CHAPTER-IV

Q & A: Questioning the Colonizing Social System

The novel Q & A (2005) has extensive range of themes, presenting a panorama of contemporary multi-faceted but typical Indian reality. There are motley forms of realistic representations of various shades of social, cultural and psychological phenomena of Indian life in this novel as Vikas Swarup has packed the novel with variety of shades of life. In describing the contemporary social history of India Swarup artistically lays bare its darker reality in the form of class-struggle and clash, collective cynicism and snobbery of the emerging Indian bourgeois, deep-rooted corruption in all spheres of life and so on. It goes to the great architectonic skills and narrative art of the novelist that he lets the main idea or the story hover around the reality game-show W3B. This is a story of an underprivileged boy Ram Mohammad Thomas who wins the biggest quiz show W3B on the basis of his ability to answer all questions in the show. It is chance factor that the all questions happen to correspond to the vicissitudes of his life. But the cynical society would not believe it, terming it a trick and thus a fraudulent offence by someone who has hailed from slum.

It is against the backdrop of this quiz show that Swarup skillfully lays bare composite facets of Indian social life; the ethnic society which cynically expects the proletarian poor labour class to be destined within the seeming world of destitute. Being an 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. Prevalence of cynicism and dismissive attitude against an underprivileged owe to age-old structured dogmas, archetypes, feudal approach in Indian society. Although there have been instances of clash, struggle and protest on the part of the marginals in social history, yet the whole system of Indian society still hinges upon the colonial and feudal patterns as hinted in the novel. Actually Indian social reality relates to the fact of the contemporary history of the commonwealth, third world countries which used to be the colonies of European imperials powers led by the British. Post-independent or post-colonial social scenario in India is characterized by the continuing colonial mindset and the novel is a true kaleidoscope of such phenomena.
In fact, colonies of the imperial powers, including India, are still lurking under the sway of Western economic and cultural hegemony; the direct colonial control is not necessary for colonizers in the era of neo-colonialism to keep the third word in colonial perpetuity. Without having direct political rule, the western powers continue to dominate the world through cultural penetration and economic subjugation. In India they not only focused on expanding the boundaries of the empire and ruling the states, but also put into practice what we call ‘cultural erosion’ in order the establish economic supremacy. In order to change the perception of the world they introduced novel ideas and beliefs of success in life with economic freedom they posed to promise, while shaking the traditional beliefs and practices of India.

That is why, the Indian literature relates this reality of Indian colonial hangover in different shades and hues. Nonetheless, it is not only the influence of the British colonial powers only that has perpetually affected the very construct of India, rather there existed indigenous colonizing system in the form of feudalism and casteism for centuries in India. Hence unlike other contemporary postcolonial writers, Swarup’s artistic focus is not confined to continuing colonial forms of British influence only, but his treatment of Indian social reality ranges to the age-old, hierarchical socio-cultural aspects which have been shedding colonizing impact on the people. This is, in fact, slavery to such social discriminatory orders, even older than British colonialism, that the novel presents in contrast with postmodern globalized world of opportunities.

Such opportunity is represented by Thomas signifying the reality of globalized world wherein even subalterns may have opportunities to rise; yet one has to face furious oppositions and rejections of the cynical society which is governed by the colonial codes. It is through projection of Thomas, the underprivileged, subaltern non-heroic hero, that Swarup raises the questioning finger to the colonizing Indian social system. While making inquiry into the very construct of the age-old colonizing social system the novelist objectively analyzes the motley facets of social life against the backdrops of the vicissitudes of the protagonist. The narrative of the novel is taken to flashback when the first person narrator, the protagonist, tells his past experiences to a lawyer Smita who saves the former from the clutches of the police. In fact Smita turns out to be Thomas’ childhood neighbour whom the former had saved from the clutches
of her villainous father. Each narrated experience or episode of life of Thomas has been skillfully linked to the question asked in the game-show; the corresponding questions relate to his social encounters which let him learn the answers to many questions in life besides of those asked in the game-show.

The narrative in each chapter has been given the form of three fold structural realities. First, the real situation of the protagonist and Smita at her home, telling and listening each story in accordance with the question; second the recorded footage reality of the game-show involving the protagonist and the third is the episode of each story of his life in flashbacks. In all three forms of life there run common features of ethnic Indian society such as hierarchy strictly based on caste and religion, prevailing social discriminations cynicism and skepticism against the poor class etc.

Sensing well this heterogeneity the novelist contrives politics in naming the protagonist as all three main religions are represented in his name i.e. Ram Mohammad Thomas. This unusual naming is suggestive of sorry state of affairs in the composite structure of Indian ethnic society which is characterized by the ethnicity of different religions, communities, sects and classes. Since his name combines the sense of belongingness to the main three religions of India, he is set to take advantage of either part to be used pertinently. It is made a success mantra for the protagonist in the postmodern scenario to find the job in any community.

Though Neelima Kumari, the famous tragedy queen, in the chapter ten, is a good natured human being with modern outlook, yet she lives with her old mother who is a staunch Hindu, representing the first generation mindset. When two boys, the protagonist and his friend Salim, ask for a job as domestic aide latter loses the chance owing to his Muslim name which would never be accepted in Hindu household. But Ram Mohammad Thomas is smart enough to take up the role of a boy of any religion; and here, he uses first part of his name viz. ‘Ram’ to get entry in the house:

‘What is your name?, she asks Salim.
‘Salim’
‘Oh, you are Muslim, aren’t you?’
Salim nods.
Look, I am sorry, but my aged mother who lives with me cannot eat anything touched by a Muslim. I personally don’t believe in all this polluting-contact nonsense, but what I am to do?’ She shrugs her shoulders. Salim looks crestfallen.
Then she turns to me. ‘And what about you? What is your name?’
‘Ram’, I tell her. (Q & A 245)

In this instance Swarup takes no half measures to enunciate the advantage, taken by the protagonist, of belonging to dominant community. This orphan boy with impression of different creeds in his name smartly takes the advantage in the given situation and turns to be a Hindu with the name ‘Ram’. This is the satirical attack on the very stereotyped mentality of the society which has been keeping this country divided on communal basis. The protagonist is smart enough to use any part of his religiously composite name not always for advantage in a situation but for making others feel comfortable; telling one part in conformity with the situation to create a bit congeniality. When he first meets Salim in Juvenile Home he tells him his name ‘Mohammad’ to let already insecure Salim feel comfortable, “Salim says he has dreams at night. He hears the sounds of mob. His mother’s shrieks echo in his ears. He shudders when he visualizes his brother writhing in the flames. He says he has begun to hate and fear all Hindus. He asks my name. ‘Mohammad’, I tell him.” (95)

Such unique name of the protagonist is a literary tool in the hands of Swarup which he deploys to put the boy in comparison and contrast to others in different situations. The orphan boy is projected as the protesting figure in the stereotype-ridden ruthless society; yet the novelist does not mould the narrative in tragic shape unlike other contemporary writers. Deviating from the vogue of the modernist literature, that tended to focus the conventional cycle of misery of the poor at the hands of the powerful society, Swarup endeavours to impart some poetic justice in the fate of his protagonist, saving him from meeting his catastrophe in the end. Swarup relates the fate of the protagonist to the widely-changing scenario of postmodern, globalized India wherein an underdog is not necessarily bound to suffer, but can find opportunity of escape from this perennial tyranny. Instead of keeping his protagonist in the pretext of moral fable and sure suffering, the novelist tries to fit him in the
dogmatic society with the dint of some much-required cleverness. Being an orphan boy he does not hesitate to speak lie, can cheat, can double-cross and even kill for survival in such colonizing social system.

However, Swarup does makes it quite clear that the minority such as Salim belonging to Muslim community has to be at back foot in such dogmatic society. Though Salim is in dire need of a job, yet he has to eat a humble pie for having been born in different community which is minor. Minorities, dalits, poor people have to be at receiving end in all situations and have to suffer at the hands of the powerful those who have cultural, religious and social hegemony in this country. The disadvantageous position of Muslim is also depicted in the novel in some other instances; being minority, a Muslim has to be ready for devastations at any time at the hands of the dominant community. The protection from police, legislature and even judicial authorities is notwithstanding in the case of the weaker sections. When Thomas first sees Salim in Juvenile Home in Delhi he narrates his pathetic past pertaining to communal disharmony, riots, insecurity of the minority Muslims in rural India.

Salim belongs to a very poor Muslim family from a village in Bihar; the village was mostly peopled by poor peasants, but there were also a few rich landowners. It was predominantly Hindu village, but there were a couple of Muslim families too, like Salim’s. His father was a labourer, his mother was a housewife, his elder brother worked in a tea stall. Salim himself attended the village school. They lived in a small thatched hut at the edge of the zamindar’s compound:

Armed with machetes and pickaxes, sticks and torches, they raided the homes of all the Muslim families. Salim was playing outside the hut and his father, mother and brother were having tea inside when the mob attacked. Before his very eyes, they set fire to the hut. He heard his mother’s shrieks, his father’s cries, his brother’s wails, but the mob would not allow anyone to escape. His whole family was burnt to death in inferno. (94-95)

This pathetic narration clearly unravels the cruel and shocking picture of communal disharmony in India where the innocent minorities become the cold-blooded victims of the communal riots. Swarup, like Arundhati Roy, raises the issues like saffron
Hindu terrorism in a country which is supposed to be secular and thus protecting the minorities. May they be Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists or others, they have to compromise with circumstances dominated by the majority. Godhra riots in Gujrat, burning of the church and the priest in Orissa and other incidents present the naked picture of Indian reality of religious imbalance.

The minorities such as Muslims, Christians, Parsees, Buddhists, Dalits and others have to lead the life of compromise, humiliation, terror etc. in a country which always burns in the fire of religion and caste hatred. When Thomas is in the church in New Delhi as a baby, kind Father Timothy is even threatened by certain religious representatives of dire consequences for having given the baby a Christian name. Of them Mr. Jagdish Sharma, the representative of Hindus, illogically claims the baby, to be Hindu and threatens Father Timothy, “…But word has got around that you have converted a Hindu boy.’ ‘But how do you know he is Hindu?’ ‘It won’t matter to the lumpen elements who are planning to ransack your church tomorrow. (Q&A 52)

The church is situated in New Delhi, the centre of governance, and there must be ample security measures for the sacred places like church and for the minorities. But, here also, the dominant community feels free to rampage the church. But in the big city like New Delhi and even Mumbai the same hatred, intolerance, lumpen impulse prevail; Vikas Swarup is intelligent enough not to miss such stances. In the chapter nine which rather belongs to Salim who narrates the story of his vicissitudes within quotes:

‘ “Each one of you say your name. All those who are Hindu are allowed to step down from the bus, all those who are Muslim should keep setting,’ the ruffians announced. One by one trembling passengers said their names. Usha. Jatin. Arun. Vasanti. Jagdish. Narmada. Ganga. Milind. The bust started emptying. The ruffians watched each of the passenger with hawk-like eyes. They checked the vermilion in the partings of the ladies’ hair, asked some of the men further question to establish their religion, and even forced a little boy to open his shorts. I was nauseated by this barbaric display, but was also quivering in my seat…(Q&A 228-229)
The reality, which the novelist endeavours to bring to fore, is that even in twenty first century India still remains in the shackles of dogmas of caste, community and creed; still standing divided, strife-torn and burning in the fire of communal disharmony. The ruffians leading the outraged mob here state their intention of revenge since their Hindu houses were torched by Muslim arsenals. This is the perennial cycle of instigation and revenge that is kept moving all the time; revenge may be of any nature—personal, communal, caste or gender based or in any form. Such emotions signify the colonial features of the society which blindly and slavishly follows the impulse calls. But it is not always the community or caste that serves as the cause of revenge motif for the people. The writer relates this principle of revenge in case of blood relation also; the society wherein even the real brother does not spare his own brother for the Mammon sake. In the chapter six, ‘Hold On To Your Buttons’ there ensues heinous dark drama of revenge-seeking; the blood itself ensuring cold-blooded fratricide leaving the readers awe-stricken.

