

**HENDERSON THE RAIN KING AND THE STRANGE CASE OF BILLY BISWAS- A  
COMPARATIVE STUDY FROM EXISTENTIAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Existentialism views an individual as a casualty of society and its laws. It champions for the privilege of the existing person to chalk his own course of life. It highlights that a human being is ultimately responsible for his/her own actions. He/She should be honest to himself/herself and in this process undergo alienation and loneliness. For him/her, the feelings of anguish are created as he/she identifies the freedom of will over the manner the world finds him, the manner normally he/she is expected to behave, the ideas of behavior which decide the society.

Key words: Existentialism, Identity crisis, Primitivism, Spiritual Integration, rootlessness.

Saul Bellow, in his fictional work, never tried to restore the religious faith nor was he annoyed with the morally abused conduct of human beings. All his novels took efforts to establish a positive approach in life and humanity.

Henderson the Rain King is a different novel of Saul Bellow. In it, Saul Bellow has smartly worked on a different theme in a diligent manner. In the novel, Henderson happens to be a representative of a set of people who are gifted with everything, yet they are unhappy due to an unknown fear. Bellow, through Henderson, has talked about common ennui and anxiety which are present in all living beings due to unintelligible existence on earth. In addition, also talked about the unavoidable nature of death and the fear it has created in human minds.

He is frustrated with the civilization and moves to the interiors of Africa continent where he comes across humanity in a primitive stage. Through his sudden sojourn in Africa, Henderson tries to settle his inner quest and dispel the fear of death.

Arun Joshi's second novel is *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas*. This novel talks about man's predicament in a civilized society and his inner crisis or being in the world. This novel discusses the crisis of rootlessness and in the words of the novelist, the novel is an attempt.

“towards a better understanding  
of the world and of the self.” (Bannerji 3)

Like Henderson, the protagonist Billy Biswas displays disinterestedness towards the civilized society and nurtures a lasting ambition to join the world of a pure reality. Billy gets alienated from this world in his search for solace of inner self.

Although Bellow and Joshi are from two different cultures and countries, yet Henderson the Rain king and The Strange Case of Billy Biswas offer interest to the carry out a comparative study. Basically, both of them dwell deep into the inner layers of man's psyche. They are very keen in bringing out the hidden desires of their protagonists who are the frustrated souls with an urge to make some compromises in the civilized world so as to lead a primitive life with savage desires. Both Bellow and Joshi make efforts to find solution for the central dichotomy of the modern man's transition from personal chaos to spiritual reintegration, from ignorance to knowledge, from absurdness to belief in complete denial and segregation.

Both the authors bring forth the imaginative cultural traits and the wild drives of primitive instincts. Their protagonists reel under the impact of confusion, frustration, disintegration, disillusionment and alienation.

In Saul Bellow's *Henderson the Rain King*, Eugene Henderson is a millionaire. In spite of his riches, exalted social status and physical prowess, he leads a restless and unfulfilled life. He is tormented by a cry to go in pursuit of something that might fulfill his desire to arrive at wisdom undisturbed by modern sophistication. He moves to an isolated place in East Africa with an Romilayu who takes him to the Arnewi tribe. After reaching Africa, he comes across a native guide tribe who treat cattle as their relatives. Unable to find any peace there, he goes to Wariri and meets King Dahfu. During the tribal festival, Henderson is able to move the idol of Mummah, the rain goddess and becomes the Sungo, the Rain king. When King Dahfu gets killed, Henderson escapes from the place so as to avoid becoming the next king. This he does by fearing that he would be thrown into the lion's den to be killed by the lion.

Joshi's *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* dwells into the contemporary man's inner crisis of being separated from the modern society. *The Strange Case of Billy Biswas* is about a young man Billy Biswas whose story is narrated by his friend Romesh Sahai. In the novel, Billy's father sends him to Columbia University to study engineering. However, Billy abandons engineering and studies anthropology. He marries Meena. His longing for tribe's life and hatred for civilized society serve as a catalyst for him to disappear into the Saal forest of the Salpura Hills in Madhya Pradesh. There he starts living with Bilasia. After sometimes, Romi finds Billy being tribalized completely. The aggrieved Billy's father seeks the help of police to retrieve him. In the operation, Billy is shot dead by a police man.

