

THE Q&A OF VIKAS SWARUP AS AN ANALYSIS OF MODERN INDIA Rupesh Krushnarao Thombare

ABSTRACT

This research explores Vikas Swarup's novel Q & A as an incisive commentary on modern India, bridging fiction and reality to portray the stark social contrasts within the country. Swarup's protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas, an uneducated young man from a Mumbai slum, wins a massive television quiz show prize, using his life experiences to answer questions. This victory challenges conventional societal structures, illustrating how lived experiences can serve as valid sources of knowledge. Through Ram's journey, the novel addresses themes of socioeconomic disparity, religious plurality, and the transformative power of media in neoliberal India. Swarup's narrative critiques the exploitation faced by the marginalized while revealing a deeper human resilience. Q & A embodies an empathetic exploration of India's complexities, using unique narrative forms and character arcs to underscore the essence of hope and struggle amidst adversity.

KEYWORDS: Vikas Swarup, Q & A, modern India, socioeconomic disparity, media influence, resilience, fiction.

INTRODUCTION

The best literary medium for authors to stay in touch with society and engage average readers has long been thought to be fiction. This is particularly true in India, where English-language authors have greatly influenced the development and appeal of the English novel. Due in major part to the efforts of Indian writers who have broadened its popularity and breadth, the novel has become one of the most popular literary forms. The first full-length English-language Indian book was Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864), which marked the beginning of the Indian novel in English. Lal Behari Day's *Govind Samanta* (1874), also titled *The History of a Bengal Raiyat*, was another early landmark that strengthened the genre's position in Indian literature.

Indian English literature has changed significantly throughout the years, embracing the multicultural realities of a society that is evolving quickly but yet representing the traditional Indian cultural ethos. Alongside new modes of expression, themes including social justice, political conflicts, and the complexity of contemporary identity have gained prominence. Indian books are now more widely available in English thanks to this exciting development, which has also increased their audience both domestically and internationally.

Salman Rushdie's 1981 Booker Prize win for his book *Midnight's Children* was a turning point in Indian English literature. Indian English authors gained confidence from this triumph, which demonstrated that their writing could compete globally and garner praise from all quarters. A major paradigm shift in Indian English literature occurred throughout the 20th century, which was characterized by dramatic shifts in many other areas. By tackling the intricate social, religious, and political institutions of modern-day India as well as the rich history of Indian storytelling, it started to establish its independence and identity.

Today, Indian English literature is a potent medium that not only preserves India's literary legacy but also gives the nation's changing social and cultural themes a voice. In addition to enhancing the larger literary community, it still influences how people throughout the globe see India.¹

British director Danny Boyle's Oscar-winning 2008 film *Slumdog Millionaire* was based on Vikas Swarup's phenomenal first novel *Q & A* (2005), which propelled the book to literary superstardom. An officer of the Indian Foreign Service and diplomat, Vikas Swarup was born into a legal family in Allahabad in 1963. He has diplomatic experience in four countries: US, Turkey, Ethiopia, and UK. "A diplomat who writes, not the other way around" is how Swarup describes himself. His other works include *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013) and *Six Suspects* (2009). *The Accidental Apprentice* and *Six Suspects* (2009) are both bildungsromans based on reality TV, but *The Accidental Apprentice* is more of a detective story with a murder at its core. *Six Suspects* is more of a kaleidoscope of characters than a murder mystery. The book has six suspects, including a politician, a bureaucrat, a Bollywood celebrity, a young Andaman tribal guy, a redneck from the United States, and a graduate from a slum. They are all in the same place at the same time and are accused of a high-profile murder, which causes their lives to overlap and eventually bring them together. The sales of *Six Suspects* have equaled those of Swarup's first novel. *Radio 4*

¹ K. Rajyalakshmi and Dr. V.S.V. Laxmi Ramana, 'A Study of Vikas Swarup's Q&A in Bildungsroman', *International Research Journal of Engineering and Technology*, 9.8 (2022), p. 1677.

commissioned a radio play based on the novel, and it has sold translation rights in thirty languages. The BBC and Starfield Productions have optioned the film. A film adaptation of *The Accidental Apprentice*, which has already been dramatized for BBC Radio Four's 15 Minute Drama, has caught Sriram Raghavan's attention. In order to be selected as the chief executive officer of a ten billion dollar firm, the female protagonist of the Bildungsroman *The Accidental Apprentice* is required to complete seven tests from the "textbook of life."

