayed out on the stoop. (9)

However, Biswas did not find a meaning in life either in White America or in the upper-class Indian society. He tells Romi that he decided to live in Harlem because White America was too civilized for him. His constant effort to identify himself with the primitives was reflected in his strange behaviour, his way of living, eating, dressing and even thinking. Romi's description of Biswas's strange behaviour at a party without moving, without drinking, just beating the bongo drum, reveals how culturally alienated Biswas was at New York. Not interested in the jubilant party atmosphere, Biswas ate little and talked even less. He sat alone in a corner producing a musical experiment that was as unique as himself. It was nothing very skilful or sophisticated from the view point of music, but what it had "was a mesmerised pull that held us by its sheer vitality" (17).

Conscious that the purpose of his arrival to the foreign land was education, Biswas worked day and night without any

sort of diversions. He worked at the type-writer for long hours for his PhD in anthropology. His determination is well exhibited when he says, "I am itching to be back, to tell you the truth. But I must finish this wretched Ph.D." (21). Romi was with him as a good friend and in each other's company they did not feel that they were far away from their home country: "In spite of a longish stay in America, neither of us had lost our roots in India or in the city of Delhi" (20).

At the age of fourteen Biswas had experienced the urge to live like a primitive man in a primitive world. He and his mother decided to spend a few weeks in Bhubaneswar at his uncle's house. As they emerged from the railway station, a curious fascination began to work in him, but he could not figure out what exactly it was. Later he realized that the strange fascination led to a sudden interest in his own identity. He was smothered by questions regarding his identity and the existence of his self, "Who was I? Where had I come from? Where was I going?" (89). His uncle's bungalow, situated in the out skirts and surrounded by old temples, pure coastal vegetation, a rough and rocky terrain, low green hills, and innocent, unadorned 'Adivasis' attracted him. He was dominated by the "magical glow" of the whole place (90). He

began to realize: "I remember saying to myself, even though I was only fourteen, Something has gone wrong in my life. This is where I belong. This is what I have always dreamt of" (91).

Another evidence of Biswas's strong obsession for the simplistic way of life lies in the letters he has sent to Tuula. A Swedish girl who had come to America for Advanced Training in Psychiatric Social Work, she was the second person who had any clue of what was going on in Biswas's unsmiling eyes, the first being Romi. Once when Romi had spent some private time with Tuula, she expressed her anxiety over Biswas's strange love for primitivism, "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 any time" (18). She was eager to have an open discussion with Romi, hoping that Romi would be a guiding light to Biswas even after returning to India.

When Biswas acquired a job as a lecturer in the University of Delhi, he tried his best to escape the call of primitivism by getting married. Though he was not in the habit of giving importance to other people's advice, he did ask

Romi about his opinion on marrying Meena. When Romi wondered why Biswas asked his opinion, the reason gave was touching, "I trust you, which is more than I can say for others" (31).

Thus hoping to settle down leaving behind his strange obsession, Biswas married Meena, a sophisticated and beautiful girl, the daughter of a rich industrialist of his own Bengali community. He was awfully discontented with his life even after his marriage. His unfulfilled yearning for the primitive life continued to beckon him, beyond his calculations. His marriage to Meena was an impulsive action, and the result was drastic as she turned out to be a down-to-earth girl, pleased with a sophisticated life, where money was the centre of happiness. He realized that both of them did not have the same attitude towards life and that they were not made for each other. He could not find the simplicity he was looking for in her. Her interest in money matters was exorbitant. Completely disappointed at her incapacity to hold the reign of his gallop, he fell for the lingering urge for the simplicity of primitivism.

Once, the couple attended a performance of the Odissi along with Romi. The performance was surfeited with

traditional music and he felt that the modern auditorium was transported to an age of wilderness. Even though Biswas was with Meena and Romi, he was mesmerised by the show, and he ignored their presence. Romi was astonished “to find him sitting virtually on the edge of his seat” (42). This incident throws light on the point that Biswas’s family commitment was not a hindrance to his longing for primitive simplicity. His failure to maintain a good relationship with his wife led Biswas into the arms of Rima Kaul, only to understand that neither Rima’s body nor her sentiments could help him realize his identity and give him an inner joy and satisfaction. He became ashamed of their affair which was adulterous and corrupt:

It gradually dawned on me that a tremendous corrupting force was working on me. It was as though my soul were taking revenge on me for having denied it for so long that Other Thing that it had been clamouring for. “Here, you swine, if you haven’t the guts to break away from this filth, well then, I am going to wallow in it until it makes you sick. (135)

According to Romi, Biswas seemed duller than most dull men

he usually met. He knew that whatever it might have been, the Billy Biswas he had known was finished, snuffed out like a candle left in the rain” (51).

