

## Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*: Growing Up in Neoliberal India

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### Abstract

The novel *Q & A* presents the life story of its protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas, a young uneducated 18-year old tiffin-boy from Asia's largest slum Dharavi, who wins a general knowledge television quiz show and pockets an astronomical sum of one billion rupees. He manages to answer all the twelve questions of the general knowledge quiz show not due to his vast general knowledge but by the dint of sheer luck and his experiences of his varied life experiences. As it is unexpected of an uneducated person to win such a tough general knowledge quiz show and the producers are unwilling to pay the prize money, he is accused of fraud and has to prove himself innocent. The novel presents the emancipatory power of global capitalism through its manifestations such as reality television which offers avenues for poor and downtrodden of India who have otherwise no hope for social mobility and the transformation of the individual into a neoliberal consumerist subject.

**Key Words:** Bildungsroman, Neoliberalism, Reality Television, Social Mobility

Vikas Swarup's spectacular debut novel *Q & A* (2005) shot into fame after its adaptation by the British film director Danny Boyle for his multi-award winning film *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Born to a family of lawyers in Allahabad in 1963, Vikas Swarup is an Indian diplomat and officer of the Indian Foreign Service who has worked as a diplomat in the United States, Turkey, Ethiopia, and Great Britain. Swarup, who describes himself as "a diplomat who writes, not the other way round" has penned two other novels: *Six Suspects* (2009) and *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013). *Six Suspects* (2009) is a detective story woven around a murder whereas *The Accidental Apprentice*, like *Q & A*, is reality television based *Bildungsroman*. *Six Suspects* is more of a kaleidoscope of characters than a murder mystery. The *Six Suspects*, in the novel, are a motley group of disparate characters: a bureaucrat; a politician; a Bollywood star; a graduate slum-dweller; an American redneck and a young tribal man from the Andamans, whose lives criss-cross and eventually converge when they are all in the same place at the same time and become suspects in a high profile murder. Like Swarup's first novel, *Six Suspects* has also

achieved popularity. The novel has sold translation rights in 30 languages, has been commissioned for a radio play by Radio 4 and even has been optioned for a film by the BBC and Starfield Productions. *The Accidental Apprentice*, too, has been dramatized for BBC Radio Four's *15 Minute Drama* and has interested Sriram Raghavan for a film adaptation. *The Accidental Apprentice* is a *Bildungsroman* whose female protagonist has to pass the seven tests from the "textbook of life" to prove herself fit for selection as CEO of a ten billion dollar business empire.

*Q & A* won several awards like South Africa's Exclusive Books Boeke Prize in 2006, Paris Book Fair's Reader's Prize, Prix Grand Public in 2007, and the Best Travel Read at the Heathrow Travel Product Award in 2009 and was shortlisted for the Best First Book by the Commonwealth Writer's Prize. The book has been translated in 43 languages across the world and has been adapted for radio play by BBC and for the film *Slumdog Millionaire* directed by Danny Boyle. The film has won more than 70 awards including four Golden Globes, 7 BAFTAs and 8 Oscars.

The novel *Q & A*, which is set in Mumbai, relates the life story of its protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas, a young uneducated 18-year old tiffin-boy from Asia's largest slum Dharavi, who wins a general knowledge television quiz show and pockets an astronomical sum of one billion rupees. He manages to answer all the twelve questions of the general knowledge quiz show not due to his vast general knowledge but by the dint of sheer luck and his experiences of his varied life experiences. As it is unexpected of an uneducated person to win such a tough general knowledge quiz show and the producers are unwilling to pay the prize money, he is accused of fraud and has to prove himself innocent. The novel presents the emancipatory power of global capitalism through its manifestations such as reality television which offers avenues for poor and downtrodden of India who have otherwise no hope for social mobility and the transformation of the individual into a neoliberal consumerist subject.

Many reviews of the book have described it as a picaresque narrative. *India Today* describes the novel as "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" (Harikrishnan). In fact, both the novels analyzed in this chapter have been mistaken to be picaresque novels which is due prevalence of similar features in both the genres like: focus on a young hero, episodic narrative, and their autobiographical nature. The *Bildungsroman* differs from the picaresque in its philosophical tenor and its focus on the transformation and the development of the hero. The plot of the *Bildungsroman* is a search for one's place in society and a viable philosophy of life and the novel ends with the hero's integration in society. The hero of the picaresque novel known as the "*picaro*" is a flat character who doesn't change much and who is an agent of action rather than reflection. The "*picaro*" who meets encounters various people in society is unaffected emotionally and intellectually like the protagonist of the *Bildungsroman*. The focus of the

picaresque narrative is on the society and its critique and rather than on the growth of the individual.