Actually this episode is replete with romantic elements like witchcraft viz. voodoo art, but through fictional world of magic the novelist is able to touch the authenticity of the idea of revenge, envy, degeneration and other evils typical in Indian society. Instead of taking some goodness from his elder brother Aravind Rao, Parkash Rao takes it to seek revenge on the former through Julie, the witchcraft woman and his wife, for the humiliations he meets at his exposure in the manipulation of money in the business of buttons:

‘I was devastated. For the first time I felt like hitting back at my brother. I recounted the incident to Julie and she became incandescent with rage. “The time has come to teach your brother a lesson,” she told me. “Are you ready now to take your revenge?” “Yes,” I replied, because my brain had been numbed by his insult. “Good, then get me a button from one of your brother’s unwashed shirts and little snippet of his hair.” “Where will I get a snippet of his hair from?” I asked. “That’s your lookout,” said Julie. (165)

May it be communal mob or an envious person, revenge has been the governing emotion in the cultures where the law of ‘might is right’ thrives. It further leads to multiplicity of revenge as one act of taking revenge by someone or some family or
group results into another vows of taking revenge and thus the cycle of violence goes on. Revenge motif is often motivated with the personal feelings and it cannot be helpful in the war of justice. It involves ‘self’ as pondered over by Franz Fanon, “Racialism and hatred and resentment ---‘a legitimate desire for revenge---cannot sustain a war of liberation.” (Fanon 111) Being the end product of the society even the hero of the novel is not clean of this venom of revenge. In fact, the motto of Thomas of winning the game-show is not to become billionaire and successful in life, but it is this revenge motif that takes him to Mumbai, to the game show. Swarup, here, tries to heighten the case of his protagonist up to the moral character as a classical ideal hero who can sacrifice anything for the sake of humanity.

He can venture out to kill a man to save a sister in neighbourhood from her morally degenerated incestuous father. He can shoot a dacoit in the train like a hero to save the modesty of a girl and the other co-passengers. And above all it is a revenge motif that takes him all the way from Agra to Mumbai to seek revenge on Prem Kumar, the debauched host of the show. Placing him in the coveted category of ideal hero the novelist tries to project him with high idealism, the apostle of humanity and love. It is his love for Nita, the prostitute girl in Agra, and loyalty to good Neelima Kumari that he endeavours to seek revenge on Prem Kumar, the game-show anchor is the man who brutally inflicted intolerable pain on Nita and Neelima Kumari. Both of them are sexually but sadistically tortured by the same person, Prem Kumar with his abnormal eroticisms. Thomas first traces this man of abnormal brutal sexuality at Neelima Kumari’s flat:

…I come back at five and hang around outside the flat. Sure enough, at six am the door opens and a man steps out. He is tall, with a decent face, but his bloodshot eyes and scruffy hair spoil the look. He clad in blue jeans and a white shirt. He holds a sheaf of currency notes and a lighted cigarette in his left hand and twirls some car keys in his fingers. He seems vaguely familiar, but I cannot place him. He doesn’t even glance at me before he walks down the stairs to the ground floor. I entered the house only at seven am.I get my first shock on seeing the condition of the drawing room. There are cigarette butts and traces of ash everywhere. An upturned glass lies on the centre table,
together with empty bottle of whisky. Peanuts are scattered all over the carpet. There is a strong smell of alcohol in the room.

The second shock is on seeing Neelima Kumari. She has bruises all over her face and a black eye. ‘Oh my God, Madam, what happened to you?’ I cry. (Q & A 258-259)

At first instance Thomas traces the man, who has subjected Nellima Kumari to such brutality, and later he confirms it when he finds the same man present at home and the same condition of his employer. His hatred for Prem Kumar altogether takes better of his mind when he finds the same brutality done to Nita at Agra; this makes him take revenge on such a sadist man who has such sexual deviations. In Agra, just after the miserable death of his friend Shankar, Thomas finds his dear Nita in the same pathetic condition with bruises, burns etc. on her body:

‘Who. . . who has done this to you?’ I ask, barely recognizing my own voice. She has difficulty speaking. ‘It was a man from Mumbai. Shyam sent me to his room at the Palace Hotel. He tied me up and did all this to me. What you see on my face is nothing. See what he did to my body.’ Nita turns on her side and I see deep red welt marks on her slim back, as if someone has used a horsewhip. Then she pushes up her blouse and I almost die. There are cigarette burn marks all over her chest, looking like ugly pockmarks on the smooth brown flesh of her breasts. I have seen this before.

My blood begins to boil. ‘I know who has done this to you. Did he say his name? I will kill him.’ (328-329)

Swarup presents the very realistic picture of a society which is essentially ridden with such convictions of taking revenge, teaching someone a lessons for the wrong they have done. That is why even the hero of the novel is projected as ridden with revenge motif; he even can discard a billion for revenge. The novelist, in a way, projects his protagonist, his ambitions, thoughts, deeds etc. rather in filmy way, with a bit of masala in his projection. It is in filmy Bollywood style that Thomas gets hold on Prem Kumar for revenge and makes the latter realize what the wrongs he has done to many innocent women. The emotion of revenge has such a strong hold on the minds of the
people that it almost enslaves and thus colonize them; as motley people’s sole aim in life is just to seek revenge and thus the clock of revenge and counter-revenge keeps moving:

‘You didn’t do me any favour by telling me the answer to question number two, you did yourself a favour,’ I say.
Prem Kumar looks at me sharply. ‘What do you mean?’
‘What I mean Mr. Prem Kumar, is that I did not come on your show to win money. No, far from it,’ I shake my head exaggeratedly. ‘No, I came on you quiz show to take revenge.’
Prem Kumar’s peeing is cut short midstream. He zips up his trousers hastily and looks at me sidelong. ‘Revenge?’ ‘What do you mean? Revenge on whom?’ ‘On you,’ I say defiantly… (348)

And a little later Thomas makes a statement to Prem Kumar, who is on his knees, which holds mirror to the truth of this stupefied violence-struck society, “ ‘So what? The only thing I live for is revenge.’ ” (350) However, Swarup saves his protagonist from going down to drain in the tune of many who kill, plunder, do all heinous activities to seek revenge and live a life of hatred. Thomas finally opts out to seek revenge in the form of the cold blooded murder of Prem Kumar; he rather spiritually realizes the fact that one achieves nothing through seeking revenge as this act cannot revert the past. May it be revenge motif, strife in family, communal vendetta or any evil in any form— all form the essential characteristics of Indian society which has been under the sway of such happenings since time immemorial. In fact, many evil practices, over the years, have come to become the part of the culture and thrive in all ways. But all these practices have colonizing and enslaving impact on the people who blindly follow them without giving a thought to the idea of freedom from them. Swarup artistically brings out such aspects of the Indian society under the burden of traditional practices, evils, dogmas, stereotypes.

In fact, the novel is a kaleidoscopic account of multiple shades and representation of various practices, happenings, facets, pangs, thoughts, beliefs, trends, etc. typical of Indian life. Out of such society the practice of discrimination is very common; the novel puts forth the reality of class struggle, if analyzed from
Marxist point of view. The novel boldly relates to the fact that in capitalistic present day India what matters in the distribution of wealth is the power politics; the ethnic groups, the feudal land owners, upper bourgeois class etc. have the strong hold on the resources. While the poor working class, which consists of millions in number, continues to suffer and yet their ways of rise are blocked by the system which supports the rich class.

The state politics is captured by those feudal powers which have been at the advantageous end for centuries and, thus, even state powers do not help the poor. The orphans, such as Thomas, and other working class poor are treated as chattels, hardly supposed to exercise any human rights since the human right organization helps can be attained if someone have spunk and awareness. Thomas is arrested without any FIR and tortured since he is a slum dog who is not to be treated as human. Actually, Thomas represents millions of such slum dogs who have to undergo such inhuman treatment at the hands of the police which works in accordance to the whims and convenience of the powerful rich class:

Godbole is stunned. He is so stunned that he does not notice that I am equally stunned. I have never seen this woman before. I don’t have money to hire a taxi. I can hardly hire a lawyer.

‘Come again?’ Godbole croaks. ‘You are his lawyer?’

‘Yes. And what you are doing to my client is completely illegal and unacceptable. I want an immediate end to this treatment. He reserves the right to prosecute you under sections 330 and 331 of the Indian Penal Code. I demand to be shown the papers regarding his arrest. I see no evidence of any FIR having been recorded. No grounds for arrest have been communicated as required under Article 22 of the Constitution and you are in breach of Section 50 of the Cr PC. (26)

Here, Thomas does not represent the strata of all underdogs in the pretext of strong luck as the writer puts his destiny on the right path to success since his luck smiles. As Smita, his lawyer, comes as saviour in the case of this one underdog, there came an advocate of millions of underdogs called Karl Marx and Swarup is the advocate of his
doctrines. Therefore, the novelist raises many grim issues of Indian social reality and finds the economic backwardness being the crux of other forms of poverty. Then, there is a chance for the protagonist to win a billion in the quiz show to legally take away the big amount of the capitalist American and Indian sponsors. Analyzing the life and rise of Thomas from Marxist ways, Swarup’s ideological focus lies in the possibility of the rise of those marginals who are under the superstructure. He, therefore, heightens the case of material ascendance of an underdog who rises to the heights of a billionaire from the miseries of a domestic aide, as a waiter frying chickens and serving the customers.