In the mean time a son was born to Biswas and Meena but still Biswas did not return to the family. Meena sadly realized that he was growing a stranger to her with every passing day. She did not know how to win his heart. If she had possessed a rare degree of empathy or even a sufficient idea of human suffering only, she could have possibly prevented his escape to the wilderness. She failed to maintain the relationship, because she could not understand him, as she disclosed to Romi, “How is one to know when he doesn’t even care to tell me what is bothering him. . . . Perhaps I just don’t understand him as a wife should. I thought may be you could help me to understand him” (55). Moved by Meena’s open confession, Romi agreed to discuss the matter with Biswas and help them to retain their bond. Biswas’s instant reply was like a thunderbolt to Meena: “I thought you were something other than what you are.” Hearing this, she “fluttered like a crushed butterfly as she wrestled with her emotions” (59). The scene ended like an epilogue to

their relationship.

Biswas's uncontrollable obsession with the simplicity of the primitive world, forced him to leave his wife, his only child and his aged parents, for good. On one of his anthropological excursions to a hilly region of Madhya Pradesh, he vanished mysteriously. Greatly startled by his disappearance, Romi visited the probable place himself and was wonderstruck at the voluptuous beauty of the place, "It was on the banks of a shallow stream. . . . Beyond the stream there was a deep *saal* forest, and beyond the forest one could see the hard granite face of the low hills that divided this part from the plains beyond" (62). Romi understood that Biswas could have been sucked in by the enticing spot, being a lover of simplicity and primitivism.

Tuula helped Romi to investigate Biswas's whereabouts by sending him the letters Biswas had written to her. She was under the impression that those letters would expose his strange obsession. The letters proved that Biswas did not want to belong to the civilized world where civilization was not anything more than the making and spending of money. In another letter he described the details of a dream he had had about a strange woman. He had also written about the dream

crossing his mind frequently and giving him a fearful disturbance. His visit to a temple was narrated in yet another letter which exposed his existential meditations:

It seems, my dear Tuula that we are swiftly losing what is known as one's grip on life. Why else is this constant blurring of reality? Who am I? Who are my parents? My wife? My child? At times I look at them, sitting at the dinner table, and for a passing moment I cannot decide who they are or what accident of Creation has brought us together. (70)

Biswas's disappearance remained an intricate lore for ten years. There were curious speculations about his absence. Some said he had become a spy, some others thought he had eloped with Tuula, and yet others suggested that he could have been eaten by a man-eater. This last conjecture was ultimately adopted as the truth by the majority.

Romi, being the district collector, visited a lot of drought-affected areas in order to extend necessary help to the victims. On his tours, he confronted several kinds of human miseries and astonishing truths of which the most painful was his meeting with Biswas. Romi could not resist the

inclination to be with his old friend and to share with him the hallucinations of his life. When Romi offered a change of clothes, Biswas who was dressed in an old loin-cloth, refused to accept it and insisted on to his dream of simplicity and primitivism.

Romi noticed with pain that ten years had transformed Biswas completely both outwardly and inwardly. As for his love for the typical wilderness, he had possessed even the minutest knowledge of things around the place. He could describe the phase of Chandtola and he claimed to know the routes of stars. He proudly predicted that it would rain after twenty days. Out of his excitement, and in order to bridge the gap of ten years, Romi told him all about the economic situation of the country, the death of Nehru and the recent drought. But Biswas was least concerned about those matters. Instead, as expected of him, he described the life in the forest with singular enthusiasm, "Nobody here is interested in the prices of food grains or new seeds or roads or elections and stuff like that. We talk of the supernatural, violent death, trees, earth, rain, dust storms, rivers, moods of the forest, animals, dance, singing" (83).

