



Class Conflict in Vikas Swarup's Q & A

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Abstract

Class and class conflict in the society is an unending criterion as far as the unequal distribution of sources of production and rights of administrative systems are authorised to a particular class are concerned. The other neglected working class who is the vital part to run the system without having control over it and devoid of their rights may revolt for their equal shares in the development of the society or industry. Vikas Swarup's Q & A is one of the finest instances of the class conflict between the rich and the poor. There are abundant instances focused on the harrowing status of the slum and the poor working class of India. Swarup also highlighted the merciful exploration of unequal social dynamics in modern India. The current debate polarizes along lines of class and class conflict and eventually suggests the establishment of equal rights, prevents class conflict and violent revolt to maintain peace and justice in the society.

Key words: class, conflict, bourgeois, elite, proletariat

In this paper, we intend to critically analyse the class conflict in the lives of the characters of Vikas Swarup's Q & A. Swarup has expertly represented these individuals, transforming them into living beings who have experienced the raw reality of social hardship and exploitation. The notion of class conflict will be explained and applied to these characters who belong to the working or labour class. These characters do not receive the credit of their employer's sympathy and compassion for being truthful, obedient, loyal, and faithful. The debate will attempt to demonstrate the injustice perpetrated by upper-class individuals, as well as their harshness and inhumane behaviour. An attempt will be made to discover a way out of the class struggle that will allow humanity to be established in society.

Although the word 'class' has been used to social groupings in a variety of cultures, including ancient city-states, early empires, and caste or feudal systems, it is most usefully restricted to modern social divides, notably in industrialised nations. Social classes must be separated from status groups; the former is formed by assessments of the honour or prestige of an occupation, cultural position, or family descent, whereas the latter is created by assessments of an occupation's honour or status, a cultural stance, or ancestral descent.

Although many of Marx's theories acquired prominence in the twentieth century, Marxism derives certain notions from his nineteenth-century publications. The Marxist criticism is founded on the notion that literature may be viewed as ideological

and studied utilising the Base and Superstructure paradigm. A society's foundation, according to Marx, is its economic means of production. It determines the superstructure of a base. The superstructure is made up of human systems and ideas that lead to the creation of art and literature. Class, socioeconomic position, and power relations among various parts of society are therefore emphasised in Marxist critique.

Marx's conflict theory was centred on a conflict between two major classes. Each class consists of a group of people who have common interests and a degree of property ownership, and who are usually assisted by the government. The bourgeoisie is comprised of people who control the majority of society's money and resources. Those who are classified as working-class or impoverished are included in the proletariat. Marx prophesied that the bourgeoisie, a tiny minority in society, would use their position to oppress the proletariat, the majority, with the birth of capitalism. This way of thinking is connected to a frequent picture associated with conflict theory-based social models, in which followers believe in a 'pyramid' system in which a minority of elites imposes terms and conditions to the rest of society owing to disproportionate control over resources and power. Unequal social distribution was anticipated to be perpetuated by intellectual compulsion, in which the bourgeoisie would push the proletariat to accept present conditions. The elite, according to common opinion, would create systems of laws, traditions, and other society institutions to enhance their own power while preventing others from joining them. As the proletariat class and the poor's living conditions deteriorated, Marx prophesied that a collective awareness would arise, exposing injustice and perhaps leading to revolution. The conflict circle would ultimately recur if conditions were later altered to satisfy the concerns of the proletariat. The theoretical approach, based on Karl Marx's theories, urges to analyse how a literary work reflects the social realities of the period it was produced.

Some novels look at the problem from the perspective of class conflict and delineated the vices of class conflict to maintain the equal rights and

opportunities. Charles Dickens, George Eliot, and Émile Zola all wrote about class relations in their writings. During the first five decades of the twentieth century, Zora Neale Hurston, John Steinbeck, Margaret Mitchell, W. E. B. DuBois, Betty Smith, Lin Yutang, and Richard Wright, among others, made sharply observed critiques about wealth and society.

Capital by John Lancaster, *Here Comes the Sun* by Nicole Dennis-Benn, *Chronic City* by Jonathan Lethem, *The Invaders* by Karolina Waclawiak, *Double Teenage* by Joni Murphy, *Your Heart is a Muscle the Size of a Fist* by Sunil Yapa, *These Dreams of You* by Steve Erickson, *Rina* by Kang Young-sook, *The Mare* by Mary Gaitskill, *Moxyland* by Lauren Beukes are some of the fine examples that portray the class conflict in their novels. Vikas Swarup's *Q & A* is one of the samples of the same series. The tale of Ram Mohammad Thomas, an orphan lad, is told in Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*. His life's adventure, struggles, and experiences since boyhood have all contributed to his winning the most prestigious quiz show, *Who Will Win A Billion?* He meets a variety of characters and experiences as an orphan child. Every time he was reminded of his poor social standing and negligence. He worked in a variety of places where he was subjected to a barrage of insults. In their lives, Ram and other characters have encountered class conflict.

