

True Tests in Real Life for Vikas Swarup's, Kafkaesque Characters-Cum-Narrators

Sonu Lohat

Asst. Professor English, Rg Govt. College Saha, Ambala India

Abstract

What distinguishes Swarup as a story-teller is his specialty to present the authentic slice of life with real experiences. His characters Ram Mohammad Thomas and Sapna Sinha in his two novels viz Q & A and The Accidental Apprentice respectively represent the quintessentially Indian middle class real lives with their vicissitudes and surreal experiences in real life. They do carry the shades of Bollywood silver screen however they are away from the heroism and unlikely possibilities. The unusual events leading to final denouement with ups and downs hinge upon the real life settings typical in Indian contemporary society. Thomas in Q & A is artistically put in the biggest game-show W3B with twelve stipulated questions which accidently correspond to the phases of his ordeal-ridden life. His is the representative case of millions proletariat Indians who are deprived of parental care, luxury of real name, academic learning, shelter and even regular meal. Being an orphan child he is fated with hardships, humiliations, ignominies, negligence etc. which help him constantly learn in the school of life and emerge as a triumphant well-baked human with huge Mammon blessings and even sublimity in mind. Similarly, Sapna Sinha is exposed to seven tests in the real settings in the school of life by eccentric billionaire Acharya Vinay and she also emerges triumphant after certain irreparable losses and inevitable transformations. In both the novels Swarup artistically devises the such ways in the lives of the protagonists which entangle the labyrinths of happenings and gradually enabling them to untie the knots.

KEYWORDS: real, life, events, experiences, Indian, test, learning

The two novels taken here for analyses share some commonalities of thematic as well as formalistic approach of Swarup. Though it is specialty of this Indian novelist of fame that his fictional world holds mirror to prevailing realities apart from surrealistic nuances and the elements of thrill and awe. Nonetheless, it was Swarup's first novel Q & A (2005) which brought him real success and fame and established him as a novelist. He was in London when he chose the popular quiz show W3B as the base of the story of a protagonist whose name consists of the major three religions of India. The protagonist, therefore, is an Indian and represents millions of Indians who are underprivileged. After having received great response the novel was published in forty three languages and adapted as a major film which broke all the records by bagging thirteen Oscar Awards.

It was short listed for the Best First Book by the Commonwealth Writer's Prize and won South Africa's Exclusive Books Booker Prize 2006 as well as the Paris Book Fair's Reader's Prize, the Prix Grand Public, in 2007. It was voted the Most Influential Book of 2008 in Taiwan, and winner of the Best Travel Read (Fiction) at the Heathrow Travel Product Award 2009. It goes to the credit of the novel that The BBC produced a radio play based on this novel and which won the Gold Award for Best Drama at the Sony Radio Academy Awards 2008 and the IVCA Clarion Award 2008.

The entire scheme of the novel Q & A hinges upon a game show W3B and it is through this show that Vikas Swarup tries to present the fact of slum dwelling underdogs having hold on knowledge and wisdom too. It is against the backdrop of this show that Swarup skillfully lays bare composite facets of Indian social scene wherein hell-bound poor labour class is supposed to be destined within the seeming world of destitute. Being orphan child the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas has never been exposed to formal education at all yet his training and constant learning through odd experiences in the school of life have bestowed him with special abilities. Swarup deploys chance factor with rich fictional elements in associating the live events to the set of questions asked in the game show.

The Aristotelian concept of likeliness of happenings that likely impossibility is preferable to unlikely possibility strikes the chord in the main texture of the novel as the main narrative hovers around those happenings in Ram's life which accidentally correspond to the options of answers in the game show: "Well, wasn't I lucky that they only asked those questions to which I knew the answers?" (Q & A 29)

The very first question in W3B fired at perplexed Ram pertains to popular glamour world of Bollywood and it should not take chance factor to answer to that question. The urchins having no future ahead often take resort to the fancy world of silver screen as an escape from unpromising reality and such question should not make the contestant like Ram, who has been domestic aid and servant throughout, tickle his head for the right answer to pop up. Yet, the answers to second and rest of the questions have been linked to the odd and varied experiences of the protagonist in life; and it is the chance factor that worked wonders in the life of an underdog. Coincidences work in life and here they have worked wonderfully to evoke the resultant disbelief in all and sundry. This fact of a slum-dweller's ability to find answer of add questions and winning a billion causes sense of disbelief and doubt of some cheating.

Thomas has to confront the fierce reaction of social authorities as he is alleged of cheating; arrested and interrogated for possible trick. The beginning of the novel strikes a powerful note with its protagonist being under police interrogation and torture for allegedly having duped in big game show. The authorities blaming him, rest their conviction on the fact that this game show is so tactically devised that even highly pedantic minds cannot possibly go beyond answering half of its total questions; how someone devoid of any formal education and who has not basic idea of even simple general knowledge can pick right options.

Since the novel is based on the game show W3B, the novelist has drafted the structure of the novel in accordance with the questions asked in the show. There are thirteen chapters besides a prologue and an epilogue; each chapter corresponds to the vicissitudes of the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas. Besides each story, corresponding to the amount of money in each question of the quiz show, reveals an aspect of the personality of the protagonist. What the novel conveys turns out to be a painful reminder of the fact that in the school of life one learns a lot, particularly those who remain orphan in the want of money and family affection. But the cynical and sardonic society would not tolerate the success of an underdog, shining high by having won one billion rupees.