Dhunia entered Biswas's life as a guide to the primitive

world and became his “mahaprasad,” that is the noblest friend that one could have on earth, as explained by Biswas. He described the strength of their friendship thus: “I suppose we shall gladly die for each other” (82). Dhunia stayed at the right hand of Biswas and led him everywhere he fancied to go. Even his passion for a tribal beauty was first revealed to Dhunia. Though the police officers questioned Dhunia about Biswas, Dhunia was determined not to ditch his ‘mahaprasad’ but protect him by all means.

On his second visit to Dhunia’s house to fetch some rope, Biswas waited for half an hour as Bilasia was not there. That short span of time played a significant role in Biswas’s life. “I wonder if all this would have happened if I had not waited for Bilasia, to return home from the forest. It was as though, during that half an hour, it was not Bilasia I had been waiting for but my future, my past, indeed the very purpose of my life” (83). Biswas, on his first visit, had provided some antibiotics to Bilasia and saved her life. That very moment their fascination for each other was aroused. He felt that something unusual was happening to him. As he was watching her, he was conscious that the world around him had a new meaning: “I had changed, and I knew that. But more

than that, I knew that 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 life” (85).

The strange old dream of the tribal girl visited him again and he woke up sweating. It upset him all over again and he became a victim of confused thoughts. He could no longer imagine himself as Bimal Biswas, a graduate of Colombia, the only son of a Supreme Court Judge, husband of Meena Biswas, and the father of a handsome child. On the contrary, he felt that he was the first man on earth facing its first night. Everything of his own seemed unfamiliar and distant and he was ardently moved by the pull of nature. Shaken by the dream, he knew that he was being beckoned by the primitive world:

Come, come, come, come. Why do you want to go back? This is all there is on earth. This is the woman waiting for you in the little hut at the bottom of a hill. You thought New York was real. You thought New Delhi was your destination. How mistaken you have been! Mistaken and misled. Come now, come. Take us. Take us until you have had your fill. It is we who are the

inheritors of the cosmic night. (88)

It was after meeting Bilasia, the untamed beauty that Biswas discovered his life force and that bit of himself that he had searched all his life without which his life would have been nothing more than the poor reflection of a million others. Bilasia, at that moment, was the essence of that primitive force that had called him night after night, year after year. The thought of forsaking his life force gave him a sense of insecurity.

Biswas easily identified himself with the primitive tribals. He was just one among them, learning how to live like them through and through. On an expedition with four of his students he described to them all about that primitive area, like the geography, the people, their origin, their livelihood, and their customs. During this time, he had a very odd sensation: "I felt I was a tribal myself, that I was one of the primitives to be investigated and not one of the investigators" (94). This truly revealed his oneness with the world of simple primitivism. As Biswas attended the tribal dance in the night without his students' knowledge, he had a terrific experience that gave him the strength to embrace the world of his choice. In the beginning, all of the tribals were waiting for

the moon, and soon Biswas discovered that he was also waiting for the moon. That was a tremendous change that had fallen upon him, "Earlier he had waited for degrees, for lectures, for money, for security, for a middle-class marriage, for the welfare of his child, for preserving the dignity of his family, for being just, for being well dressed, and for being normal and all those things that civilized men count as their duty or the foundations of their happiness or both." (99). Nothing he had waited for in the past sophisticated society, gained importance in his present life. His prime attention fell on the rising of the moon which symbolized his new life in the simplicity of the wilderness. Biswas' cry for primitivism is manifested clearly when he pleaded to Dhunia to hide him in the wilderness. He boldly proclaimed that he was even ready to kill mankind in order to preserve a place in the simple style of living. His disregard for civilized people is stressed when he said: "I am fed up of those slimy bastards who are camped across that 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" (105). Biswas mustered the courage to overcome the resistance and entropy prevalent in the modern society. Thus he chose a way to serve and grow, and

to grow and thus serve the community.

When Biswas narrated to Romi the happiness he found in the forest, which comprised, “the rainbows, the liquor from the ‘*mahua*’ an occasional feast, a lot of dancing and love-making and, more than anything else, no ambition, none at all,” he was convinced to the core (107). He observed the life around to register what Biswas had experienced, and commented that he marvelled at the intense beauty of human relationship that was born out of so much love. Though Romi could not follow Biswas’s path, he could contain his new ambition and discernment. Though Biswas’s personal talents and his family background had favoured him and helped him to achieve the comforts and luxuries of life, his aspiration soared higher still, at a different angle. He wanted to be a refugee from civilization, sitting in the shadow of a *saal* tree, a thousand miles away from home. Romi was shocked to see the metamorphosis. The ten years of life in the wilderness had completely transformed him physically as well as spiritually. His hair had grown lighter and longer than Romi could imagine. His complexion faded as a result of his excess exposure to the sun.