I have been arrested. For winning a quiz show. (11)

The novel *Q & A* begins with the arrest of the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas. He is accused of cheating in the quiz show *Who Will Win A Billion?* because the organisers do not believe that an illiterate waiter who is a slum dweller can win the quiz. Secondly, they do not have a billion rupees to pay him. So, they plan to arrest him. After giving a third-degree treatment the inspector is going to sign a confession from Ram that he cheated in the quiz. The commissioner is given a bribe of ten per cent amount of the prize. It is an intolerable fact for the organisers to accept Ram's victory. The organisers, having money and power, tries to inflict the charge of cheating. The incident unveils the instance of

'Have and Have Nots'. The organisers, the haves, employ all the powers to prove that Ram cheated. Ram, 'the have not', has become the victim of their power.

There are those who will say that I brought this... our hands and legs. (12)

Class consciousness is deeply rooted in the minds of the rich or the poor. The rich enjoy the royal pleasure while the poor curse their poverty. The poor slums have accepted the fact of poverty, penury and stoicism. Arresting is a frequent scene in the slum. Forming the general assumption that the accused might have committed the crime, there was no sign of amazement of Ram's arrest. The acrimonious feeling of class identification has been asphyxiated. For slum dwellers, using intellect and skill is like crossing the dividing line that separates the affluent from the poor. Ram has crossed the dividing line by winning the quiz and proved that the brain or talent is not the monopoly of the rich. He contested the quiz and bagged the billion rupees. His victory annoyed the organisers. Had he been a lawyer, a professor or a high-class person, the organizers would not have doubted and arrested him. The show was meant for the intellectuals, for those who have a brain, not just a body. The attitude changes with the social and economic status. The bare truth of human tendency is exposed in this incident.

Godbole has been punishing me for more than an

... nearly drowned. (23)

'Money is the root of all evil'. The police commissioner is convinced and given a bribe to compel Ram to accept and sign the confession that he cheated in the quiz. For this job inspector Godbole is assigned and asked to give Ram a third-degree treatment. 'The impoverished beg for pity; the wealthy respond with insults.' The poor have no value in the world of the rich. The poor can be victimised with their power and money. Ram has become the victim of the superstructure framed by the bourgeoisie.

'Well, Madam, we poor can also ask questions and ... the rich wouldn't be able to answer a single question. (29)

Gayatri Spivak says, "The subaltern cannot speak". But here the subaltern speaks. Ram dares to challenge the superstructure. He is a bona fide winner and he does not want to be a scapegoat. An unknown lawyer named Smita Shah releases Ram on bail. She tries to know the truth behind his victory. But Ram considers her as a part of arrest and trick, so he replies to her with contempt.

I am the only one not smiling. Granted, we servants... my blood boils. (125)

Colonel Taylor bungalow, the Australian ambassador, reflects the colonial mindset, as does the Indian superior. For the White, the Indians are 'bloody Indians' and for the Indians, people like Ram are an idiot and useless. Subaltern is a worldwide issue that may be found all over the globe. The other servants were not affected by this comment but Ram displays a profound contempt for their attitude.

That evening, Bihari comes back to ... till his voice fails. (303-304)

The incident takes place in Agra where Ram lives in Swapna Palace's outhouse as a tenant with the name Raju Sharma, a guide at the Tajmahal. Ram's neighbour Bihari, a cobbler, abuses the rich, the doctors, the government and everyone and everything when his six-year-old son Nanhey dies of pneumonia. He shows contempt and disgust while wailing over his son's death. The poor are always helpless. No one comes to help him. He is blaming everyone because he is poor, penniless and could not save his son's life. The subaltern voice is complaining against the social and economic system.

Lajwanti is crying on the bed. The drops falling from

... Steal the money. (313)

One more incident takes place in Swapna Palace with Lajwanti. She was one of the best maids of Rani Sahiba has ever had. Lajwanti was preparing

for the wedding of her sister. As a dowry, she was prepared to offer the groom a Bajaj scooter, a Sumeet mixer, five Raymond outfits, and some gold jewellery. For this, she is to borrow fifty thousand from Rani Sahiba. She had a firm belief that Rani Sahiba would not deny it because she is the best maid ever. But the dreams of her sister's marriage are shattered when Rani Sahiba refused to give her a loan. The rich always expect sincerity, submissiveness and obedience from their servants but they never trust them. Lajwanti won everything except the trust of her mistress. The conflict between the mistress and the maid reached the apex of rage and hatred. The denial of the loan compels her to rob Rani Sahiba. Lajwanti, as per her plan, steals a necklace from Rani Sahiba's safe. The best ever maid has been recompensed distrust and arrest.