The Marxist concept of economic freedom for uplift of poor from exploitation seems to have come down with artistic skills of Swarup when he painstakingly depicts the instances of materialistic nirvana of the protagonist. The protagonist achieves this nirvana by winning the biggest quiz show, as an escape from the clutches of the tyrannical forces. Karl Marx had propounded the theory that relates economic growth to all other developments, “Marx identified the production relations of society (arising on the basis of given productive forces) as the economic base of society. He also explained that on the foundation of economic base there arise certain political institutions, laws, customs, cultures etc., and ideal ways of thinking, morality etc…” (Marx Qtd. in Kinger 43)

The projection of unsupported poor labour class trying reach higher place equal to the powerful rich by challenging the established power politics relates this text to Michel Foucault’s concept of sexuality and power. M. M. Mazumdar’s findings hold water to Foucaultdian concept, “However, in keeping with Foucault’s logic that the modern control of sexuality in bourgeois culture was less a weapon for use against the lower classes than an instrument of bourgeois self-idealization.” (Mazumdar 129)

While depicting the encounters of Thomas in the dogmatic society in each successive chapter the author puts him every here and there in relation to such Marx-defined superstructure, the power politics of which is enjoyed by a few. In prologue, when he is in police torture-cell for interrogation for the alleged trick in the game, Thomas carves out an imaginary food chain of this power politics; though his hierarchy of power in the society refers to the experience of a slum-dweller orphan
urchin. When Thomas is arrested and cynically treated by the police, he, representing the common Indian mindset, carves out the hierarchy of professionals in conformity to their status which presents the clear picture of Indian social hierarchy:

We were always told never to pick a quarrel with the police. Street boys like me come at the bottom of the food chain. Above us are the petty criminals, like pick-pockets. Above them come the extortionists and loan sharks. Above them come the dons. Above them come the business houses. But above all them all are the police. (*Q & A: 25*)

Though it is a food chain made by the protagonist on the basis of his experience, yet it reveals the perception of the common man signifying the power politics in the country. The police, here, has been placed highest owing to the fact of the exercise of powers but later Ram has to reshuffle the hierarchy giving way to lawyer, his ignorance of the powers of politicians notwithstanding. What Swarup explores here is the fact that possession of power determines one's status which ensures his acceptance in the society. On the face of it this food chain refers to the professional exercise of powers but it also hints to the fact of Indian social hierarchy which keeps the slum-dwellers, subalterns, dalits at the bottom. Uma Chakravarti clearly states the traditional food chain of social hierarchy in India, “Without doubt, ‘caste’ originated in the economic division of labour. The talented and most intelligent portion of the Aryan Hindus became, as was natural, the governing body of the entire race.” (*Chakravarti Qtd. in Omvedt 26*)

The novel reveals the fact that how millions of economically and socially weaker people have to live in miserable conditions in the slums such as Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia. Though Thomas lives in typical Mumbai chawl, the residential colony for poor people who are forced to lead a life of compromise, yet there are strata of human spiders who build their homes in the slums, with waste garbage; the spiders such as adivasis or tribal communities who are always on the brink of losing their settings of natural abode owing the widely spreading modern India of well-off materialist bourgeois. Thomas ponders over this hierarchy even in poor settings:
After the time I spent with the actress Neelima Kumari, living in her flat, I had almost forgotten life in a chawl. A bundle of one-room tenements occupied by the lower-middle classes, chawls are the smelly armpit of Mumbai. Those who live here are only marginally better off than who live in slums like Dharavi. As Mr. Barve told me once, the rich people, those who live in their marble and granite four-bedroom flats, they enjoy. The slum people, who live in squalid, tattered huts, they suffer. And we, who reside in the overcrowded chawls, we simply live. (Q&A: 70)

Although as an Indian Dickens, Swarup mainly focuses on the urban poverty and the issues of social problems particularly in urban settings, yet he does not fail to raise the many issues representing the darker side of India against the slogan of ‘India Shining’, and this slogan was in vogue when this book was published. In the slums such as Dharavi, which represents various other slums, there seems hardly any possibility of regeneration since the poor slum dwellers have to remain unsupported, vagabound like stray dogs to be included in the army of beggars, crippled beggars, slaves, prostitutes, criminals and so on. The writer gives brief description of such future professionals when he depicts the children in Dharavi, “From time to time, the train passes through slum colonies, living in the edge of the railway track like a ribbon of dirt. We see half-naked children with distended bellies waving at us, while their mothers wash utensils in sewer water. We wave back.” (105)

However, poverty is not the problem within itself, it breeds multiple problems and evils and the poor people have to be within those evils, compromising, suffering, starving and dying unnatural death. Domestic violence, incest, child-abuse, human trafficking, prostitution, even gay-prostitution, etc. are associated practices with poverty. Swarup is visionary enough and ahead of other contemporary Indian writers with his concept of indigenous colonization, instead the Western one which all thinkers see as the cause of many problems. However, the present novel focuses the multi-faceted culture and social factors, the very structure of the feudally-built Indian society which has been in control of superstructure of the power and politics.

The novel gives extensive account of the type of life in slum, juvenile house, chawl and other poor settings wherein the residents have to undergo untold miseries,
and domestic violence is one of such miseries. Unlike developed and civilized countries, in third world undeveloped societies based on traditional feudal patterns, one has to be adept to such pathos—being bullied, abused, tortured mentally as well as physically within the threshold of the household. Swarup does not restrict his art of evaluation of facets of life to the outdoor vicissitudes of the protagonist, but he lets the readers peer through the walls of the houses; inside the life where physically weaker, younger ones have to compromise with tyranny from their own.

Since Smita alias Gudiya once was the neighbour of Thomas in the chawl residency, as a child she had to undergo horrendous treatment at the hands of her own father. Her case, though she is eventually saved by Thomas, represents the shocking reality of many innocent girls who have to suffer this stigma called incestuous exploitation ironically at the hands of their own. Domestic violence, incestuous assault, child abuse are the common matters in the poor settings where millions live.

In the chapter ‘A Brother’s Promise’ the horrible reality of such evil is described when Thomas witnesses all this in the chawl. When he tries to complain the matter of domestic violence against Shantharam, the lewd father of Gudiya, the naked reality of this society is brought forth in the words of practical man Ramakrishna, the secretary of the chawl:

‘You are a demon,’ Mrs. Shantaram yells, and Shantaram hits her. I hear a bottle break.
‘No!’ I hear Gudiya scream.
I feel as though an oxyacetylene torch has pierced my brain and molten metal has been poured over my heart. I can tolerate it no more. I run to Mr. Ramakrishna’s room and tell him that Shantaram is doing something terrible to his own wife and daughter. But Ramakrishna behaves as if am talking about the weather.
‘Look,’ he tells me. ‘Whatever happens inside the four walls of a house is a private matter for the that family and we cannot interfere. You are a young orphan boy. You have not seen life. But I know the daily stories of wife-beating and abuse and incest and rape, which take place in chawls all over
Mumbai. Yet no one does anything. We Indians have this sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it...(83-84)

This real but shocking excerpt from the novel is the essence of the all colonizing reality of Indian life; the evils so permeate the very culture that people stay colonized, salve to follow what happens around, though wrong and horrible it may be. The instances of incest can have more traumatic consequences on psychological levels for the victims since in the case of rape the exploiter is outside agent but in such cases the devilish rapist may be a father or other family members. Such treatment of human beings questions the clap trap of so-called laws of human rights and the Constitution of India itself; the writer questions the whole system which sheds colonial impact on the people. Shantaram, though is an educated scientist, yet is found at the helm of executing such aghast task i. e. beating his wife and daughter and advancing the innocent daughter with incestuous lust. Swarup, here, questions even the creed of educated group who are supposed to be the harbinger of the society towards modernism, away from the old dogmas. Frustrated Shantaram, who is subjected to injustice in his work place, becomes debauched, immoral lewd posing threats to his own family.

Again this case of aghast violence and horrendous incest or child abuse can be judged in the light of Marxist principles since the cause of misery is none other than the economic devastation. The case of Shantaram is the vivid enunciation of the waste of human potency and talent in India owing the corruption in all spheres and powers in the hands of the clever thugs. If one is not aware of the art of politics to succeed and is educated and talented his academics and excellence are bound to go waste. A brilliant scientist like Shantaram has to do odd petty jobs for maintenance after having met the injustice of losing the job:

The three hours I spend with Gudiya enable me to learn a lot about her father. Mrs. Shantaram tells me, ‘My husband is a famous space scientist. Rather, he was a scientist. He used to work in Aryabhatta Space Research Institute, where he investigated stars with the help of huge telescopes. We used to live in big bungalow on the institute’s campus. Three years ago he discovered a
new star. It was very important scientific discovery but one of his fellow astronomers took credit for it. This shattered my husband completely. He started drinking. He started having fights with his colleagues and one day he got so angry with the director of the institute he almost beat him to death. He was thrown out of the institute immediately and I had to beg the director not to have him arrested by the police. After leaving the institute, my husband got a job as a physics teacher in a good school, but he could not keep his drinking and his violent temper in check. He would thrash boys for minor lapses and was kicked out in just six months. Since then he has been doing odd jobs, working as a canteen manager in an office, as an accountant in a factory, and now as a sales assistant in a clothes showroom. And because we have exhausted all our savings, we are forced to live in a chawl.’ (79)

Taking this instance as representative of what Marxist thinkers apprehend is that the proletarians have to be at losing end in the politics of economic powers, since it is bourgeoisie or neo-feudal powers which has all control over the system, “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, a lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers.” (Marx 67) There are motley cases like that of Shantaram, the professional experts in their fields who are made helpless to sell themselves cheap for the sake of earning livelihood. Sounding a socialist, Swarup raises such issues, depicting the miseries of proletarian class and the tyranny of bourgeoisie in rising India, the country which is going rapidly in the jaw of the devil viz. capitalism since 1990 when it fell prey of Western politics.