To add spice to Biswas’s fascination for the primitive, he

married Bilasia, the essence of the primitive force. The marriage was a kind of realization of his quest. He fathered two sons, and led a contented life without any sort of disagreements, quarrels and arguments. Therefore he considered Bilasia, a part of his own self and enjoyed a life of peace and harmony. With great happiness he realized: "In spite of all that had happened to him, it came to him as a big surprise that he had no ambition, none at all; not even for becoming a good primitive"(107). The tribals believed that Biswas was the incarnation of their mythical king and possessed many divine gifts as Chandtola, the white-faced cliff of the village which started glowing because of his presence in the village. The ignorance of the primitive people became an advantage to him and they established him on a pedestal. There were many stories to prove his superhuman powers. Dhunia boasted of his greatness, "A tiger had been roaming the jungle for a week killing our cattle. Billy Bhai went into the jungle and spoke to the tiger, and the tiger went away" (114).

Another example of Biswas's superhuman power was displayed when he cured the migraine of Situ, Romi's wife. Once when he visited Romi, he found Situ suffering from

migraine, an illness that had seriously affected her for a long time. Biswas went to her room without any herbs or medicines, and by the time he left, she was completely relieved. Both Situ and Romi were surprised; so also Dhunia and the tribal, for whom he was like rain on parched lands, and like balm on a wound: "These hills have not seen the like of him, since the last of our kings passed away," they agreed (115).

Romi and Biswas could not prevent the tragedy. One day, Romi approached Bilasia with the intention of helping Biswas to escape. He introduced himself as a friend of her husband but she hurriedly replied, ". . . my husband has no friends" and then doubting the purpose of his visit, she said, "I know you have come to take him away" (163). As a confirmation, she asked Romi to promise by touching her child's head that he would not take Biswas away, a simple primitive gesture. The child looked deep into Romi's eyes and that confused him, "How did I know that there wasn't a god, a god apart from the gods of civilized India, a god who had lured Billy away, and who would not now hesitate to smite this child dead for a Collector's lie" (163). Romi tried his best

to convince Bilasia but he did not succeed.

Aware of the danger awaiting him, Biswas warned Romi not to disclose his whereabouts to anyone. But Situ sent the news of his reappearance to Meena and Mr. Biswas, who got the whole government machinery into action. During one such raid on the tribal people, a constable was killed and it was reported that Biswas had speared him to death. Rele, the superintendent of police, was determined to catch the murderer of the constable, dead or alive. Though Romi tried his best to avoid the tragedy, Biswas was killed.

When Bilasia heard the heavy tramp of the police boots, she became an epitome of strength and vitality as against an ordinary woman of the sophisticated society, "Had she been an ordinary woman she would have immediately capitulated. But she was the child of the mountains, and the cold hardness of granite returned to her face" (165). The superintendent of police ran a step ahead of Romi and thus ended the strange case of Billy Biswas. Even while dying, Biswas showed his contempt for the civilized world by uttering "You Bastards" (167). No one understood him and his problems. Nobody cared to fathom his thirst for 'truth'. Deeply grieved by the tragedy, Romi reflects: "What we had

killed was not a man, not even the son of a 'Governor', but someone for whom our civilized world had no equivalent. It was as though we had killed one of the numerous man-gods of the primitive pantheon (169). Though he succeeded in tracing his route and finding his roots in the simplistic world, his life was ripped in the budding stage.

Joshi draws a line of distinction between the two worlds, the sophisticated world of corruption and the simple world of primitivism. The primitive people, though uneducated, are sincere in their words and deeds in comparison with civilized people. Situ's betrayal caused the death of Biswas whereas the primitives were ready to risk their lives for the life of Biswas. The constable was killed by Biswas, the son of the Governor, and Biswas was killed by the Governor's Government. The saddest fact was that Biswas's case was disposed off without investigating the reason for the tragedy. Romi recollects: "It had been disposed of in the only manner that a humdrum society knows of disposing its rebels, its seers, its true lovers . . ." (172). Thus the son of simplicity was killed by the slaves of sophistication. Out of his affection towards his friend, Romi could not forsake Biswas's family in the forest. He invited

them to the civilized society. But the strength of Biswas's world was with his wife and Bilasia firmly replied, "The forest has looked after me until now. The forest will look after me for what little remains in my life" (170).