The reader's prize at the 2006 South African Exclusive Books Boeke Prize, the Best Travel Read at the 2009 Heathrow Travel Product Award, a Commonwealth Writer's Prize shortlist for Best First Book, and the Prix Grand Public at the 2007 Paris Book Fair are just a few of the many accolades bestowed upon Q & A. The book has been made into a BBC radio play and Danny Boyle's film *Slumdog Millionaire*; it has also been translated into 43 languages worldwide. The film has been recognized with more than 70 accolades, such as four Golden Globes, eight Oscars, and seven BAFTAs.²

India is a land of diverse languages, cultures, and lifestyles, where the rich and the poor coexist, each living according to their own preferences and choices. It is a country that houses some of the world's wealthiest individuals, yet it is also home to vast slums where the poor struggle for basic necessities. Many of these people, often illiterate, face challenges in securing their daily bread. However, they continue to lead their lives with hope and resilience, driven by their unwavering desire for a better future. This spirit demonstrates that even in the harshest of conditions, they are not symbols of despair or hopelessness, but rather of perseverance, constantly striving for success and productivity.

Vikas Swarup's work vividly captures this duality. His novel, *Q & A*, highlights the fundamental unity of India's major religions—Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam—amidst the country's complex socio-religious dynamics. The protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas, adopts different identities to navigate various social contexts: he becomes Mohammad for his Muslim friend, Thomas for an Australian diplomat, and Ram for an Indian actress who is uncomfortable hiring a Muslim servant. Through these transformations, Swarup subtly portrays the deep-seated religious tensions prevalent in India while emphasizing the adaptability and resilience of the common man in the face of such challenges. Swarup's contribution to Indian writing in English is both unique and significant. Unlike many other writers, he brings fresh perspectives, contemporary themes, and innovative storytelling structures to the literary landscape. His novel *Q & A* opens with a gripping and unexpected line:

"I have been arrested for winning a game show"³.

This intriguing start not only captivates the reader but also sets the tone for a narrative filled with twists, turns, and social commentary, making Swarup stand out as a modern voice in Indian literature.

Q & A takes place in the bustling metropolis of Mumbai and tells the riveting life story of 18-year-old Ram Mohammad Thomas, a naive tiffin-boy from Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia. Ram triumphs against all obstacles, rising from humble origins and without formal education, to win a general knowledge television quiz show and collect an extraordinary award of one billion rupees. His triumph, however, is not the result of an expansive knowledge base but rather a combination of sheer luck and the richness of his life experiences. Each question he answers on the quiz show relates to specific events from his life, highlighting how lived experiences can serve as sources of knowledge in unconventional ways.

Ram's unexpected victory challenges societal norms and assumptions, especially given that an uneducated individual like him was not anticipated to perform so well in such a challenging quiz show. His success, however, arouses suspicion, and the producers of the show, unwilling to part with the prize money, accuse him of fraud. Ram must then embark on a journey to prove his innocence and demonstrate that his victory was legitimate.

The novel explores the transformative potential of global capitalism, particularly through its manifestation in reality television. Shows like the quiz contest in *Q & A* provide opportunities for India's marginalized and downtrodden, offering a rare path to upward social mobility for those who otherwise have little hope of escaping poverty. Through Ram's journey, the novel reflects on the commodification of human stories and struggles within a neoliberal framework, where even the poorest can be transformed into consumerist subjects. Ram's transformation from a slum

² Dr. Dhiraj J. Deshmukh, 'Vikas Swarup's Q And A From Print To Celluloid', *Purana*, 64.1 (2022), p. 14.

³ Vikas Swarup, 'Q&A. 2005', *London: Black Swan-Transworld Publishers*, 2009, p. 11.

boy into a potential millionaire underscores the novel's commentary on the dynamics of wealth, power, and social change in contemporary India.⁴

The novel has been characterized as a picaresque story in several reviews. According to India Today, the book is "A picaresque ride through the underbelly of urban India where evil hides in the most ordinary places ... Despite an overdose of darkness, of the evil's endless trysts with a boy, the novel is for the most part stripped of overt sentimentality. It is the terseness of narrative that gives the book an air of contemporaneity. It is the tale of the new millennium's just-turned adults, the heirs to midnight's overgrown children".⁵ Both novels examined in this chapter have often been misinterpreted as picaresque due to the presence of common characteristics such as a young protagonist, episodic structure, and autobiographical elements. However, while the two genres share these features, the Bildungsroman differs in its philosophical depth and emphasis on the hero's personal development and transformation. The Bildungsroman centers on the hero's journey to find their place in society and craft a personal philosophy, culminating in the protagonist's social integration. In contrast, the picaresque novel, characterized by its central figure, the "picaro," portrays a static character—one who engages in various adventures but undergoes little change. The "picaro" encounters society without the emotional and intellectual growth seen in the Bildungsroman's protagonist. Instead, the picaresque focuses on critiquing society, with less emphasis on the individual's evolution. The protagonist of the story, Ram Mohammad Thomas, was born into a broken family when his mother left him. The Catholic priest Father Timothy takes Ram in as an orphan and nurtures him in his Delhi home. During his first years in the orphanage, he is not given a name. In an effort to win over the local religious authorities, Father Timothy changed his name from Joseph Michael Thomas—which he had originally meant to adopt—to Ram Mohammad Thomas.