Since economy is the base of progress one has to ensure the livelihood of their family first. There are many like Shantaram who are denied their share in this system despite the fact they are highly educated and academically equipped to direct the society to great heights. In another case in the novel the economic cause again plays vital role in making someone take the path of crime. Lajwanti in the chapter ‘X Gkrz Opknu or, A Love Story’ has been a faithful, loyal housemaid to Rani Sahiba, the royal lady and the owner of the large property in Agra, yet she is discarded by the latter at one stroke when the former has to resort the illegal ways of stealing. Like Shantaram, Lajwanti also has been leading a peaceful life but the circumstances,
social politics, fate, corruption etc. play crucial role in jeopardizing such cases. In need of mere rupees fifty thousand for the marriage of her younger sister she asks for a loan of the same amount from her rich employer but latter flatly refuses irrespective to the fact of her years of loyalty an honesty:

Lajwanti returns from her village the next day and is immediately arrested. A sweaty constable drags her from her room to the jeep with flashing light.
She wails inconsolably.
Helplessly I watch the spectacle unfold. I am with Abdul, who works as a gardener in Swapna Palace. ‘Abdul’, why are the police taking Lajwanti away? Why don’t Rani Sahiba do something? After all, Lajwanti is the best maid she has ever had.’
Abdul grins, Madam has herself called the police to arrest Lajwanti (Q & A 317

The politics in space organization in the case of Shntaram and Swapna Devi alias Rani Sahiba in the case of loyal maid Lajwanti— represent the powerful bourgeoisie or the novel form of colonizing feudalism in India which is always standing against the hopes of proletarians and have-nots. Though Shatharam, the scientist, has given a new discovery in the credit of the country and Lajwanti has been devoted servant to the royal woman, yet they are at once discarded, dismissed and made to face utter humiliation. In the politics of this bourgeoisie power human values find no place, only the mottoes of utilitarianism and laissez-faire are valued. Lajwanti lives like a family member in Swapna Palace, cherishing the illusion of having right over the disdain queen for help but she is disillusioned when asking for help in the marriage of her younger sister. The Marxist ideas of regarding the capitalistic politics of bourgeoisie hold this truth, “The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.” (Marx 67)

Swarup does not restricts his explorations of such colonizing and mercantile values to Indian boundaries only, but the narrative goes miles away to the remote peripheries of developing countries such as New Papua Guneva and Haiti where in the influence of bourgeois values sways. Julie represents that reality who has no moral
scruples to kill Arvind Rao first and then even her husband, Parkash Rao for the sake of money:

‘Julie turned my life upside-down. She had been a poor cleaning woman, but now she wanted to be a part of high society. She forgot that she was married to the brother of a rich industrialist, not the industrialist himself. She wanted money all the time. Money which I couldn’t give her because it didn’t belong to me. It belonged to my brother, to the company. (Q & A 164)

Apart from jealousy and revenge Parkash Rao agrees to let Julie kill his own brother for the sake of money too. But Julie is the end product of typical bourgeois avarice, valuing just material gain and worshipping Mammon than anything else. However, Swarup does restrict his exploration either to the study of bourgeoisie and proletarian in light of Marxist doctrine only. He goes into the very workings of the social machinery which determines various actions of discrimination, misery, clash, crime and so on. In case of Lajwanti, things should not be viewed in pretext of bourgeois ruthlessness and insensitivity to human values only. Rather, the very cultural values and customs which have been keeping the people colonized and captive; the people like Lajwanti keep a strong bond to the cultural codes, clinging to hollow values never trying for freedom. Lajwanti needs money for the spending in the proposed wedding ceremony of her sister to show off the lavish expenditure in her community and village. This is very common stance in Indian social reality that the people sacrifice everything for the sake of ostentation on such occasions.

Lajwanti, here, is a representative case of millions poor proletarians who earn money by the sweat of their brows, not for enjoying their life but to squander that on the marriages and other occasions. The dowry system is also in the light for criticism in the novel as she needs money to buy dowry for the prospect bride; it is through this dowry that she can buy a capable bridegroom for her sister. Taking it in feminist ways, the custom of dowry and lavish spending in the marriage of a girl is the real cause not only for poverty but also for the unchecked suffering of women. The dowry, the practice of giving riches to the bridegroom or to the in-laws of the bride, help strengthen the capitalistic system which keeps the poor in poverty perpetually. Swarup makes survey of such colonizing practices:
‘Arrey, Lajwanti, what are the sweets in aid of? Have you got a raise? I ask her.
‘This is the happiest day of my life. With Goddess Durga’s blessings, the Sugarcane Officer has finally agreed to marry Lakshmi. My sister will now live like a queen. I am preparing for a wedding to beat all weddings.’
‘But what about dowry? Hasn’t the groom’s family made any demands?’
‘No, not at all. They are very decent family. They do not want any cash. They have only requested some very small things.’
‘Like what?’
‘Like a Bajaj scooter, a Sumeet Mixer, five Raymond suits and some gold jewellery. I was, in any case, going to give all this to Lakshmi.’ (309)

The common man in Indian culture is so conditioned since the very childhood that he takes it more important to abide by so-called god-made rituals than venturing into the newer ways of progress in life. A poor man saves hard-earned money to give away dowry in the marriage of his daughter and prove his stipulated social recognition by spending more. Here, Lajwanti cherishes the dream to beat the other marriages in her community by spending more than her capacity. Such bad practices have multiple ramifications. First, the poor proletarian person takes heavy loan for such social ostentations and, thus, is further weakened economically; this practice helps the rich who lends the money to the poor. This practice is traditional in Indian culture and thus there has been already this capital system supporting the rich bunyas and the feudal landlords. Secondly, owing to the dowry system and other such practices people tend to take the daughters unwanted in the family and their preference goes for the boys. The Indian society is heavily burdened with the shocking evil practices such as murder of the innocent bride for the sake of dowry:

At a modest estimate, the figures for deaths in India the occur due to non-payment or partial payment of dowry could be placed around 4,000 for one year. In 1990, 4,148 cases of dowry murders were recorded in the country, the highest being in Uttar Pradesh (1,516), followed by Maharashtra (858), West Bengal (420), and Madhya Pradesh (397). (Ahuja 212)
In fact the above given data correspond to those cases which were recorded in the year 1990. This evil practice, ironically, has increased multifold over the year despite enforcement of the laws against it. In postmodern times the crime against the girl child has taken the hi-tech form as the medical science helps in killing the female fetus even before birth. It has been the politics of capitalistic bourgeoisie to keep the poor ignorant people caught in the web of such socio-cultural rituals and practices, the poor cannot spare time and means of escape, rebellion or further growth. They are caught in the cages like roosters in Rooster Coops, the capitalist butchers slaughter them one by one. Poverty in many cases has so much devastating impact that some people even cannot afford to feed their babies, have to leave them somewhere at orphanages, charitable places such as church.

The protagonist and his friend Salim are orphan kids in this vast country. It is very pathetic instance when Ram Mohammad Thomas imagines a woman as his mother in the tune of Bollywood filmy scenes. Many a times in the narrative his mind gets the strokes of this visual and he consoles himself with mere the thought of a mother:

The wind is howling. Her long black hair blows across her face, obscuring her features. Leaves rustle near her feet. Dust scatters. Lighting flashes. She walks with heavy footsteps towards the church, clutching the baby to her bosom. She reaches the door of the church and uses the metal ring knocker. But the wind is so strong, it drowns out the sound of the knock. Her time is limited. With tears streaming from her eyes, she smothers the baby’s face with the kisses. Then she places him in the bin, arranging the old clothes to make him comfortable. She takes one final look at the baby, averts her eyes and then, running away from the camera, disappears into the night…(Q & A 49)

Thomas is raised in a church in New Delhi wherein Father Timothy becomes a fatherly divine figure for this orphan child who was left over there as a helpless baby. With such imaginary visuals Thomas tries the justify the helplessness of his imaginary mother; still holds her in high esteem, notwithstanding his desertion by her. Salim is also an orphan boy like Thomas. Both the cases illustrate the fact that how the life of
such boys without parental home and blessings is replete with sufferings; they have to become vagabond, trying their luck here and there. In case of the boys in patriarchal dogmatic society, there may be chances of escape from one circumstance to another and try their fate; but things would have been horrendous and disturbing for the girls.

In the largest numbers of Oscar winning film *Slum-dog Millionaire*, made on this novel, there is a female child Latika with Jamal, representation of Thomas, and Salim, who is Jamal’s elder brother. Latika, befittingly, is the representation of Nita, is forced to the prostitution, personal servicer of the mafia don who exploits her. The problem of prostitution will be discussed later in this chapter, but here, it must be clear that the life of women in India is more difficult; doubly wretched since they are susceptible and vulnerable to fall victim of any force—society in general, dogmas and prejudices, even their own family as in the case of Gudiya and Nita.

It goes to the credit of the literariness of the novelist that he describes the conditions of an orphan deserted baby, the protagonist, in very light mood narrated straight from horse’s mouth, adding in the novel the elements of what we critically call dark humour. In the chapter ‘The Burden of a Priest’ the gloomy reality of the society is exposed that how the babies are deserted in church or somewhere else; and even how one baby is rejected by many, if selected once, then again deserted:

The sisters of St. Mary ran an orphanage and an adoption agency, and I was put up for adoption, together with a clutch of other orphan babies. All the other babies were collected, but no one came for me. A prospective mother and father would see me and exchange glances with each other. There would be an imperceptible shake of head, and then they would move on to the next cradle. I do not know why. Perhaps I was too dark. Too ugly. Too colicky. Perhaps I didn’t have cherubic smile, or I gurgled too much. So I remained at the orphanage for two years. Oddly enough, the sisters never got round to giving me a name. I was just called baby---the baby that no one wanted. (49-50)

Though this is the pathetic condition of a baby, yet the tone is rather light; a farcical description of the orphanage, of baby and of the adoption business. As a baby he is often rejected and other babies are preferred to him perhaps, as felt by himself, owing
to the fact of his being too blackish and dark. This point of dark complexion casts the
dark shadows of other unexplored facts over this reality of orphan child. The dark
complexion originally refers to native aboriginal Indians viz. dalits of India who are
poor and helpless for centuries. Thomas is rejected by the typical middle class people
but adopted by a swarthy complexioned Christian couple. This move may be intended
to be given a symbolic significance as the dark skinned dalits, who have been abjectly
rejected, are often accepted by the Christian missionaries in India, adding more and
more swarthy skinned native Christians. Though Swarup gives a farcical description
of this adoption too, “…Mr. Thomas must have taken one look at me and immediately
passed on to the next baby, but Mrs. Philomena Thomas selected me the moment she
saw me. I was perfect match for her dark skin!” (50)

The symbolic adoption of the baby by the dark black Christians, implying the
fact of acceptance of aboriginal dalits by the missionaries, may have analogy with the
view of Jean Paul Sartre. Fanon in this seminal book accounts the truth of the
conversion of natives by the settlers. But here in this novel the mischief is not made
by the foreign settlers, rather they seem to accept the aboriginal dalits and Thomas is
brought up by father Timothy as if he is his real father; the church people give him
much love like a family. Here, the indigenous feudal and colonizing socio-cultural
system and traditional bourgeoisie can be seen as mischief in inflicting pain on the
dalits. While Sartre finds such adoption as settlers’ mission to convert others into
Christianity, “Then, indeed, Europe could believe in her mission ; she had had
Hellenized the Asians; she had created a new breed…” (Sartre in Fanon 07)

The dalits are rejected by the fanatic Hindus in the country but are accepted by
the Christian missionaries, though the purpose may be of conversion. The indigenous
native, particularly the dalits, therefore, are often susceptible to utter misery and
poverty; it is the poverty that leads to many social evils in the society. Orphan
children owing to poverty are subjected to certain aghast horrendous evils such as
child abuse, apart from the instances of incestuous child abuse as mentioned earlier.
This practice is a stigma in the whole society since India, as per the latest researches
and surveys, ranks very high, in fact on top, regarding the cases of child abuse in
different forms.
The lives of two orphan boys, the protagonist and Salim, are the stark illustration of the child abuse; how they have to serve like slaves; how they have close shave from the clutches of child trafficking mafia and so on. Although this novel is rich with multi-faceted aspects and issues typical of Indian society, the big portion of the narrative seems to hover around this grimmest reality i.e. child abuse; every here and there are the instances of this evil practice in the novel. The very first chapter ‘Death of a Hero’ comprises this psychological mania called child abuse apart from the gay-issues. The title of the chapter refers to Arman Ali, perhaps adaptation of Salman Khan, who is the iconic god of Salim, the mad fan of this actor. As a child Salim, who lives with Thomas, literally worships this hero like a devoted slave and watch his each and every film many a times.