When Romi met Biswas's son he understood that the son had taken over the strange passion from the father. Moreover he was the young "replica of Billy: proud, intelligent, and unflinchingly brave" (161). Joshi hints that the world would not be free of people who have a secret obsession for simplicity in the midst of sophistication. Hari Mohan Prasad writes:

Billy is like those saints of India who want to realize unity with the divine through awakening of their senses. Like Sadhakas of Tanta, Billy hankers after self realization, the experience of identification with the cosmos, the divine. He gets a taste of it and he cannot return to Meena or Mr. Biswas. For him Bilasia is Prakrti and he is Purush (Male) and the cosmic whole can be experienced in their union. (60)

As Biswas wore the garb of the primitive, he was transformed into a modern prince Siddhattha, who left behind the princely

status and pleasures of life to seek simplicity and attain the Divine Buddhist glory. When Biswas gave up the pleasures of life and embraced the barbaric primitive culture, he found himself free from the troublesome thoughts of rootlessness. As he identified himself with the savage men, and sacrificed his life to preserve its simplicity, he imparted the message of Buddhism, and reached the threshold of divinity:

Thus Siddhattha, the prince, renounced power and worldly pleasures, gave up his kingdom, served all ties, and went into homelessness. He rode out into the silent night . . . Darkness lay upon the earth, but stars shone brightly in the heavens. (20)

The route from sophistication to simplicity is found in the other novels too. Sindi Oberoi in *The Foreigner* is also an uprooted character in a sophisticated world. Born of an English mother and an Indian father who died when little Sindi was only four, he was brought up by his uncle in Kenya. Young Sindi was educated in East Africa, London and America. As he grew up, he was full of contempt for the busy and sophisticated life of America. When Mrs. Blyth bragged about the longer life-span of the Americans, Oberoi ridiculed the state of the contemporary society in the

following words, “And what use have you made of your extra height and extra years? You carry heavier guns and have a longer time to make each other unhappy, that’s all. Can you call that an achievement? (88) Though America was rich, clean, and optimistic he found it empty. He knew that the robot-like life there had made people artificial. He noticed how the participants at the ball arranged by the International Students Association pretended to be courteous even when they did not care for one another. At the time of parting they promised to meet again though they knew it would not be possible: “Strangers parted on the doorsteps promising to meet again, knowing fully well they didn’t mean it. It was the American way.” (23). He tried to unmask the triviality prevalent in the sophisticated society, and searched for a meaning in life.

Notwithstanding the sophisticated norms of civilized America, Oberoi decided to go to India where he expected to enjoy the simplicity of a primitive life. He was like the other foreign students in America, most of whom were lost in the sophisticated societies. While they were attending Professor White’s talk, Sheila interrogated, “Is it true, professor . . . that many Indian students in America feel very lost. . . .

Some of them even commit suicide?” (44) Though White was able to give her a common answer, the question of the lost Indian youth lingered in Oberoi’s mind, and he was greatly worried about Sheila’s brother Babu. Babu, being the son of India, with a number of simple primitive beliefs and tradition, failed to survive the sophisticated style of America. Oberoi once told June that their change of attitude towards many things were rooted in the difference of their culture. “The Statue of Liberty promises you this optimism. But in my world there are no statues of liberty. In my world many things are inevitable and what’s more, most of them are sad and painful. I can’t come to your world. I have no escape, June, I just have no escape” (108).