"He explained to me that I was an orphan child left behind by my mother in the clothes bin of St Mary's Orphanage, and that was why he was white and I was not. It was then, for the first time, that I understood the distinction between father and Father".⁶

This quote from Q & A by Vikas Swarup captures a significant moment in the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas's life, where he begins to understand the complexities of identity, family, and social hierarchies. When the priest explains to him that he was abandoned by his mother and found in an orphanage, Ram comes to a profound realization about the difference between his personal relationships and institutional roles.

The "father" in the quote refers to the priest, a figure of authority and care in the orphanage, who plays a paternal role in Ram's life. However, Ram's realization that this man is not his biological father ("Father") highlights the emotional and social gap between them. The distinction between "father" and "Father" underscores Ram's understanding of his own lack of familial ties and heritage, reinforcing his sense of being an outsider in a society that places significant value on family and lineage.

Moreover, the racial difference mentioned in the quote ("he was white and I was not") emphasizes Ram's growing awareness of the social divisions based on race and status. It signifies a moment of awakening where Ram begins to comprehend not only the personal loss of family but also the larger societal boundaries that define relationships and identity. This understanding marks an important step in his journey toward self-awareness, shaping his perspective on the world as he navigates his life in the context of poverty, abandonment, and survival.

Ram learns English from Father Timothy and uses his skills to become a leader among the youths in the Juvenile Home:

"Without even trying, I became their leader. Not because I was bigger, not because I was more aggressive, but because I spoke English. I was the orphan boy who could speak and read the magic language, and its effect on the officials was electric".⁷

⁴ Abhisek Upadhyay and Dr. Siddhartha Sharma, 'Vikas Swarup's Q & A: Growing Up in Neoliberal India', *Literary Herald*, 6.6 (2021), p. 8.

⁵ Charmy Harikrishnan, 'Q&A: Vikas Swarup's Tale of a 'Slumdog Millionaire'', *India Today*, 2019.

⁶ Vikas Swarup, 'Q&A. 2005', London: Black Swan-Transworld Publishers, 2009, p. 55.

⁷ Vikash Swarup, 'Q&A. 2005', London: Black Swan-Transworld Publishers, 2009, p. 88.

In the developing world, proficiency in English is often seen as essential not only for personal economic advancement but also for broader national economic development. English serves as a gateway to better employment opportunities, higher social status, and access to global networks. For Ram, his ability to speak English proves to be a crucial asset that significantly improves his prospects in life. It allows him to secure jobs with foreigners and wealthy individuals, giving him opportunities that would have otherwise been out of reach. His fluency in English lands him various roles, such as working as a waiter for the famous actress Neelima Kumari, serving as a personal attendant for an Australian diplomat in Delhi, and working as a tourist guide at the Taj Mahal in Agra. These positions not only provide Ram with a means of livelihood but also expose him to different aspects of society and culture, further expanding his worldview. Ram's experience reflects a broader societal reality in which English, often regarded as a "magic language," acts as a tool for bridging the gap between the marginalized and the elite, ultimately opening doors to upward mobility in a globalized economy.

Ram, who is eight years old at the time of his death, visits a juvenile home where he meets Salim Ilyasi, a little kid from Bihar who became an orphan as a result of a sectarian conflict. A group of beggars buy Ram and Salim and bring them to Mumbai. After escaping the Beggar Gang, Ram found employment as a tiffin boy for Neelima Kumari, a Hollywood actress. Ram, who lives in the chawls of Dharavi, makes an effort to learn as much as he can. After crippling his own father, Shantaram, Ram rescues Gudiya, a local girl who had been molested by Shantaram, and knocks him down from a high structure. Fearing arrest for the murder he feels he committed against Shantaram, Ram flees to Delhi.