Though the chapter mainly deals with the idea of gay mania prevailing in modern world as Arman Ali turns out to be so which results in Salim’s hatred for someone whom he has been loving more than himself. However, the novelist raises the issue of child-abuse against the backdrop of the plot of Salim’s emotions for Arman. Through this novel Swarup skillfully lays bare the common practice of erotic excess to the soft target i.e. children, particularly those children who are not guarded by the shadow of parents or the guardians. Salim is softer, fairer, suppler than Thomas; is approached by an unscrupulous old man in the cinema when they were enjoying the film of Arman Ali. The erotic, lustful footage illustrating the love-making of Arman Ali and Priya Kapoor sheds off the sensual excitement to the audience and it is here the old man tries advance Salim for sexual arousal:

Arman has now locked Priya in his embrace. We are shown the swell of her breasts, her heavy breathing, the perspiration forming on her forehead. There are catcall and whistles from the stalls. The old man sitting next to Salim shifts uncomfortably in his seat, crossing his legs. I am not sure, but I think his hand is massaging his crotch. (Q & A 40)

Since Swarup is a creative writer, it should be his prime concern to show the mirror to the society he lives in; he, therefore, scans every aspect of the real happenings around. The instances of erotic advancement to the children are very
common and matter of great concern; Swarup mirrors the society with its ugly facet in the form of this evil practice even in the very first chapter. The antagonist in this representative instance in the cinema is an old man and the novelist raises the interrogative finger to the cultural values wherein the old, senior members are given due respect. In a society wherein age is worshipped, Swarup ascribes this evil, disgusting action to the aged one; the old man, with no scruples trying to satiate his lustful desires through a helpless child. This old man does not stop here as this action is repeated three times by the same man, to the same child, in the same cinema showing the same film of the same hero:

I see that the bearded man’s left hand has moved on. It is now placed in Salim’s lap and rests there gently. Salim is so engrossed in the death scene he does not register it. The old man is emboldened. He rubs his palm against Salim’s jeans. As Arman takes his last few breaths, the man increases his pressure on Salim’s crotch, till he is almost gripping it. (43)

The offending old man’s erotic excess cannot be viewed in pretext of lustful romantic footage as this man takes Salim as a target for such evil designs. He is unconcerned with the form of life running on the silver screen. What may be the greater evidence of the practice of child-abuse than the depiction of a child, the protagonist in the novel, as working odd jobs here and there. Devoid of any parental, familial or societal protection he has to protect himself from odd hardships. Neelima Kumari, the actress with good heart, does not have scruple in employing a child at her household. In fact, in such instances there goes irony since she is rather helping an orphan child, but simultaneously she is adding to the practice of child labour. Even the justice-loving Western official like Colonel Taylor is not untouched of this sin as he also employs Thomas, a child, as family aide.

However, Swarup does not limit his findings in this field with some references and shades of this evil practice in familial and social scenario only. Rather, he devotes whole episode, a whole chapter to depicting the real shades and facets of this practice. The chapter, ‘A Thought for the Crippled’ is wholesome exploration of this shadowy practice in the form of human and child trafficking, mafia of child begging. In this chapter the novelist brings forth the horrendous picture of Indian society by depicting
the reality that how the children are abducted, stolen and crippled for begging. This mafia flourishes in India under the nose of law and governance; the poor innocent children are tortured, harassed ruthlessly, even crippled so that people may give them alms out of pity. This mafia has nexus with police and other authorities which let this Mephistophelian task go on and further flourish. In the name of the schemes to be boasted by the ruling governments there are govt.-run and NGOs- run human development centres, yet the evil elements hold much powers to negate the goodness of such centres.

There is Delhi Juvenile Home in Turkman Gate, but shockingly there also thrives this evil of child-abuse unchecked and this is patronized by the authorities indirectly. The devilish sinners like Mr. Gupta hold power therein to use innocent children in the way they want, “…but we all know that the real power is wielded by his deputy, Mr. Gupta, nicknamed the Terror of Turkman Gate.” (Q&A 91-92) Though the institutes such as Bal Vikash Kendra, Rehabilitation centres etc. are under the control of govt. and NGOs even UNESCO, yet the practice of child abuse runs and flourishes unchecked since the children therein do not have their own guardians to protect them. If some wrong is smelled by any child he or she cannot resist it since the authority to report to is itself indulged in this foul game. Mr. Gupta is such authority there who fearlessly and unscrupulously executes this beastly act on the new arrivals, the children who are treated as commodities:

Late one night, Salim is summoned to Gupta’s room. Gupta is a widower and lives alone on the compound. Salim is worried. ‘Why is he calling me?’ he asks me.

‘I don’t know,’ I reply. ‘I never been to hi room. But we can find it today.’

So Salim walks down to Gupta’s room and I tiptoe behind him.

Gupta is sitting in his room wearing a crumbled kurta pyjamas when Salim knocks on the door. ‘Come. . .come, Salim’ he says in slurred voice. He has a glassful of golden liquid in his hand. He gulps it down and wipes his mouth. His eyes look like big buttons. I watch from the little space between the two curtains in the doorway. He strokes Salim’s face, tracing his fingers over his bony nose and thin lips. Then abruptly he orders, ‘Take off your shorts.’

Salim is confused by this request.
‘Just do as I say, bastard, or I will give you a tight slap,’ Gupta snarls.
Salim complies. He pushes down his shorts hesitantly. I avert my eyes
Gupta approaches Salim from behind, his gold chains jangling. ‘Good,’ he
mutters. He see him unfasten the cord of his pyjamas and lower them…(96)

Even after this incident everybody, such as staff members and others, finds Gupta
captured red-handed but no one has spunk to go against him since he is powerful man.
Things do not stop here as shockingly and ironically enough, such centres, which are
supposed to protect the children, become market of the soft, supple, innocents to be
bought by the child trafficking mafia. As the hypocritical character of the Indian
official working goes, there are legal papers of each child who are actually sold and
the money is siphoned. On papers they are adopted by the so-called good people and
taken away to their homes. But is it very sorry reality that they are sold to the
racketeer mafias like Babu Pillai alias Maman.

Swarup is keen and sharp as a realistic writer that he touches every aspect and
likely possibilities of each concept and reality. He does not leave things half-
described to be pooh-poohed by the readers as mere fictional elements; rather he
minutely scans all aspects related to that reality. Here while depicting this shocking
reality of child-abuse and child-trafficking, he certainly gives answer to the possibility
of the intervention of Welfare Boards and international Human Right authorities. The
Indian government system reels on the situations and data furnished on papers; in the
illegal purchase of children there are many tricks to satisfy such organizations. The
novelist relates this tricky truth when a Sethji comes in the Juvenile Home in
Turkman Gate and selects Salim for purchase. Mr. Gupta assures him for no legal
problem.

How sad,’ says Sethji. ‘But he is just the kind of boy I need. Can you sort out
the paperwork?’ ‘You just have to tell me, Sethji. Whoever you want will be
restored to you in no time. For this boy, we’ll show Mustafa as the uncle. The
Welfare Board will not create any problem. In fact, they want to get rid of as
many kids as possible.’ (103)

It is necessary to note that how clever these homicidal devils are that Mr. Gupta
projects Mustafa, a Muslim name, as the uncle of Salim so that it sounds convincing
that the minor is being adopted with the consent of blood relation. Such people execute their evil deeds with high cleverness and tactics and the cycle of corruption keep moving. There is deep rooted corruption in all spheres of life in India. Celebrated writer V.S. Naipaul also exposes such disparity between papers and the actions in this country of disparities, “When action is symbolic, labels are important, for things and places as well for people. An enclosed open space, its purpose is made clear by its fixtures, nevertheless carries a large board: CHILDREN’S PLAYGROUND…” (Naipaul 80)

However, being a bureaucrat Swarup is not vehement with the gloomy and grim reality in the society and thus keeps his cool to describe the things in well designed manner. The smooth and unchecked working of human trafficking does indicate the big politics behind such mafia. This so-called Sethji is in strong alliance with the Juvenile Home authorities but to Thomas he sounds a disguised man, “Sethji finally arrives, accompanied by two other men. He doesn’t look like a diamond merchant. He looks more like a gangster.” (Q & A 102) Even he is accompanied by the Maman’s men making the business deal of the innocent children very openly, “The two henchmen with him look exactly like henchmen. I learn later that they are called Mustafa and Punnoose. Gupta is also with them, leading the way.” (102)

Such shameful actions devoid of any moral scruple and sense of pity imply the fact of this flawed society being governed by the darker and arcane forces; the evils have been colonizing the people since long when the Western traders even did not step in this dark land. And out of many colonizing evils, child-abuse is as old as the human history, “Child abuse neither a recent phenomenon, nor it is emerged with any historical period or cultural practice. It is as old as the history of mankind.” (Pandey 01) Similarly the roots of child-trafficking mafia also seems to be very deep when Swarup depicts this bleak business in full swing in Mumbai after Thomas and Salim are trafficked there at the mercy of Babu Pillai alias Maman. The alarming truth is explored by the novelist when he describes the plight of helpless innocent children. The Mafia not only exploits children sexually and in other ways but also cripples them, making them fit for begging in local trains, traffic signals or elsewhere:
We befriend Ashok, a thirteen-year-old with a deformed arm, receive our first shock.
‘We are not schoolchildren,’ he tells us. ‘We are beggars. We beg in local trains. Some of us are pick-pocket as well.’
‘And what happen to the money you earn?’
‘We are required to give it to Maman’s men, in return for food and shelter.’
‘You mean Maman is a gangster?’
‘What did you think?’ He is no angel, but at least he gives us two square meals a day.
My belief in Maman is shattered, but Salim continues to lay faith in the innate goodness of man.
We have an encounter with Raju, a blind ten-year-old. ‘How come you were punished today?’
‘I didn’t earn enough.’
‘How much are you required to give each day?’
‘All that we earn. But if you give less than one hundred rupees, you are punished (Q & A 110-111)