For both Bellow and Joshi, their fictional characters are the projection of their libido that prefer fantasy to escape from the sordid realities. The characters of Bellow and Joshi are similar to their counterparts in the present world as they appear to be going in a world free of all values while their quest for props is doomed to an end. For example, Henderson comes back to America after his mission fails. Likewise, Biswas emerges out of the hill only to be shot dead by a policeman.

Both the novels exhibit a metaphysical quest and are related to a deeper exploration of the human soul. Bellow and Joshi picture a world where an individual is confronted by the self and the doubts about human existence and rituals. In pursuit of their true selves, Henderson and Billy involve themselves in evaluating the inscrutable region of uncertainty and inscrutability. The darker recesses of their human psyche identifies instincts and impulses at work in the nihilistic society. They make attempts to find out the meaning of life hidden in the inner self of a man so as to plan ways and means for removing the difference between individual pursuits and his fulfillment.

Henderson and Billy are gross misfits in the world where they survive as their inner selves are darkened ones. In this context, R.S.Pathak observes:

“while experiencing the normal claims  
of love and hatred, doubts and  
dilemmas.” (139)

**He further observes:**

“they try to face challenges of their meaningless life  
by outstripping the narrow confines of their  
distracted selves.” (139)

Henderson and Billy unravel the crisis in their mind with the complication that the atmosphere in which they live is stiffening and stifling their troubled psyche. Both respond favourable to the voice of their inner calls. They embrace primitive culture by discarding their wives, children, status and so on. To correct themselves from this condition, they get involved in a spiritual journey from disintegration to integration by sacrificing the material world for a primitive world. Henderson with the aid of an African native named Romilayu moves to primitive Africa.

Similarly, Billy Biswas moves into the Saal forests of the Maikala Hills during one of his anthropological excursions. However, there is one striking difference between them in leading a primitive life. Henderson's primitive life is deliberate and well planned whereas Billy's is spontaneous without any resistance and prior planning.

Both the novels cultivate the theme of an individual's feeling of anxiety and alienation. The feeling of alienation and anarchy as well as the crisis of identity for both Henderson and Billy are present at the spiritual and mental level. They come scything out of the upper crust of the society, power and privilege that directs them, still they tend to be indifferent and hostile.

It is quite interesting to note that both the authors employed 'nature-culture forces in their novels. They made efforts to establish that every man is born with an inbuilt nature. When he grows, he has to learn to locate and follow his nature. In the *Strange Case of Billy Biswas*, he learns to do this whereas the rest of the characters are lead astray by culture. Both Henderson and Billy are sufferers and they meet a tragic end due to their dominance of the culture world and the death of a decisive direction from within. They toil under extreme pressure from the world of materiality and they willingly go in pursuit of primitive life in the company of tribes in Africa and Maikala Hills in Satpura region.

In both the novels, journey implies an essential form. It represents the sincere resolve to start things afresh in life's functions. They steadily march towards the discovery of their selves finally. Henderson comes back to America and Billy is shot dead while he was coming out of the Saal forest. From the world of exotic fantasy and orgiastic sex, they move to the world of chaos. Their exotic exodus makes them comeback to the humdrum society which minimizes their existence. They become vapours and nowhere men in their vagrancy.

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### Journal Details

|                                     |  |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| Journal Title (in English Language) | Journal of Education, Rabindra Bharati University (print only)   (Current Table of Contents) |
| Publication Language                | English  |
| Publisher                           | Department of Education, Rabindra Bharati University   |
| ISSN                                | 0972-7175  |
| E-ISSN                              | NA   |
| Discipline                          | Social Science   |
| Subject                             | Social Sciences (all)  |
| Focus Subject                       | Education  |