Oberoi also was fed up with the irrelevant existence in the modern society. Facing some of the terrible consequences of his detachment, he decided to live in India, and hide himself in the simplicity of an ordinary man’s life. He had witnessed the stylish way of living in America and when he witnessed Muthu’s way of life he was totally taken aback and decided to be a part of a simple crowd of people around him. He took over the management of the imprisoned Mr. Khemka’s business and became fully devoted to his task at



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hand. He hoped to carry the sinking ship ashore, and to achieve the goals which the workers of the factory could not have won without his cooperation and guidance. Forgetting his self-interest, he worked day and night, for the benefit of the workers in the factory. He also followed their simplistic lifestyle and found pleasure in it. Thus Oberoi attained the meaning of his life he was searching for and regained his mental tranquillity and emotional security. There is an apt comparison of the novels, *The Foreigner* and *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* in the book, *A Critical Study of the Novels of Arun Joshi, Raja Rao and Sudhin N Ghose*:

The major aspect that differentiates *The Foreigner* from *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is the plane in which issues are involved. In the latter, it is raised some measure above the earthly one and effects a delicate balance between this world and the one beyond. In *The Foreigner* the novelist scrupulously confines himself to this world only, to validate it, as it were, as a test case."

(Abraham 35)

In *The Apprentice*, the route from sophistication to simplicity is portrayed in the life of Ratan Rathor, who struggled against

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the two worlds. His father, a freedom fighter, lived a simple life and dedicated it to the betterment of his country. In contrast to this, was his mother, for whom money was the most important in life. V. Gopal Reddy, in his article, "*The Apprentice, An Existential study*" aptly comments: "It is the story of a young man who out of sheer exhaustion of joblessness and privation is forced to shed the honesty and the old world morality of his father to become an "apprentice" to the corrupt civilization" (Dhawan 223).

Rathor did not care for his father's values or for the martyrs who had sacrificed their lives. He had observed that their values and principles were easily forgotten by the people. In the article, "Crisis and Confession," Tapan Kumar Ghosh says: "Sacrifice was replaced by self-interest, courage and honesty were replaced by cowardice, fraud and deception and ideals by deals" (91). The country, for which his father had squandered his life, appeared to Rathor only as "a nation of dreamers . . . of frustrated men sailing about in a confused society, a society without norms, without direction without even, perhaps a purpose!" (73-4). At the initial stage of his life, Rathor was confused between the clutches of two lifestyles. He wondered whether his destiny awaited him in the

heroic land of freedom-fighting or in the midst of the materialistic gains of the money-centred society. He maintained the idealistic values of his father for a short while. But as he experienced a heartbreaking disappointment while seeking a job in an insensitive city, he was shattered. According to his calculations, he would easily get a job with the influence of his relations in Delhi and thus would be able to make a responsible lifestyle. He was a man of high hopes, but at this stage of life, he struggled hard to make a source of revenue for his existence. As soon as he arrived in Delhi he became a shrewd and cunning man and learnt the crooked ways of the world.

Rathor got accustomed to the sophisticated norms of the society and managed to procure the job of a temporary clerk in the department for war-purchases with the help of a fellow inn-dweller. From then on, he did not look back. Devoting himself wholeheartedly to the build-up of his career in utter defiance of the basic human values, he advanced rapidly in his career. Gradually the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, became totally blurred in his conscience.

Influenced by his colleagues, a month before the Chinese invasion, Rathor cleared a huge pile of useless

military materials lying in Bombay. He was offered a bribe for this and he accepted it with no proper reason. It was a plot designed by the scheming Himmat Singh, popularly known as the Sheikh. This incident marked the lowest point of his downward movement and he realized the meaninglessness of his life spent in the sophisticated society:

Twenty years earlier I had come to this city, just as you have come now: to learn, to work and in the process to make my mark. I had come full of hope, ambition, goodwill; and all that was left was a pile of dung. The grey evening stretched back twenty years until it seemed to me that there had never been sunshine, that for two decades I had lived only in smog: confused, exploited, exploiting, deceiving and now deceived. (133)

Rathor sought the remedy for his soul's solace neither by fighting with the treacherous society nor by detachment. That was how he began his apprenticeship: "Each morning, before I go to work, I come here. I sit on the steps of the temple and while they pray I wipe the shoes of the congregation . . . Then, when they are gone, I stand in the doorway" (142). Thus, he learnt the simple way of cleansing sins through the

humble service at God's feet.

