



**VIKAS SWARUP'S NOVEL Q & A:
A POSTMODERN BILDUNGSROMAN**

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ABSTRACT

The primary goal of this research paper is to apply the terms 'Postmodernism' and 'Bildungsroman' to examine how they are relevant to the present novel which focuses on the psychological, educational, physical and moral growth of the protagonist from an orphan childhood to youth. This research attempts at evaluating the title of the novel Q & A as questions and answers for a common Indian man. The present research paper attempts at highlighting an extremely pessimistic and realistic view of life of protagonist. It also aims at examining the psychological intelligence of a leading character for acquiring education informally and applying that to the crucial situations occurring in his life.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Bildungsroman, Psychology, Identity.

In 20th century literature, criticism and art, 'postmodernism' has been lingered as a benchmark. It has fetched the multiplicities in forms, structures and subjects of literature in special context with the extraordinary use of the German term 'Bildungsroman'- a novel of formation, novel of education, or coming-of-age story. After all it is better known as a development novel. This development or growth comprises educational, physical, mental, psychological, moral parts related with an individual or protagonist. It generally narrates the coming-of-age story of a sensitive individual seeking satisfactory answers to his/her quarries through the experience of adjoining society. Postmodern bildungsroman forms a new approach in Indian English literature as a literary theory. It refers to Vikas Swarup's novel Q & A published in 2005. This research paper attempts at examining how the term 'Postmodern Bildungsroman' work in relevance to the present novel.

Vikas Swarup's novel debut Q & A is set in Mumbai in special context of *Dharavi*- a slum and later in Agra. The protagonist, Ram Mohammed Thomas, is a Mumbai-based grown up orphan boy whose strife with his misfortune and agony of being helpless is shown throughout the novel. Ram grows as a young man without having enough space for existence. Mumbai is considered the affluent city of India. Many Bollywood stars reside there so as it remained as a film industry. Ram resides in Mumbai as a servant of famous film actress, Neelima Kumari.



Swarup describes Mumbai at the very beginning of the novel when Ram drives through the streets. He says, 'the sun seems brighter, the air feels cooler, the people appear more prosperous, the city throbs with the happiness of sharing space with the megastars of Bollywood'.

To be categorized in the bildungsroman, the plot must follow a certain course of action. The protagonist Ram grows from an orphan child to an adult in the novel. The events that happen in the Ram's life are extreme and what is even more extreme is that he is able to answer all questions to win grand prize. When Ram gathers every walk of his life experiences from childhood to adult to answer the questions, it forms an episodic arrangement of events occurred in his life. His story is narrated by him coherently through an intense agony of being orphaned and illiterate. The flashback technique is used to narrate the story. Luck is another important tool in the proceeding of the story because the upcoming incidents or crucial moments in Ram's life are controlled by determining luck in tossing the lucky coin unluckily having 'head' at both sides.

The plot of the novel interlinks the incidents with the growing up or coming-of-age of Ram Mohammed Thomas as an emerging protagonist of the novel. The titles of all chapters have been given on the basis of the nature of the questions asked in quiz show and the revelation of the answer without even proper education. The coming-of-age of protagonist reveals through the chapters' titles highlighting the increasing amount of the total prize money. Ram is an orphan child thrown in the dustbin without knowing his parents, dramatically named as Ram Mohammed Thomas, stood for the three different major religions in India. This is because it is unknown which religion his parents had. Each chapter reveals the answer of all questions one by one as the story continues. His development links with the chapters stated in the novel. It's not a bad outlining method and for the most parts it works remarkably well. The novel ends on the idea where it begins when the final answer is given by Ram and his reunion with his rescued beloved Nita. Ram's relationship with other characters like his friend Salim Ilyasi, Smita Shah, Shankar, Neelima Kumari, Armaan Ali and many others is also designated through the course of the time and action in the novel.

Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A* tells the story of how an indigent servant becomes the biggest television quiz show winner in Mumbai. Ram narrates the story of his life to a lawyer who is facilitating him escape from the circumstances befallen meanwhile receiving the victory in the quiz show. He is just eighteen, and however he has experienced a worst ride of a life where he is accused of cheated in the quiz show. By telling episodes from his life, Ram slowly reveals what he has experienced and incidentally, how he came to know the answers to the specific questions asked in the quiz show.