Such crippled, helpless and hopeless children with no eyes, no arms, no legs present the picture of this country as helpless and crippled; the country that cannot protect its children is, in fact, in the lurch of utter gloom. The people like Mr. Gupta, Maman, Mustafa, Sethji, Punnoose and other culprits roam freely scurrying around the offices of the power while the abject condition of the innocent victims goes on unchecked. Swarup does make it clear that such Mafias have firm grip on police and government authorities as the children in Maman’s captivity are very soon brought back to the hell. This fact indicates to the involvement of police and other so-called prestigious citizens in the society. Since Thomas, along with Salim, is projected to represent the possibility of escape and ascendance through sheer luck and chance, they are shown succeeding in escape from here and there. But such timely escape is not in the fate of many children who are forced to lead a pathetic life as beggars with physical handicap and mental trauma. Thomas and Salim meet many boys in Maman’s consignment who tell the miserable stories of crippling, beating, inhuman treatments, besides
telling them how there is no bolt-hole from this captivity as they are brought back from any corner:

We get introduced to Moolay, a thirteen-year-old with an amputated arm.
‘I hate my life’, he says.
‘Why don’t you run away?’
‘Where to?’ This is Mumbai, not my village. There is no space to hide your head in this vast city. You need to have connections even to sleep in a sewage pipe. And you need protection from other gangs.’
‘Other gangs?’
‘Yes. Two boys ran away last month. They came back within three days. They couldn’t find any work. Bhiku’s gang wouldn’t allow them to operate in their area. Here, at least we get food and shelter, and when we are working for Maman none of other gangs bother us.’ (112)

This shocking information makes it clear that how there is no hope from that hell of Maman since there are other gangs also operating in the city. In fact, the instances from a city are representative while there is wide spread web of such mafias in the country. Not only India but the whole of the subcontinent seems to be in the drain of this inhuman practice which inflicts pain on the innocent children. The case of Sikander is more disturbing and shocking when it is unraveled that some communities in Pakistan deliberately put iron rings on the soft head of a baby to stop its head grow further. Such child is known as ‘rat child’ with typical physical features preferred in the market wherein the children are sold, “I have heard that they put iron rings on the baby’s head to stop it growing. That is how you get this unique head design.’ ‘I think he has lot of potential. Maman will be pleased,’ says Punnoose” (113) The Kanijjar community in Pakistan is known for inhuman customs as they prefer to have girl child to put her into prostitution and earn money.

Here, in the case of Sikander the typical features in the rat children are craftily made by their family as if the child were the item made in the factory. Yes, this is true the countries of South Asia such as India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal etc. are the big market of children for abuse and girls for prostitution to be supplied to Arab countries in consignments like commodities. There are different prototypes of this Kanijjar
community thriving in India with such hypocritical cultural norms and customs that give them pretext to sell their own innocent daughters which is a heinous form of child abuse. The child abuse in the case of girls is more painful since they are naturally not blessed with toughness to fight hardships. Thomas and Salim can escape from the clutches of Maman but Nita could not escape from the ritual of her tribal communities which forced her into prostitution at the age of twelve only. Though there are laws in India which prevent the practice of child abuse and prostitution, but all laws seem mere zilch in front of colonizing cultural norms. Nita, the love of Thomas, is prostitute in Agra who was forced to this aghast profession as a minor child:

‘And how long have you been doing this?’
‘Ever since puberty. Once the nathni utherna ceremony for the removal of the nose ring and the sar dhakwana ritual for covering the head are over, you are deemed to have become a woman. So at the age of twelve, my virginity was auctioned to the highest bidder and I was put on sale inside this brothel. (305-306)

In the countries where prostitution is legal there is a law that allows the girl who has got major at the age of eighteen to choose this profession, and the same law protects the minor girls from this inhuman degeneration. But ironically, in the country where prostitution is totally banned as per the Constitution’s rulings, there thrives this devilish practice of forcing the girl children into this profession by their own families which are governed by the barbaric but colonizing cultural norms. Swarup presents many aspects of this evil practice of child abuse one by one each time shocking more with the piece of reality he describes. Apart from crippling, tortures, punishment, sexual exploitation these children are made to addict to drugs also. Another boy Jitu’s case gives horrible account of his addiction of eating very harmful element i.e. glue of leather; not for the sake of stupor or intoxication but to kill hunger. This description of starvation is the culmination of insensitivity and savagery of those who are not savage but human, “I slap him. He coughs up black phlegm I am addicted to glue,’ he tells me later. ‘I buy it from the cobbler. Glue takes the hunger away, and the pain.”(114)
The children in camps are professionally trained in music and prepared to beg good deal of alms through good singing. Swarup ironically relates the poetic songs of some Bhakti poets like Surdas while depicting the music training of the crippled helpless kids; the songs have the thematic message of one’s devotion to Krishana, the god of many Indians who are adept to slavish panegyrics of various gods. Smita, is taken aback with such horrendous but real account of the misery of many children, “Smita shivers involuntarily. ‘I cannot imagine there are still people in this day and age who can inflict such cruelty on innocent children.” (121). The reaction of Smita, in fact, reflects the reaction of all and sundry as many of us remain unaware of such barbaric treatment to the children; the children who even cannot plead their case in any judicial court.

However, it is not only the cruel child-trafficking mafia which is responsible for child abuse, but this practice is wide spread and multi-pronged as it is child’s own home where it often takes place. Actually the concept of child abuse should not be restricted to the practice of inflicting pain, sexual exploitation and other cruel treatments only, it includes scolding, injustice, emotional discrimination etc. also. The projection of Shankar as mentally drained child is the case of utter neglect since he lives as a servant to her own real mother Rani Sahiba, but she would not accept him as her son, fearing social disgrace. Protagonist’s desertion as a baby at church, Shankar’s irony of life that he cannot claim the love of his own mother etc. are the question that Swarup raises even at the motherliness of women. Even a mother, who is supposed to be the best protection for child, is depicted as a hypocrite, believing in the fake pride as she stays colonized under the hollow social norms. The novelist describes the pathetic condition of this neglected boy in detail.

The boy speaks in some nonsensical syllables like, ‘Hu Ixhz Qo Odxifxn’ which means ‘my name is Shankar’, and is taken as mentally drained, but he knows that he has to keep this secret of being Swapna Devi’s son within his little heart. On the verge of his death, having bitten by the rabbis-giving dog, Shankar poignantly speaks in his dream all the time asking his estranged mother to relent and pity him, “…Why did you throw me out, Mummy?” he mumbles. ‘I am sorry, I should have knocked. How could I know Uncle was inside with you?’ ‘I love you, Mummy.” (322) It makes one’s heart sink to think that how he could have managed his life
without protection of parents, ironically when there has been his mother alive around him but he cannot claim her motherhood. This is the poignant case of child abuse on psychological and emotional planes. But things get worst when this inhuman callous mother at once refuses to pay for the treatment of her own son; her refusal and statement shock and wreck Thomas, “But if I don’t get the money, Shankar will die of hydrophobia within twenty-four hours.’ ‘I don’t care what you do, but don’t bother me.’ And then she says the most spiteful thing I have ever heard a mother say. ‘Perhaps it is for the best that he dies.” (324)

The writer unravels here such an instance that is a big question to the most delicate relation of mother and son; the relation which is hardly taken for critique. It is height of irony with paradox that the orphan protagonist Thomas’ conditions is made sound better than that of Shankar’s since latter does not have mother despite having his mother alive. Thomas realizes this fact when this weird, hypocrite mother lets her son die miserably, “I was at least lucky enough to have been discarded by my mother at birth, but poor Shankar was cast off by his mother midway through life, and now she was refusing to lift a finger even to prevent his imminent death.” (324)

The novel can be credited for specialty of focusing on certain untouched, unquestioned and delicate nuances, shades and issues. With its intensive exploration of various shades of child abuse the novel is an authentic critique of such practices which have colonizing impact. One such heinous practice with long history is prostitution, the profession which is deeply rooted in the whole world; a canker which is spreading more and more, thus making the parts of social structure hollow. Vikas Swarup gives this burning issue much focus and extensive exploration, bringing forth certain unheard but aghast shades of this evil practice. Again, what Swarup finds the prime cause for this problem too is poverty; poverty which brings helplessness and doom of sexual exploitation for the innocent girls. But Swarup is a writer with the mind bending to social sciences, and thus he cannot resist to exploring the socio-cultural causes, factors, rituals etc. responsible for this shameful practice. Agra is one of the famous place for this illegal but shameful profession; various girls in their teen, even minor, are brought there in that mandi, and are offered for money to many a those who hold prestigious positions in the society.
It is a great racket, a mafia that freely executes this business with support of the corrupt officers in police and other authorities. Nita is a prostitute in an Agra brothel and it is here that Thomas falls in love with her. The novelist portrays the realistic picture of the situation and compromising living conditions of the brothels:

The driver takes us through narrow streets and teeming bazaars towards the outskirts of Agra. He finally enters a strange-looking settlement close to the National Highway called Bassi. Mohalla. There is billboard at its entry which says: ‘Enter the Red Light Area at your own risk. Always remember to use condom. Prevent AIDS, Save Lives.’ I do not understand the reference to red light on the billboard. There are no red light on any of the houses, as far as I can see. There are at least a dozen trucks parked along the road. Some barefoot children loiter in the streets---there is no sign of their mothers. The faint sound of music and dancers’ ankles bells float into the might air. In the distance, I can see the dome and minarets of the Taj Mahal shimmering under the golden moonlight. The halo of the moon and the sight of the marble monument imbue even this dusty and dirty enclave of single and double story shacks with bit of gold dust. (296-297)

The passage is artistically telling of many aspects of contemporary and historical urban life of India. The congested bazaars, hustle and bustle, warning against the modern disease called AIDS on billboards etc. present the modern day picture of India. Besides, they also indicate double standards of society and the governments since prostitution is totally banned in India, yet the sign boards, statuary warning etc. indicate to legal approval, though never on papers. The faint music, sound of the ankle bells, slum Mohalla all carries the typical picture of Red Light Areas across the country. It goes to the descriptive excellence of the author that he vividly depicts this ugly picture of brothels in stark contrast to monumental beauty of Taj Mahal; this contrast signifies the historicity of the both in India i.e. ugly prostitution and Taj Mahal, the art and beauty. Going deeper into the philosophical poetry of this idea one can find that the beauty of Taj symbolizes the beauty of India, its culture which is
getting disfigured with the stigmas and blots of evil practices (prostitution and child-abuse) which inflict pain on the innocents.