An Australian ambassador in Delhi employs the protagonist, who is thirteen years old. A diplomat was apprehended by Ram on suspicion of espionage. While returning to Mumbai, Ram falls victim to a train fraud and loses all of his hard-earned money. After killing one of the robbers, Ram runs away to Agra and takes a job as a tour guide at the Taj Mahal. During his time in Agra, Ram develops feelings for Nita, a prostitute. Ram travels to Mumbai to visit Salim, who is attending acting school, after he is unable to get her from her pimps with the appropriate amount of money.

Ram finds an advertising for the quiz show *Who Will Win A Billion* while working as a bartender at a substandard hotel. He enters the program not for the cash, but to get right with Prem Kumar, who had bullied his former boss Neelima Kumari and his sweetheart Nita. Prem Kumar makes fun of Ram's low socioeconomic status and family history throughout the quiz. In spite of Prem Kumar's threats to leave the program, Ram remains steadfast and manages to answer every single question, drawing on an unlikely combination of chance and his own life experiences. Ram forgoes taking retribution after winning the jackpot and instead decides to distribute the windfall to those in need. Ram keeps his moral compass sharp, in contrast to Balram Halwai, who spirals into a psychopath in his quest of fame and fortune. He assists others in their time of need, even if he is poor himself. Ram had seen tremendous poverty before his triumph on the program, and he had known tremendous affluence thereafter.⁸

The writer effectively illustrates the plight of impoverished individuals and slum dwellers who suffer under unjust legal practices that favor the wealthy elite. This systemic inequity is vividly depicted at the beginning of the narrative when Ram, despite his success in a quiz competition, is unjustly imprisoned. The show's producers, motivated by their greed for the one-billion-dollar prize, resort to corruption by bribing the Home Minister and the Police Commissioner to coerce Ram into falsely confessing that he cheated to win. This scenario underscores a harsh reality where those with financial power can manipulate law enforcement to perpetuate their control over the vulnerable. The police boast about their ability to extract confessions through third-degree torture, often leaving no visible marks on the victim's body, thereby highlighting the brutal lengths to which the wealthy will go to maintain their dominance while the marginalized continue to suffer in silence. This commentary serves as a poignant critique of societal structures that prioritize wealth over justice, ultimately illustrating the broader implications of such corruption in the legal system.

Swarup emphasizes the significance of money and power in the context of exploitation, as well as the fact that those who are economically disadvantaged and underprivileged are consistent victims of exploitation. In the chapter titled "The Burden of a Priest," Swarup describes a different kind of exploitation known as child molestation. This type of exploitation occurs when a young priest violently sexually attacks a youngster. In the chapter that came before this one, the main character went into detail about the whole event. They are caught red-handed when Ram learns that

⁸ Abhisek Upadhyay and Dr. Siddhartha Sharma, 'Vikas Swarup's Q & A: Growing Up in Neoliberal India', *Literary Herald*, 6.6 (2021), p. 9.

John, a young dad, has sexually abused Timothy's concealed kid. Ram in turn discovers that John has done this. The portrayal of Young Father John is that of a gay guy who often invites individuals from outside the church for the purpose of gratifying his sexual desires. One day, he makes an effort to use this evil method on the son that father Timothy has concealed, but Ram is able to uncover his scheme. Swarup does an excellent job of portraying the fragile mind of the contemporary man.

Vikas Swarup vividly captures the deep anxiety that the typical man has of both criminals and law enforcement, illuminating the dire situation of civilian security in modern-day India. He delivers a biting indictment of an economically unequal world in which people are not treated fairly for their hard work and brains. In this light, the country's great qualities are conspicuously undervalued and eclipsed by the harsh reality that its people must contend with. Two Indian characters, one wealthy and the other poor, are at the heart of the story; their contrast highlights the misery of their lives. While the affluent character is entangled in a society full of crime, dishonesty, artificiality, and widespread corruption, which erodes basic human values, the impoverished character represents the severe inequalities of their life.

Swarup also transports the viewer to the gloomy setting of a Delhi government-run juvenile detention facility, where little Ram is housed after the untimely passing of Father Timothy, his guardian. This so-called halfway home exposes a sobering truth: officials waste public monies, leaving the children to endure subpar clothes, food, sanitation, healthcare, education, and leisure activities. Inflicting psychological torture, the superintendents create an environment in which each kid carries a tragic story that mirrors the harsh destiny of the nation's future. Every tale is a sobering reminder of the potential squandered in a country where optimism is often dashed and innocence is abused.