Ram Mohammad Thomas is, thus, arrested for alleged cheating in the quiz show; he is tortured in police cell. Yet, Swarup does not end the story with tragic not, arising from the injustice done to the poor chap. The novelist foresees the possibility of the justice to

all in Marxist spirit and brings about poetic justice for the protagonist. The epilogue envelops the ray of hope for those who have been underprivileged as Ram Mohammad Thomas finds the justice, bagging all the money he has won.

Having almost same formalistic strain the novel *The Accidental Apprentice* vibrantly echoes the truth of testimony to the writing ethics in strong conformity to its protagonist Sapna Sinha who emerges triumphant through all tests in life. Like Thomas she is also strategically put in the situations which test her in all blues and blacks. Being typical Swarupian protagonist she successfully passes through each odd test in life with the dint of her innate sincerity, perseverance and other positive attributes. As Thomas is put into game-show to prove his true learning in the school of life Sapna is put into seven tests in life by Acharya Vinay. Swarup's intelligence in the art of carving out the phases of life of the protagonists using appropriate controlling agents is unparalleled.

Herein he very intelligently deploys such a powerful instrument to shape up and map up the designs of Sapna's life that events in the novel hold strong analogy with the happenings in real life. Being the business tycoon of multi-billion ABC group of companies Acharya Vinay is much powerful to easily manipulate the things in the life of a proletarian girl like Sapna, "I groan, cursing the day I accepted his offer. Ever since, my life has become one long exam, with God testing me on one side and the industrialist testing me on the other." (*The Accidental Apprentice*, 2013: 307) Acharya is a reigning devil with all heights of influence and power:

Acharya gazes out of the bay window, brooding over my demand. From his vintage point, like an eagle on his perch, he can see Lutyens's Delhi spread out below him. There is something magical and mystical about seeing a city from a high-rise, far from the soot and dust of the concrete jungle, the heat and noise of the road. I crane my neck to catch a view of the capital. All I can see is a shimmering ribbon of the glitter draped across horizon, blurring the boundary between earth and sky (43)

Swarup very skillfully carves out the set of circumstances, the vortex in which Sapna is struck . pertinently, she is found sandwiched between economic burdens leading to the rise of her needs to look further better job and the hectic working hours and bullying of the Gulati and sons in Delhi. In fact in both the novels it is intelligence of the protagonists which help them gear up in the path of success. Sapna agrees to the weird type of offer from eccentric Acharya to pass seven tests from the "text book of life" to meet out her circumstantial economic needs; she is intelligent and smart enough to get double money from a giant businessman in the beginning:

'Before I sign, I also want something.'

Acharya frowns, 'What?'

'I want double.'

'What do you mean?'

'According to this contract, you are to pay me a sum of one lakh rupee to participate in the tests. I am asking for two lakhs.'

And what makes you think I will agree to your demand?'

‘In life you don’t get what you deserve: you only get what you negotiate. Isn’t this what you told me in the Coffee House? Well, I’m only following your advice. I’m negotiating with you.’

‘Touche!’ Acharya clasps grudgingly. ‘You are a fast learner...’(42)

It may be Acharya’s perversion that he randomly chooses Sapna for the seven tests to be worthy claimant for the position of CEO of his huge empire. However, for Sapna whatever happens to her is real for her. In each test she is made to get engrossed and absorbed in the whirlpool of happenings that she hardly suspects it the dice cast by this god of her universe. Her real life events, vicissitudes and the devised mechanism by Acharya are so intermingled that Sapna is utterly unable to differentiate the real one and the designed one. The chapters in the novel has been dexterously classified in accordance with the devised seven tests in the life the protagonist apart from prologue and epilogue.

Being utterly unaware of the web spread out by whimsical billionaire Sapna puts her foot in the right place as she gets indulged into the dark affairs of age-old Khap system in Haryana. It is the characteristic strength of this modern girl from middle class that she successfully comes out all mess:

What follows next is reminiscent of the scripted ending of a Bollywood movie. SI Inder Varma and Head Constable Ram Kumar are taken into custody. The frenzied crowd outside is lathi---charged and dispersed. Sultan Singh runs for cover with his tail between legs. And Kuldip Singh has an instant change of heart, declining that the best match for Babli will be Sunil.(113)

The second test or the second chapter ‘Diamonds and Rust’ puts Sapna in yet another testimony. She wins in the end with her honesty as she returns Bollywood actress Priya Kapoor’s precious ring and also wins many hearts. She comes out of this test in the school of life with learning and earned wisdom. In the third test ‘Locked Dreams’ Sapna emerges out as the great soul of social consciousness and humane altruism. Swarup willfully reveals the shades of common person’s rights as laid in The Constitution of India. He very skillfully intermingles the evens really taking place in Sapna’s life and the events created by the man with dice. In successive tests ‘The Blindness of Fame’, ‘The Atlas of Revolution’, ‘150 grams of Sacrifice’, ‘The Acid Rain’—the fourth, fifth, sixth and the seventh tests respectively Sapna rises higher and higher in the esteem of the reader with learning and acquired wisdom. The socio-politico events in contemporary India take shape in the background of her tests. The novel bounds the happenings from individual to the national. With certain irreparable losses in life Sapna finally emerges as more refined, learned and wise person when she gets spiritual sublimity with no desire left of riches and pompous.

May it be Thomas or Spana, both the protagonist are found marching ahead with the ignited torch of luminosity and positivity in life as Swarup is the author who not only foresees poetic justice in the pages of his fictional world but also in the complex whirlpools of life. For him the question in the game show should correspond to the vicissitudes of the protagonist with sure occurrence of positive and favourable results. In his utopian world good character should be rewarded and the evil to be punished. However, all his philosophy is executed in the pages of his novel and thus both the novel have been acclaimed as the true representation of the reality of life.

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