On the corner of the city Mumbai, a small wasteland where millions of people have their little houses with corrugated roofs without any light or ventilation Ram grows up there. A bad place to stay, Swarup says, 'there are daily squabbles over inches of space, over bucket of water- which at times turns deadly.' It seems like a dangerous place to live. When Ram has to fight for everything he needs to survive because he is an orphan child, unknown to his parents. Instead of going to school, he works as a waiter from his early childhood. Framing the story is Ram's greatest triumph: he participated in an Indian television quiz show. Despite being an illiterate servant, he becomes the first contestant to answer all twelve questions correctly and took the grand prize. At the beginning of the book, he is arrested by the police for this prodigious achievement, the organizers of the show charged that he must have cheated in delivering correct answers. Incidentally, Ram comes to know the correct answers asked in the show through the experience he receives in his life. It indicates that without having any formal education, Ram answers through his experience of preaching journey of struggling life. Ram gets his education through an informal way. The major scenes in the novel show the educational implications in the character of the protagonist. It becomes clear that his life and destiny work upon to teach him how to be most clever in selecting the right answer.

Gradually, as a novel of formation, title of the novel *Q & A* is also significant because it indicates questions and answers that lead the story continuously narrated. It has been chosen after examining psychological condition of a common man in India. The present novel reveals the answers of thousands of questions which are going on in common Indian mind. The whole novel is based basically on a story told by Ram to the lawyer to escape from the charge of cheating at the quiz show. This is related to psychological thinking of the protagonist. His interaction with society produces a difficult life for him. All the answers asked to him are nothing but his analysis of the society. Ram's name shows unique religious culture of India. Ram's struggle to survive in the life, a battle to prove his goodness is the real picture of Indian lower classes hammering and exploiting regularly in every moment of life. As an orphan, he observes the number of sufferings and agonies in life. This condition badly effects on his mental or psychological condition. How does one's own life incidents have importance in life, it can be seen by two characters of the novel, Salim Ilyasi and Ram. Ilyasi has spent his life in the positive environment so he looks towards the life positively. Ram perceives a hard way of life which builds a pessimistic attitude in his thinking.

Ram does not remain self-reliant, and never think about a luxurious life. He remains a symbol of suffered orphan and gets realized to the readers that how the life of orphans is an inevitable task. Vikas Swarup provides a major space for fate and chance, which sometimes seems unbelievable. The way which makes Ram billionaire is a T.V. show. Nowadays such types of shows are so much popular. These shows are playing a crucial role in making the thinking towards the directions for earning money from the shortcut ways. Vikas Swarup dramatically



attacks on the output of such shows. How do they mold the thinking of the viewers? As a result, the criminal offences are paving their roots in the society like India.

The protagonist Ram's hesitation at the time of answering the questions shows his distressed psychological condition. Ram's love with a prostitute is again a proof of his pessimistic thinking. Swarup selects Ram's life style to get more space to discuss the problems of Indian lower sections. Ram's parents orphan Ram once in a life but several times in life he feels defenselessness. And till the end of the novel he seems to protect himself from any misfortune. Why does Ram want to be a rich person? Psychology behind earning money hurriedly is the thinking of having luxurious things in life. All over the world humanity becomes more aggressive, more materialistic and more luxury centered. To get a luxurious life, everyone wants to make money with any hook or crook. Ultimately, it effects on the human values in the world so far.

A genre often features a main conflict between the protagonist and society. There is not any single chapter where someone is not abusing someone else in Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A*. The novelist is making a harsh comment on society in this novel. The fine example of this sort of conflict where the first chapter deals with the arrest of Ram by the Policemen who then abuse him in order to obtain signed statement declaring he cheated on the game show. Ram is not merely orphaned once, but several times. He has to fend for himself from relatively early age, and every time he seems to have found a place where he is safe catastrophe strikes. Here is a can-do-optimism in the novel driving a hero, Ram Mohammed Thomas. Many events, he describes, are so tormenting that the novel's brisk, even breezy, pace can seem disconcerting. This novel is therefore a mingling far-reaching humour with insightful social dictum.

John R. Mayrand, in his study of the Bildungsroman, comments that a major element of the form is the theme of identity: the nature of human nature. The Bildungsroman is not committed to the idea of an essential human nature, but it often examines the relative effects of environment and individual predisposition for the creation of character. In Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A*, we do have the context of a dramatically shifted psychological, geographic and social setting. While in the larger sense Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A*, is a story about character development: psychological, educational and moral. Much of what we know about these characters is from the technique of flashbacks on the protagonist's life span. These flashbacks might work on self-reflexive maturity, self-affirming, self-protecting and self-reliant. As a narrative device, memory often has a precision in showing the picturesque highlights from one's life. After all, Vikas Swarup's novel *Q & A* is a postmodern bildungsroman search for fragmented answers of the questions stand at every moment in a common Indian man's life.



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