Nita represents many a girls who are forced, taken, sold, abducted, duped into this inhuman profession. Swarup describes the pathetic condition of the girls in this profession through Nita, “She chuckles. ‘You have come to a brothel, Sahib, not a marriage bureau, prostitutes don’t have surnames. Like pet cats and dogs, we are called only by our first names.” (299) Precisely, the women forced to this profession are kept like chattels, who can be put to any use by anyone, her choice notwithstanding. Such unfortunate women are kept like slaves, subjected with inhuman treatment and there is no protection and law for them in practice. At first, it is always poverty which breeds many horrendous evils in the society, “Look, this is a profession for me, not a hobby. It gives me enough to feed me and my entire family. If I was not doing this, my family would have died from hunger long ago.” (300) This fact makes one think, who got a thinking head upon his shoulders, that it is the hypocrisy of Indian cultural norms which relate to the concept of man as the earner of the family rather than woman. If Indian cultural traditional values are taken into analysis one fact certainly comes out and that is patriarchy. But in patriarchal system it is man who have decision-making power; but again it is man who is supposed to shoulder the responsibilities of earning bread for the family. As per stipulated norms, it is his prime duty to take care of the female members of the family and ensure safety and security for them.

What Swarup takes into critical account is the facets of double standards of tribal but cultural reality in India. The text gets feminist colourings with the exploration and survey of the facts relating to the unending misery of women; some have to encounter incestuous devilish assaults and some are forced into abject misery of prostitution. Taking the pretext of the tribal customs and cultural norms the girls like Nita are forced to prostitution by their own families. Nita’s own brother puts her into the chasm of this profession, ensuring for her a life of utter disgrace and sufferings. The novelist minutely analyzes the shades of such hypocritical cultural norms through the case of Nita who represent the pathetic realities of many:
She tells me that she is a Bedia tribal girl from Bhind district in Madhya Pradesh. Both her parents are still alive and she has a brother, and a sister who is happily married. In her community, it is the tradition for one girl from each family to serve as a communal prostitute, called the Bedini. This girl earns money for her family, while the males spend their time drinking alcohol and playing cards. ‘That is why the birth of a girl is an occasion to celebrate in our community, not a cause of gloom. A boy, in fact, is a liability. You can find Bendis from my village in brothels, truck stops, hotels and roadside restaurants, all selling their bodies for money.’ (305)

The novel, in fact, is a mosaic of multi-colours of Indian social reality, particularly dark colours which signify the bleak deeds characterized by impulses, hypocrisy, savagery and what not. The traditions in this tribal community presents rather ironical picture of any colonized society which prefers boy to girls. But this preference of girl to boy in a tribal community implies the great paradox of human history that the welcome of a girl baby is for her unending gloom and misery further. Irony goes more further in Nita’s narration of her story of gloom when it is found that the blessing of natural beauty ensures the curse for a girl. A mother in the family is supposed to thrash her own daughter into the muddy bog of prostitution, preparing her to become a successful Bedni:

Nita gives a hollow laugh, “Because my beauty became a bane. My mother had the right to decide which of her two daughters would marry and which one would become a prostitute. She chose me to become the Bedni. Perhaps it had been plain looking, like my sister, I would not have been sent here. I might have gone to school, married and had children. Now I am in this brothel. This is my price I have to pay for beauty. So don’t call me beautiful.’ (305)

The plight of an innocent prostitute is not restricted here, rather she never knows what is in her fate in the next moment in the want of protection or any law. She has to sleep with odd types of men against her will, is sexually exploited by them at their whims. The customer may be of any status, any physical features or any mental state—only
money determines his entry into the brothel. No one is concerned about the safety and security of the girls in the brothel as they are left at the mercy and whims of the customers. Prem Kumar, the host of the quiz show and the inflictor on Neelima Kumari, brutally uses Nita for his sadistic abnormal pleasures in sexual act. He inflicts torture and pain on her in the same way he did to the actress; Nita’s condition is abject and horrible when she becomes subject to his abnormal treatment.

It has already been described in this chapter that how Nita is almost killed by this devilish man by giving pockmarks on her breast, torturing her with cigarette burns on her soft body, giving her bruises on face. But to this aghast incident, the reaction of Shayam, the pimp of Nita and ironically her own brother, is all the more disturbing and shocking. Shayam is least bothered of his sister’s pathetic condition, rather what concerns him is that this party from Mumbai viz. Prem Kumar has paid him high amount to freely torture the girl, to abuse this commodity called Nita, “Do you know how much this party from Mumbai paid for her? Five thousand rupees…”(329) Such inhuman, barbaric subjugation of Nita is a telling case of multifold misery of many girls who have to undergo any treatment owing to insensitive attitude of the society in general, want of proper but active laws, slavery to cultural dogmatic rituals, blind avarice for money etc. Swarup tries to touch every nook and corner of the vast edifice of Indian society to depict the shades of such gloomy facets of life. By delineating many shades of evil practices such as child-abuse, prostitution, child-trafficking, exploitation of human being, particularly the younger innocents, etc. Swarup not only interrogates the changing trends of modern India owing to capitalism but also questions the very relevance of those cultural customs and norms which have colonizing impact on the people who execute such inhuman actions.

In addition to such aghast issues such as child abuse and prostitution Swarup moves his compass to radar the related burning shades of dark action in the form of gay practices. The child trafficking mafia is obviously an instrument of this practice, apart from the business of begging and other evils. But the homosexual issues are found raising heads every here and there across the world and India is no exception to this reality. In fact, Swarup exclusively throws his artistic lights on this issue in motley forms every here and there in the novel. Even the beginning of the novel,
excluding the prologue, registers the presence and prevalence of this practice. The very first chapter, ‘The Death of a Hero’ is exclusively devoted to the exploration of the shades of this issue. But, being a true artist, Swarup does not limit his explorations by just raising and describing this issue in context of Arman Ali only; he rather relates this weird erotic desire in case of the common people. The bearded old man in the cinema makes lustful advancements to Salim which has been analyzed in light of child abuse in this chapter already. But this instance indicates and registers the prevalence of gay tendencies in the society.

Arman Ali is the top star of Bollywood and Salim is a mad fan of him, worshipping him as a god and watches his each film with relish many a times. What Swarup tries to reveal is the existence and practice of gay reality prevailing not within the boundaries of middle class, but the rich stars like Arman are not untouched with this dubious practice. Thomas is surprised to notice that a dead fan of Arman is tearing the Bollywood magazine featuring his iconic hero:

I notice that Salim is tearing pages from a magazine.
‘Which magazine is this? It looks new.’
‘It is the latest issue of Starburst. I will destroy as many copies as I can lay my hands on. I could only buy ten from the news-stand.’
I grab a copy that has not yet been mangled. It has Arman Ali on the cover, with a screaming headline:
‘THE NAKED TRUTH ABOUT THIS MAN’
‘But it has your idol on the cover. Why are you destroying it?’ I cried.
‘Because of what they say inside about Arman.’
‘But you can’t read.’
‘I read enough and can hear. I overheard Mrs. Barve and Mrs. Shirke discussing the scurrilous accusations made against Arman in this issue.’
‘Like what?’
‘That Urvashi left him because he could not satisfy her. That he is gay.’ (40-41)

Homosexuality is a controversial and recurrent issue in every society including Indian and the people, law, policy-makers express ambivalent and even ambiguous views on this topic. That is why this shade of the society finds ample echo in the novel, but
Swarup keeps his writing tight within his objectivity in the narrative. As a postcolonial writer he does not tend to fend or condemn any issues, rather he objectively describes that shade, missing no related nuances therein. Besides, the novelist does not restrict a phenomenon to a culture, time or boundary either and describes things in all hue and colour. Church is a sacred place where people come for the purgation of their sins. But Swarup even takes this holy place in his sharp compass as the citadel of sins such as the practice of homosexuality. The phenomenon of the corruption in church, whether it is the fact of Father Timothy’s being the father of Ian or gay activities or narcotic addiction of young father John—all conform the old saying—*If gold goes rusty, what shall iron do?* Thomas, being the mouthpiece of the novelist, is an instrument to scan down every shade of church life through his wide-open eyes, since he has been reared in that very church.

The entry of young Father John brings a peculiar tension and disturbance in the church. He is just a boy with all evils that he is a drug-addict, homosexual gay, debouched, and even murders. Thomas feels stoned and astonished to witness John’s homosexual act, “What I see inside is frightening. Ian is stooped over the table and Father John is bending over him. His pyjamas have fallen down to his feet. I am totally confused.” (64) This is very sorry fact that even sacred places such as church are not untouched with evil practices. The entry of the immoral, degenerated boys like John as Father in the church raises the point of question to the church authorities and this indicates to the embedded corruption in the place of faith. Critically taking the views of the novelist, it may be assumed that since he has strong Marxist leanings with his concerns for the have-nots, his outlook of the futility and irrelevance of the religion may be dominant force behind the portrayal of sorry state of the religious places.

In fact, being a Marxist thinker, what Swarup wants to establish the idea that the religion is an intoxicant keeping the Hindus in India in the stupor of frenzy, the Christians in the languor and waiting for final providence and so on. Father Timothy has to keep mum to the lewd activities of Father John; former’s faith in the justice of God makes him keep calm and tolerant of the shocking misdeeds in the sacred premise. Had Father Timothy been active the evil like John would not have entered the church. This also indicates to the helplessness of an illegitimate but remorseful
father of Ian, that Father Timothy, who cannot have spunk and boldness to face the social reality of his condemnation by all for having secretly fathered a son who has been like orphan. Through this secret but helpless father the novelist is forcing an literary analogy between Father Dimesdale in Hawthorn’s famous novel *The Scarlet Letter* wherein that Father is caught in psychological predicament to disclaim his own daughter for hollow dignity. The sin, hypocrisy, dogmas of social dignity etc. weaken the men in both the cases to challenge the social and religious barriers. May it be Hawthorn or Swarup, the creative writer picks a slice of life and brings forth its shades and hidden nuances in light.

Besides, the writer artistically draws the cross-matching of the fates of Ian and Shankar, both of them have one parent alive but still they cannot claim each. Though, Father Timothy is a god-fearing, good-natured and loving soul, yet he is so socially conditioned that he cannot accept Ian who knows that he is unfortunate to have father yet does not have a father. The same paradoxical shadows cast on Shankar’s life. But Ian is not doomed with that misfortune as Shankar is, since latter’s hypocritical, profligate mother lives with pride and has no regret of his death. In a way, Swapana Devi kills her own son as she does not save his life and willfully lets him die of rabbis. But Ian’s illegitimate father kills himself in penances or killed by John. It may be guilty conscience of Father Timothy for his connivance of John’s aghast misdeeds or the corruption in the church, but the author does not fail to expose the real façade of the sorry state of affairs in the religious institutions in present day India.

However, Father Timothy is not that hypocrite unlike Rani Sahiba who is staunchly cynical in the stupor of social pride and riches that she cynically rejects not only her poor son but all who are not of equal status. It may be Lajwanti, her most faithful housemaid, Abdul, Thomas himself or others she gives it no second thought to cynically reject any one at one stroke, keeping her coquettish nose in air. The social conscience is very much strong not only in her but in Father Timothy also, though their attitudes may be different. When Thomas first approaches Swapna Devi for a room to let, she does not have time even to cynically shun him away but it is because of colonizing English language that at once catches a hold of her mind, “‘Thank you, Madam,’ I reply in English. ‘I will take the room and I will pay you four hundred
rupees next week.’ The lady looks at me sharply as soon as I speak in English, her severe features soften somewhat. ‘Perhaps you can stay with Shankar for a week.” (285). It is remarkable here that it is English that cools down a woman who is too cynical even to talk a boy who looks like an urchin with Shankar, her own son whom she would never acknowledge.