Swarup also draws attention to another horrifying problem with orphanages and the so-called beggar lords who take advantage of these defenseless kids for financial gain. By offering false promises of better life, these people entice children away from their families and pay government authorities to take them, only to expose them to exploitative lives. Many children who are drawn to urban areas end up being disfigured and coerced into begging; others are even blinded to improve their ability to beg. Mamman Pillai, an infamous Bombay beggar-master, buys Ram and his friend Salim. Salim, who aspires to work in Bollywood, is first mesmerized by their arrival in the busy metropolis and is not aware of the harsh reality and extremes of exploitation he would face. In addition to bringing to light the plight of Indian children, this moving story offers a sobering critique of the structural flaws that let these atrocities to continue.

The book Swarup sheds light on the extravagant lifestyle of the neocolonial ruling elite, as well as the corrupt nature of the government system and the opaque deals that plague it. In addition to that, he sheds light on the mental slavery and white supremacy that exist in contemporary India. Colonel Taylor, the diplomat in charge of the Australian embassy, decides to engage Ram as a servant because of his grasp of the English language. It is the assertion of the Taylors that Indians are willing to do anything in order to receive bribes. When it comes to the postman, the electrician, the phone repairman, and even the census taker who disregards the staff, there is a propensity for bribery to be used as a means of proving one's credibility.

In his narrative, Swarup uses a diverse array of female characterizations to illustrate the paralyzing effects of women's aggression. The persistence of violence among women contributes to an ecological imbalance within society. To prevent more significant issues related to female marginalization, this negative behavior toward women must be addressed. Creating a safe, violence-free environment for girls requires fundamental changes in how men perceive and treat women; otherwise, the slogan "SAVE THE GIRL-CHILD" will remain unfulfilled. Thus, it is essential to tackle this issue at its roots. Women should be treated with dignity and equality, not merely out of sympathy. In this context, Swarup's motivation for depicting a character like Ram becomes complex and challenging to interpret.

Despite the fact that the culture is rife with violence, he is at least the embodiment of non-violence and is working toward the establishment of a new civilization that is gender-free. Not only is this a remarkable accomplishment, but it also provides solace to the women in our society who are suffering from anxiety.⁹

⁹ Dr. Vaibhav Pimpale, 'Vikas Swarup's Q&A as a Critique of Contemporary India', *Research Journal of English Language and Literature* (, 9.1 (2021), p. 466.

The novel effectively employs various literary devices, including myths, symbols, and narratives that intertwine slum life, disruption, and question-and-answer formats. Despite these elements, its realism shines through in the vivid depiction of India, seen from the perspective of an Indian diplomat. This character has the unique ability to resonate with the deepest concerns of the nation and amplify the voices of the marginalized.

The narrative unfolds like a roller coaster ride through the contemporary Indian psyche, intricately linked with significant events from the country's recent history. The fragmented memories presented in the story echo Salman Rushdie's concept in *Imaginary Homelands*, where he observes that "Memory... selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies, [and creates] a usually coherent version of events; and no same human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own".¹⁰ These recollections are meticulously excavated by adept authors who navigate the same experiences as their characters, aiding them in reconstructing and validating their memories within the current socio-political landscape of India.

Through its intricate storytelling and emotional depth, *Q & A* positions itself as one of the most significant novels of our time, offering a poignant critique of contemporary India. Its narrative intensity captures the complexities of life in India, making it a compelling read that engages with the nation's struggles and triumphs. By weaving together personal stories and broader societal issues, the novel invites readers to reflect on the realities faced by many, thereby cementing its place in modern literature.

CONCLUSION

Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* offers a nuanced portrayal of modern India, blending hope, resilience, and systemic inequalities. Through protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas, Swarup introduces a character who rises above his socio-economic hardships not through formal education but through knowledge gained from personal experiences. Each quiz question Ram answers is tied to a pivotal life event, highlighting how real-world challenges can shape individuals in ways that formal learning often cannot, especially in a society deeply divided by class and opportunity. The novel explores various facets of Indian society—religious diversity, economic disparity, and institutional corruption—reflecting the dual nature of India, where the marginalized navigate a landscape of wealth and poverty. Ram's journey captures the resilience of millions who, despite systemic challenges, continue to strive. The contrast between slums and elites underscores the novel's central theme: the impact of neoliberal capitalism on India's poor. Reality television, through the quiz show, becomes a symbol of social mobility, though constrained by classist biases and stereotypes. Swarup critiques the structures that allow the elite to exploit legal and economic systems while the underprivileged suffer. Themes of corruption, child exploitation, and religious prejudice are interwoven with Ram's life, reflecting broader societal ills. Despite this, the novel presents a hopeful message, urging compassion, justice, and social awareness. *Q & A* stands as a significant work in contemporary Indian literature, resonating with the struggles and aspirations of its people while advocating for societal reform and empathy.

¹⁰ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (Penguin Publishing Group, 1992).