The novel's hero Ram Mohammad Thomas is an orphan who is abandoned by his mother at his birth. Ram is brought up by Father Timothy, a Catholic priest in his orphanage in Delhi. He spends his first few years in the orphanage without a name. Father Timothy, who wanted to adopt him, gave him the name Joseph Michael Thomas which had to be subsequently changed to Ram Mohammad Thomas in order to placate local religious leaders.

Ram is taught English by Father Timothy which enables him to become the leader of the boys in the Juvenile Home by the virtue of his knowledge of English: "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" (93). In a global economy, English not only functions as a lingua franca but also "a way of securing economic advancement, elevated status and prestige and trans-national mobility" (Singh, Kell, & Pandian, 53–54). In the Third World, competency in English language is considered indispensable for individual economic benefits and national economic development. Ram's ability to speak English helps him to get work under foreigners and wealthy people. Ram's ability to speak English gets him work as actress Neelima Kumari's waiter, servant of the Australian diplomat in Delhi and as a tourist guide at Taj Mahal in Agra.

After the death of Father Timothy, the eight year old Ram goes to a Juvenile Home where he meets his friend Salim Ilyasi, which is from Bihar and orphaned in a communal riot. Ram and Salim are bought by a Beggar Gang and reach Mumbai. Ram escapes from the Beggar Gang and finds work as a tiffin boy for the Bolywood Actress Neelima Kumari. Despite his hardship at the chawls of Dharavi, Ram tries to gather knowledge by whatever means possible. Ram rescues Gudiya a girl from his neighbourhood who was being molested by his own father Shantaram, and pushes him down from the upper floors of a building which paralyzes Shantaram. Ram, who thinks he has murdered Shantaram, flees to Delhi fearing arrest.

At Delhi, the thirteen year protagonist works for an Australian diplomat. Ram gets the diplomat arrested for espionage. While returning to Mumbai, Ram loses his hard-earned money in a train dacoity. Ram shoots one of the dacoits and escapes to Agra, where he works as a tourist guide at the Taj Mahal. At Agra, Ram falls in love with a prostitute Nita. Ram tries to earn money to buy her from her pimps but is unable to earn enough money and returns to Mumbai where he is reunited with Salim who is training to be an actor.

While on work as a bartender in a cheap hotel, Ram spots the ad for the quiz show *Who Will Win A Billion?* Ram participates in the quiz show not to win the prize money but to kill the host of the quiz show Prem Kumar who has tortured her first employer Neelima Kumari and his beloved Nita. At the quiz show, Prem Kumar mocks and ridicules Ram's background and poverty. Ram is also threatened by Prem Kumar to quit

the quiz show but Ram refuses to budge and answers all the twelve questions by unbelievable luck and his unusual life experiences. After winning the prize money, Ram gives up on his revenge and uses the prize money to help the needy and the poor. Unlike Balram Halwai, who grows into a sociopath in his ambition for wealth and status, Ram harbours a strong moral sense of what is right and wrong. Despite his poverty, he helps people around him in time of their need. Before his success in the show, Ram experienced extreme poverty and after extreme affluence.

If Dicken's *Bildungsroman* David Copperfield begins with the birth of its protagonist, Swarup's novel begins with its arrest: "I have been arrested. For winning a quiz show" (11). *Q & A* begins with its protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas arrested on grounds of fraud for correctly answering all the questions of a reality television quiz show *Who Will Win a Billion*, a quiz show which promises a billion rupees as prize money to any participant who answers all its 12 questions correctly as all the questions turn out to be related to his life. As the show producers are not willing to pay Ram Mohammad the prize money they get him arrested for cheating on the show. The police try to torture Ram and get a confession but he is rescued in the nick of time by a lawyer Smita, who he explains how he was able to answer all the answers rightly without any formal education. The whole story is narrated through flashbacks about his life experiences and adventures. The novel is episodic and in each of the twelve chapters Ram presents an amazing experiences of his life which lead to his answering each of the twelve questions. The book's appeal lies in its rags to riches story of a poor man climbing up the social ladder through the neoliberal artefact of a reality show. If in Adiga's novel *The White Tiger* it was the IT and ITES industry in Bangalore which offered avenues of entrepreneurship to Balram Halwai, in Swarup's book it is the post-reforms Indian private television network funded by global capitalism which catapults Ram Mohammad Thomas into affluence.