This is not only snobbery for English and Western Ways, but there prevails deep sense of cynicism, quintessential bourgeois sardonic attitude towards underdogs. However, in the case of Neelima Kumari, rather a good person, is also in the grip of this psychological disorder called the sense of social pride. But she is not vehement cynical to the poor but is snobbish not for the West or English or something higher in power, but for her own charm and art. In today’s world she is like an antique pure art which is no longer attracting attention of the people but gathering dust of time. But she would not come out of her pride in her talents as a sublime actor, rejecting the whole mechanical world of today’s fast life in her own cynical but snobbish manner. In her times, she was an outstanding actress and known as tragedy queen, owing to her sublime art of acting in award-winning films. Through her pathetic conscience Swarup draws the portrait of the conscience of India itself in the postmodern changing time when people are slave to Mammon rather than having sense of appreciation for art. With her loneliness, suffocation, pathos and death Swarup draws analogy of art and literature in this world of staunch capitalism:

Then she teaches me about genres. ‘I hate the movies they make these days, in which they try to cram everything—tragedy, comedy, action and melodrama. No. A good film has to respect its genre. I always used to choose my films carefully after fully understanding what the story meant and what it involved for me. You will never catch me singing and dancing in one scene and dying two reels later. No, Ram. A character has to be consistent. Just as a great painter is identified by his unique signature style, an actor is known for his unique niche. A genre of his own. A great artist is not one who merely fits into a genre, but one who defines the genre…(249)

No doubt, she was once the queen of her genre which was defined by her, but now in the changing scenario she is altogether frustrated and thus rejects the world with
cynicism. In fact, Swarup throws ample light of various facets on these twin psychological but colonizing obsessions viz. cynicism and snobbery. Yet the cynical attitude of Neelima Kumari represents the different shades of these psychological phenomena. In an interview, when she vehemently lets the outcry of her frustration and dismissive attitude toward the journalist she reveals that fact that her cynicism is not blind but targeted to a condemnable stratum. On being asked the reason of her having quit the films she honestly answers, showing her disapproval for commercial films and concerns for the degeneration of art. But she is infuriated when the journalist reveals fact of producers’ preference for other actresses to her:

‘Because they no longer make films like they used to. The passion, the commitment, is gone. Today’s actors are nothing but assembly-line products, each exactly like the other, mouthing their lines like parrots. There is no depth. We did one film at a time. Now I find actors rushing to three different sets in a day. It’s ridiculous.’ Neelima gestures with her hands.

‘Well, pardon my saying so, but I heard that part of the reason you quit was because you were not being offered any roles.’

Anger flares up on her face. ‘Who told you that?’ It is a complete lie. I was offered several roles, but I turned them down. They were not powerful enough. And the films weren’t heroine-oriented.’ (261)

This famous heroine of yesterdays is not ready to get disillusioned in her whole life and therefore dies a horrible death, escaping the unfavouring reality. Her cynicism for the contemporary world around her never lets her accept it. However, the people in general are also never found coming out of their collectively shared unconsciousness of snobbery for the Western, feudal, colonizing phenomena and cynicism for anything which is marginal. In fact, Swarup seems to be preoccupied with the artistic act of exploring the factors which shape perceptions, demeanours, attitudes and approaches to life. Culture studies unravel the fact that owing to continual colonial rule and feudal practices in India since long the common Indian mind has come to develop the mentality of servility. A few incidents in the novel represent the very fact of perpetual sense of colonized mindset in the form of snobbery, servility, anglophilia, social cynicism and so on. Colonial rule, even before the British, feudal practices and caste
hierarchy had shaping influence on the making of the culture, and in turn culture leave impact on the behaviour of an individual. Certain thematic aspects in the novel are mapped through authentic depiction of the Indian social life having deep rooted hierarchical system, through focusing the disparity between rich and poor and the profound sense of colonial rule that has great influence on individuals in forming the perceptions and attitudes.

Swarup in the novel endeavours to intensively exhort the shades of such attitudes and comes out with the findings that snobbery and cynicism are prominent behaviours in social scene today. The cynicism of Neelima Kumari though has different shade but that of Swapna Devi is typical one, characterized with contempt for the poor but accolades for the Western and powerful. Since possession of power and wealth determine one’s status which ensures his acceptance in this perpetually colonized society, Thomas is never accepted by the snobs and cynics owing to the fact of his humble origins as the people are in general cynical against the underdogs. The fact of Thomas’s winning one billion in W3B is an artistic endeavour of Swarup to expose the cynicism and hypocrisy of the society in general. The success of a poor underdog is the hard pie for the sardonic society of rigid colonized mindset to swallow down. This fact of an underdog’s ability to find answer of odd questions and winning a billion causes sense of disbelief and doubt of some cheating. In prologue, the first person narrative begins with the narrator or the protagonist being captive in police torture cell for the alleged cheating in the quiz W3B. The authorities blaming him rest their conviction on the fact that this game show is so tactically devised that even high level scholars 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.

Nobody, including producer of the show, the police and American owner of the channel Neil Johnson, believes him for having won a billion rupees. Swarup brings forth the prevailing post-colonial attitude of the society characterized by the deep sense of cynicism against the underdogs and attitude of non-acceptance of the same. The dismissive disbelief is so strong that the channel authorities are determined to prove Thomas’s win a cheat, fraud and thus a zilch. Mr. Nanda and Johnson have evil designs against the poor guy and thus plan to contrive a conspiracy in
collaboration with the cynical Police Commissioner. Johnson even offers the Police Commissioner with a big share as bribe who snobbishly accepts the same, “I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated on the show. That he couldn’t have known the answers to all twelve questions without an accomplice. Just think. He’s never been to school. He’s never even read a newspaper. There is no way he could have won the top prize.” (18)

What the novelist painstakingly tries to scan is the psychological willingness and readiness of the people to dismiss an underdog and blindly believe in anything what relates to the power; the power of the white skin, feudal hegemony or anything against which they do not have deterrence. Even good Smita would not believe Thomas’ success and joins the society in cynicism and utter disbelief of a poor chap’s abilities and luck:

The looks of utter disbelief on Smita’s face says it all. I can take it no longer. I erupt in sadness and anger. I know what you are thinking. Like Godbole, you wonder what I was doing on that quiz show. Like Godbole, you believe I am only good for serving chicken fry and whisky in a restaurant. That I am meant to live like a dog, and die like an insect. (29)

Although, the success of this underdog may be struck in the throat of the cynical people, yet Swarup gives the pretext of this to chance factors and fate which do work in life, yet not always enhance the woes of the poor and here they have work wonderfully. Being in the band of typical Postmodern Indian writers Swarup in this novel diverts from the conventionally and colonially laid concept of poor protagonists’ defeat at the hands of powerful social forces. The earlier Indian colonial literature used to project the protagonists hailing from the humble origin and succumbing to the towering social forces; such literature represented the colonized sense of the third world never going for any transgression. However, the writers of Postcolonial era have developed the ability to remain unaffected by any Western cultural hegemony in style as well as in selection of theme. In fact, Swarup has devised the ways of success and triumph for the marginal, “Mr. Ram Mohammad Thomas, you have made history by winning the world’s biggest jackpot.” (355) Despite wide spread cynical disapproval of the protagonist’s stepping up at higher
rungs, the novelist makes artistic efforts to propound the concept of transition of time; the post-colonial time when even have-nots can have something.

However more than relating to the phenomena of the changing India, the novel is a discerning attempt to find out the colonial outlook of the people who reject the marginals, yet stoop slavishly to those who once used to be the rulers viz. Western representatives. The sense and attitude of servitude of common Indians to the white skinned sahibs is a counter shade of the colonial reality in India, “Godbole presents me to the white man like a ring-master introducing his pet lion. ‘This is Ram Mohammad Thomas, Sir,” (15). It is remarkable illustration in the novel that a foreigner entrepreneur such as Neil Johnson, the representative of New Age Media from America, has strong influence and power to exercise in India, who can summon up the Police Commissioner and offer him bribe. Swarup, through this instance, raises the question to the politics and power in India that the servants of public such as the Police Commissioner and the minister, who are the representative of the common masses, work at the will of the foreign capitalistic powers. This is the typical instance of continuing colonial influence in India which keeps the people in the strong grip of snobbery, “The Commissioner nods. ‘I came as soon as I got the message from the Home Minister.’” (16)

In the chapter ‘How to Speak Australian’ Swarup exclusively explores the shades and the forms of snobbery and servitude for the white skin. Colonel Taylor, the Australian embassy officer in New Delhi, is highly cynical against Indians, keeping them always at arm’s length, yet Indians are very snobbish for his highness. They are found slavishly and hypocritically servile and grinning to him. Swarup vividly highlights the shades of corruption by depicting the lapses in demographic account; the petty clerk always at service to white people like Taylor who can easily buy them, “Colonel Taylor gives the census man a dirty look……..The census man salutes Colonel Taylor. ‘Don’t worry, Sir. I won’t bother you for the next ten years.’ He walks off happily. Mrs. Taylor is also happy. ‘These bloody Indians, she smiles. ‘Give them a bottle of whisky and they’ll do anything.’”(125) For the sake of a bottle of liquor the petty clerk forgets his duty and leaves out Taylor’s servants from the census though it is very clear to sense the intensions of the ambassador to get his servants excluded from Indian census.
Q & A is thus a novel with multiple themes and ideas therein which are typical of Indian society. Indigenous feudalism and colonialism permeate the very soul of Indian culture; the people here are slave to the customs, cynicism, snobbery and other typical tendencies. People are so cynical that nobody comes forward to acknowledge the fact that an underdog has won a billion on the basis of experience-based knowledge in the school of life. Corruption is so deep in the society that a qualified innovative scientist falls the victim of conspiracy against him; the consequence is horrendous that this scientist turns to be a debauched, frustrated man who even would not spare his own daughter. Lajwanti is an instruments in the hands of Swarup to bring forth the idea of fetters traditions and customs in which the people are chained. This is colonizing impact of the dogmas and age-old customs that people have to follow them at the cost of their happiness and life. Snobbery to the West and to powerful, cynicism to the underdogs, hypocrisy, fake pride, ostentations, slavery to the traditions, intolerance, religious and communal disharmony, class hierarchy and casteism, prostitution, child-abuse, gay mania, other forms of corruption etc. are the issues the novelist artistically raises in the novel.

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Works Cited


Swarup, Vikas. *Q & A*. London: Black Swan, 2005. (All subsequent references are to this edition only. The page nos. are given in parentheses). Print.