The Last Labyrinth brings out Som Bhaskar's route from the labyrinth of a modern society to the light of a primitive mountain god. The novel upholds the present-day Indian society with its cynicism, loss of faith, confusion of values, and anxieties. Bhaskar was unable to come to terms with life because of his failure to come to terms with himself. Bhaskar, an immensely rich young man who owned a huge plastic manufacturing industry which he had inherited from his father, was initially a scientist but later turned to a businessman. Sophisticated and smart, Bhaskar apparently led a happy life with an educated and trust worthy wife, two children and an expanding business. He had been to one of the world's finest universities, and had observed the different phases of the different societies. A quarter million had been spent on his education. He was acquainted with the western way of life, its pursuit for sophistication and materialism. Yet he knew that "money was dirt; a whore. So were houses, cars, carpets" (11). He suffered from an indefinable hunger that disrupted the harmony of his life. He held the cup of happiness, but he could not drink a drop of it. In the midst of wealth and sophistication, he felt a void within and yearned for simplicity.

As Bhaskar sat with, Aftab and Anuradha, in the Haveli, he was reminded of the insignificance of his existence, “If someone, man or god had watched my life from a great height, would I have appeared to him like an ant threading through a maze, knocking about, against one wall, then another” (53)?

Bhaskar felt himself an insignificant part of the world, in comparison to the huge and hilarious Haveli, and its inhabitants. He was influenced by Azizum’s music, “It was husky, a little nasal, and it reminded you of that core of loneliness around which all of us are built. It must have emerged from the slums of Benaras but centuries had gone into its perfection” (55). The sad songs of Azizum, taught Bhaskar the fact that all the struggles to climb up ladder of success were futile. Only a simple life led with faith matters in the long run. Anuradha noticed Bhaskar’s expression and saw the streak of sadness in the depth of his eyes. It terribly surprized her that a man of such an affluent family should be so sad for an unknown reason. At that moment he went through a tremendous experience: “At that hour, the grounds of Aftab’s Haveli looked like the wilderness that surrounds

of Aftab's Haveli looked like the wilderness that surrounds abandoned tombs" (59). The silence and the strangeness dragged Bhaskar towards Anuradha.

In one of their intimate conversations Anuradha told him of a God in the mountains. Bhaskar showed no interest because he had grown with his eyes closed to the world of faith, God and mysteries. But later when he was deprived of all the pleasures of life, including his lady love, Anuradha, he was eager to seek the mountain-God hoping to attain self-complacency and peace of mind. As he climbed the mountain to get united with the mountain God, he is supposed to have traced his route from sophistication to simplicity. Aftab's life also declined from a high level sophistication down to base simplicity. Anuradha referred to him as a man of 'make-beliefs'. He made himself believe that Anuradha was his wife, and that they were leading a peaceful and joyful married life, and that nobody could harm them in their sophisticated Haveli. He considered Haveli a labyrinth from which no one could drag them out. However his beliefs were shattered when a strong bond of relationship developed between Anuradha and Bhaskar. Aftab lost his self-control and wrote a

letter cursing Bhaskar: “. . . how I hate you . . . curse you . . . you escaped to the hotel that night . . . but how long . . . your time will come . . . while you live you will rot . . . when dead you shall not find peace . . . from one graveyard to another you will wander . . . a million years” (222). As the novel ends, the sophisticated description of the Haveli, the moghul empire and the Ajanta rock give way to the simple narration of the mountains.

The City and the River, set against the primitive backdrop of nature’s dominance, reflects the sophistication of the Indian ruling system and also the cult of simplicity in the Indian people. Harish Raizada in his article “Double Vision of Fantasy and Reality in Arun Joshi’s Novels,” comments: “Joshi has placed his book in a ‘temporal setting which is deliberately confused. Actually, the novel is a meeting of different societies - one with Hermits, Yajnas, sacrifice, primitive people co-exist with electronic surveillance, ultra modern lasers, helicopters, videos, spying and inquisition” (Dhawan 69).

The Grand Master, the descendent of many Grand Masters, possessed an ancestry of riches and sophistication. He grew up in the place where his family had lived for

seventy years. As a ruler he visited his subjects but had never attempted to familiarize himself with the people around. He was not aware of the simplicity of the lives they were living in. He believed that he loved the city and the people but there was no certainty about it. He was doubtful about their fidelity towards him. He tried to improve his governing power by instituting various organizary boards. Overwhelmed by the dream he had, he tried to visualise himself as the king of the city and asked the grand father to name a new rose 'king'. In comparison with the sophisticated life of the Grand Master, the simple life of the boatmen was nothing. Though they did not pose a threat to the Grand Master, they were many in number and that was an element of danger. None of the sophisticated norms of the modern society hindered them from their natural growth. He dreamt that he had become a King, enthroned on top of a hill surrounded by the water of the river. The Astrologer interpreted the dream as a warning of the rebellion of the people. The boatmen posing a threat to the King and his throne formed the opposition Group. Their strength and number posed a threat to the city and the palace as well. As the Astrologer says, "The danger posed by their numbers, not only to the city but also to the palace

itself. As their numbers grow so does the discontent and so much easier does it become for the spark of rebellion to ignite” (16).