'You worthless boy, how dare you make

... or I will have you thrown out.'(323)

'Mrs Swapna Devi, if this is your palace, and you are

... your penniless tenant.'(327)

It was Shankar who takes Ram to Swapna Palace as a tenant. Shankar allowed Ram to stay for a week until he gets his own room. Shankar was an orphan like Ram. During his stay in Agra, both became good friends. Unfortunately, Shankar got rabies from a mad dog. A vaccine from America called RabCure costs four lakh rupees. The cost was beyond Ram's earnings. One night Ram discovers that Shankar is Rani Sahiba's son when Shankar was mumbling in his sleep. Ram goes to Rani Sahiba to ask for her help but Rani Sahiba rebukes and dismisses his appeal. Eventually, Shankar dies. Ram again goes to ask Rani Sahiba to pay for the funeral. The poor whenever ask for any help their appeal is rejected or they are thrown out. There is no sympathy or kindness for the poor. Rani Sahiba was an insensitive and characterless woman. She threw out her own son Shankar when he discovers her secret and made him an orphan. Helping an orphan boy, Rani Sahiba thinks, is below her status. The rich

kill even their sentiments and kinship for their pseudo-status.

She has livid bruises all over her face and

*her lips are peculiarly ...have seen this before.
(328-29)*

Physical torture is also a sort of crisis when a debauch sexually harasses a prostitute. Ram falls in love with Nita, a prostitute. One night Nita's pimp, her brother Shyam, sends her to a customer from Mumbai. He was none other than Prem Kumar, the anchor of the quiz show, discovered later by Ram. Prem Kumar fastened her up and beat her with a horsewhip, leaving deep red welt marks on her slim back, cigarette burn marks all over her breast, which looked like truly awful injuries on the smooth brown flesh of her breasts, livid gashes all over her face, and her lips are strangely warped as if her jaw had been severely damaged. There was blood on her teeth, and her left eye blackened. Nita was compensated for sexual gratification rather than physical harassment. The money does not permit a customer to behave like a beast even with a prostitute. Working as a prostitute may seem lumpen and vulgar to the so-called respected people but it is the only way the poor woman finds to survive. The thirst of the stomach is more valuable than physical chastity. When the poor are unable to use their brain, they use body. And the rich have always been waiting to exploit the innocent class.

*I make my plans and wait for an occasion
when*

*... locations and exit the way I came. (330-
331)*

Ram, after seeing the pain inflicted on Nita, decides to free her from the work of prostitution. He has to pay four lakhs as a ransom to free Nita from her pimp. Ram wants to marry Nita, his beloved. He does not wish to let her work as a prostitute anymore. So, like Lajwanti, now he plans to rob Rani Sahiba. He succeeds in his plan but Shyam denies and asks for another two lakh rupees for Nita's plastic surgery. Ram was disheartened and lost all the hopes to marry Nita. Conflict within the class can

be seen here. Ram was not a born thief. The poverty and situations made him commit theft.

The bespectacled man is still in the

... I am your servant.'(333-334)

Leaving the hospital with a broken heart, Ram meets a school teacher who was waiting for the help of rupees four lakh for the treatment of his son suffering from hydrophobia. The vaccine called RabCure costing four lakh rupees. He begged Ram to save his son's life. Ram reminds Shankar's death by the same disease. Ram openheartedly donates the teacher four lakh rupees. For the time being, Ram becomes 'the have' and sees how people beg when they are in utter urgency. Money can make a school teacher a beggar.

I realized a long time ago that dreams have power only

... power over the minds of others. (359)

Ultimately all the questions are solved. Ram gets his billion rupees. He set an example of 'from rags to riches', from 'have not' to 'have', from 'penniless to powerful'. All his dreams come true. He witnessed the bitter truth of poverty and suffered a lot. He realized the bare truth that money makes us powerful.

Ram and other poor class characters in the novel either suffer or revolt. He and the other labour class characters are treated as subalterns. The characters who suffer become the victims of their poverty or inability to change their economic and social condition. No other option is left for them than to endure injustice, loss, pain, insult and humiliations. There are other characters who are not submissive in nature, they try to revolt to get justice and their rights. As per Marx's prediction, the proletariat and poor's living conditions deteriorated, a collective consciousness would arise, exposing injustice and perhaps leading to revolution. Sometimes they create violence and nuisance to show their identity and to declare their rights. What else they can do except revolt?

The above discussion shows two kinds of attitude. On the one hand, the novel delineates the weaker side of the poor and on the other hand, the stronger side of the poor is represented through the characters like Ram. He fought against the adversity of class conflict and won the quiz and heart of his friends. But everyone cannot become a winner, successful or rich in life. The crisis of 'the haves and the haves not' is endless. There has always been class and class struggle. Marx and Engel expected a classless society but practically it cannot be materialised. The only way to eradicate the class struggle is to follow the way of equality of status and opportunities. We need to change our attitude and must not forget humanity, a sole religion that can bring peace and happiness all over the world.

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