The development of Ram Mohmmamad Thomas takes place in the "reel world" of reality television show rather than the real world. Reality television is a new form of television production that presents supposedly real-life circumstances which employs common unknown people rather than professional actors. Reality television emerged along with the emergence of global capitalism in the 1990s. The global success of two shows *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* and *Survivor* launched reality television in the mainstream programming. Critics have discovered the narrative conventions of reality television to echo the ethics and values of neoliberal agenda. The connection between neoliberal ideology and reality television becomes prominent when the necessity of the media industry to invent the genre is explored. According to David Grazian, the entertainment industry came up with reality television shows in order to "create a form of programming that would be largely immune from union tactics from sit downs to picket lines. Since reality television shows do not rely on traditional scripts, producers avoid the risks and expensive costs associated with hiring unionized writers." The business necessity of the capitalistic entertainment industry for union resistant television programming gave rise to the emergence of reality television shows. Susan Murray and

Laurie Ouellett consider reality television a product as well as producer of neoliberal ideology:

Reality programming is one site where neoliberal approaches to citizenship have in fact materialized on television. From makeover programs (*What Not to Wear*, *Trading Spaces*) that enlist friends, neighbors, and experts in their quest to teach people how to make "better" fashion and decorating choices to game-docs (*Survivor*, *Big Brother*) that construct community relations in terms of individual competition and self-enterprising--in all of these, neoliberal constructions of "good citizenship" have cut across much popular reality television" (224).

Till 1991 in India, there was only one television channel—Doordarshan which is India's public broadcaster. The 1991 economic reforms also opened the gates of international private broadcasters in India, which increased the number of channels to over 850 channels today. The television channels reach a large section of the population and have shaped public discourse and introduced free-market ideologies and consumerist ideologies into various spheres of public life.

Despite the role of luck in the success of Ram, his neoliberal values and ethics are the real factors which lead him towards his fortune. Ram's life story suggests that luck is not enough for success in the neoliberal world, and one needs to make consistent efforts towards self-upliftment, acquiring the skills required by the market and take calculated-risks like an entrepreneur. Now, in possession of one billion rupees, Ram shows himself to be a true proponent of global capitalism and consumerism. Consumerism is an ideology that claims that increase in consumption of goods and services in the market is the main driver of the economy and encourages consumers to spend goods and services. Consumerism, also, refers to the notion that holds a person's happiness and wellbeing hinges on possession of material goods and services. The culture of consumerism has led to a tendency of people in capitalistic economies to adopt a lifestyle of excessive materialism of reflexive, wasteful, and unnecessary consumption. Yiannis Gabriel and Tim Lang hold that it is an ideology of conspicuous consumption which "has come to supplant religion, work and politics as the mechanism by which social and status distinctions may be established. Display of material commodities fix the social position and prestige of their owners (8). Ram purchases a luxurious mansion in the posh locality of Juhu beach beside the very film stars like Armaan Ali who he found out to be fake earlier in his life. Another sign of the working of global consumerism and capitalism in Ram is his purchases of Mercedes Benz and a Ferrari. Ram's Mercedes Benz flaunts a sticker that "My other car is a Ferrari"(360). Ram's neoliberal and consumerist ethics is seen in his statement that "dreams have power only over your own mind. But with money you can have power over the minds of others (180). Ram who himself felt the pinching of the vulgar display of wealth by the rich, participates in the same culture of vulgar consumerism when he has achieved the purchasing power by winning the jackpot in the quiz show.

The *Bildungsroman* in the twenty first century India has moved beyond socialistic concerns, linguistic anxiety, questions of nationhood and the aftermath of partition. Contemporary novelists portray the paradigm shift in lifestyle of a society brought about by global capitalism. The protagonists of neoliberal Indian *Bildungsroman* have moved beyond the anxiety of India's pre-liberalization period about the effects of colonialism and the problematic nationhood of a nation in formation, which characterises protagonists of Rushdie's *Bildungsromane* who were "handcuffed to history." The protagonists of post-liberalization Indian *Bildungsroman* novels like Balram Halwai and Ram Mohammad Thomas are fully autonomous enterprising individuals who exploit the opportunities of global capitalism to rise the ladder of material success. The neoliberal protagonists are not fettered by concerns for history, community, ancestry, identity, religion, class or caste, themes of ambition, personal initiative, and an embrace of the new, and a rejection of the old. The neoliberal *Bildungsroman* ends with the protagonist assimilated in the neoliberal social order and starting to function as a proponent of neoliberalism.

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