The simplicity of the boatmen’s life filled the Grand Master with contempt for them. He was disgusted at their ugliness and nakedness. All the same, he knew that without their support he would not be able to continue with his reign. So he sent the Astrologer as his mediator to speak on behalf of him. On the bank of the river, the Astrologer addressed the public: “My children, “God has sent the Grand Master to be your servant. Looking after this city is like *Yajna* for him and his life is the *Abuti* (17). The Astrologer’s speech was a little too much for the simple folk. Most of the people did not comprehend what he said, but out of their innocence and simplicity they applauded him. They did not understand his hints at the increasing treachery and rebellious behaviour among the people when he said, “A large number of asuras have taken human form and have descended to disturb the *Yajna* (18).

The Grand Master’s powerful hands extended all over the city and he employed several means to crush down those who were not with him. This continued and the poor people

of the river had no one to turn to. It was at this juncture that nature came to the rescue of the human beings. It rained continuously for seven days and seven nights. On the eighth day the sun rose and from a clear sky stared down at a vast sea of water. "Of the Grandmaster and his city, nothing remained" (260). Thus the simple power of nature overruled the entire sophisticated symbols of man's power. The very title of the novel *The City and the River* includes the themes of sophistication and simplicity. If "the city" stands for sophistication, "the river" stands for simplicity. The mechanized modern city failed before the great primitive force, the river.

The Strange Case of Billy Biswas is a fascinating novel to an interested reader, who experiences the thrill of an exciting high-level life with Biswas and later shares his bitterness. The interested reader understands that Biswas is suffocated by the sophistication of the society and believes that it is high time he accepted the simplicity of a primitive life. The disinterested reader raises several questions of significance for he does not agree with the idea that going to the forest is the only way towards a simple life. Being impartial he wonders how Biswas could be relaxed and peaceful when denied of all

the familiar luxuries of life. Meanwhile, the uninterested reader is shocked to find Billy descending to the level of a primitive. He cannot accept such an action from the son of a High Court judge, who has a doctorate to his credit and the honours of a civilized life. An uninterested reader also blames Biswas for his instant and unmeditative decision of moving into a jungle.

The response of the readers regarding the heroes, vary from person to person, group to group. The interested reader rejoices with Sindi Oberoi of *The Foreigner* for forsaking the sophisticated norms in America and accepting the simplicity of his land. If Oberoi finds his roots, the greatest dream of a foreigner is fulfilled. On the other hand, the disinterested reader is not so eager about Oberoi's return. In fact he is unconcerned about it because he believes a person and not the place is the point. The uninterested reader accuses him for preferring the primitive to the sophisticated.

The interested reader of *The Apprentice* is happy to watch Ratan Rathor on the steps of the temple polishing shoes, free of all the troubles and tribulations of life. The disinterested reader partially agrees with the action and partially wonders whether such a repentant step is possible

for a man of Rathor's background. The uninterested reader is not convinced that a person like Rathor can stoop to shine shoes at the doorstep of a temple. But he swallows the statements as they are.

Som Bhaskar of *The Last Labyrinth* is a credible character for the interested reader who is conscious of Bhaskar's success. The disinterested reader approves of his lack of interest in the glamorous world but disapproves of his infatuation for Anuradha. The uninterested reader protests against the relationship as a shameful one. He also disbelieves Bhaskar's final action.

In *The City and the River* the interested reader applauds the interference of nature at the right time to make everyone believe in the omnipotent. The disinterested reader is not willing to accept the power of nature pervading over human beings. At the same time, he confirms that the Grand Master's monopoly is unacceptable. The uninterested reader refuses to confirm the idea of nature overpowering man. He also dares to criticize Joshi for concluding the novel upholding the primitive concept of nature's domination over man.

“We think we leave our actions behind, but the past is never dead. Time has a way of exacting its toll and the more you hold out, the heavier the toll is.”

Arun Joshi