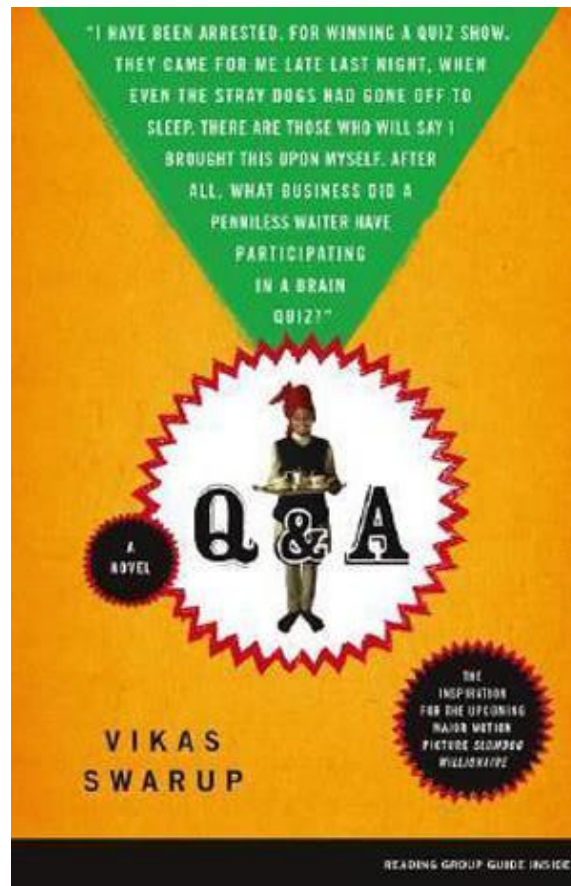


The Role of the Unconscious in Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*: An Analysis

Dr. C. Ramya Ravikumar, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.



Abstract

Unconscious, the repressed wishes and drives govern the psychic behavior of the humans and determine the personality development of the individuals. The innate drives and desires accumulate in the Unconscious mind and when it comes in conflict with the conscious mind, there comes the psychic disturbances like anxiety, depression, etc... Hence, in order to understand one's own true self or the self of others it is an ultimate option of knowing and exploring the Unconscious with the help of Freud's theories and interpretations, this article analyses the behavior, experience and cognition of the characters of Vikas Swarup's Celebrated Novel, *Q & A*.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 17:1 January 2017

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Key words: Human Psyche, Unconscious, Freud, Behavior, Experience and Cognition.

The Puzzle of Human Beings

"What is suppressed continues to exist in normal people as well as abnormal, and remains capable of psychical functioning" (TIOD 768)

True to the words of Sigmund Freud, for centuries over centuries, right after the birth of civilization, human beings have puzzled over human beings. Understanding human psyche, either one's own self or the others', is an art or most of the catastrophes occur only because people lacked mastery over it. "I'm not to blame; Zeus and fate and fury stalking through the night, they are the ones who drove the savage madness in my heart" says king Agamemnon in *Iliad*. He claims that it is not the act of his own self but just a 'savage madness' for which he is not responsible. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychology, puts it that it is a force that serves as an agency in performing the act through him. Freud calls it "Unconscious" that governs the psychic behavior. He stresses that the unconscious wishes are always active and ready for expression whenever they find an opportunity to unite themselves with an emotion from conscious life, and that they transfer their greater intensity to the lesser intensity of the latter.

The Unconscious and the Conscious in Literature and Literary Criticism

What is the relation that the unconsciousness or consciousness or psyche as a whole, have with literature? Why understanding of psychology is important to interpret literature and penetrate deeply into it? What is the purpose of psychoanalytic literary criticism? The first thing one should understand is that the answers to all these questions seem quite simple but an impossible task to explain just in a single chapter as the field is widely immense.

Literary Criticism is about books, psychoanalysis is about minds. Therefore, psychoanalytic literary criticism is all about the minds associated with the books. Those are the three minds that the psychoanalytic critics address-the author, audience or some person derived from the text. Each of us interpret a word in a different way and every single reader's individual way of understanding a text depends upon his or her own personality. How does a person respond while reading the obsession world of Charles Dickens? Or how does a reader react to

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Dr. Faustus' overwhelming ambition and rage? How does a person change those literary worlds to fit into one's own characteristic patterns? To put it in a simple way, what kind of a person you are and how do you perceive the people and the books around you? The psychoanalytically-oriented Reader-Response theory answers all the questions above. Nowadays, analyzing the readers' response is an interesting psychoanalytic criticism.

Role of Psychoanalysis

In order to understand all these relations that psychology has with literature, one should get an idea of what happens inside the human psyche, what factor motivates a particular behavior of human beings. The term Psychoanalysis refers to many aspects Freud's work and research including Freudian therapy and the research methodology he used to develop his theories. Freud's theories of psychosexual stages, the unconscious, and dream symbolism remain a popular topic among both psychologists and laypersons, despite the fact that his work is viewed with skepticism by many today.

The basic features of psychoanalysis are:

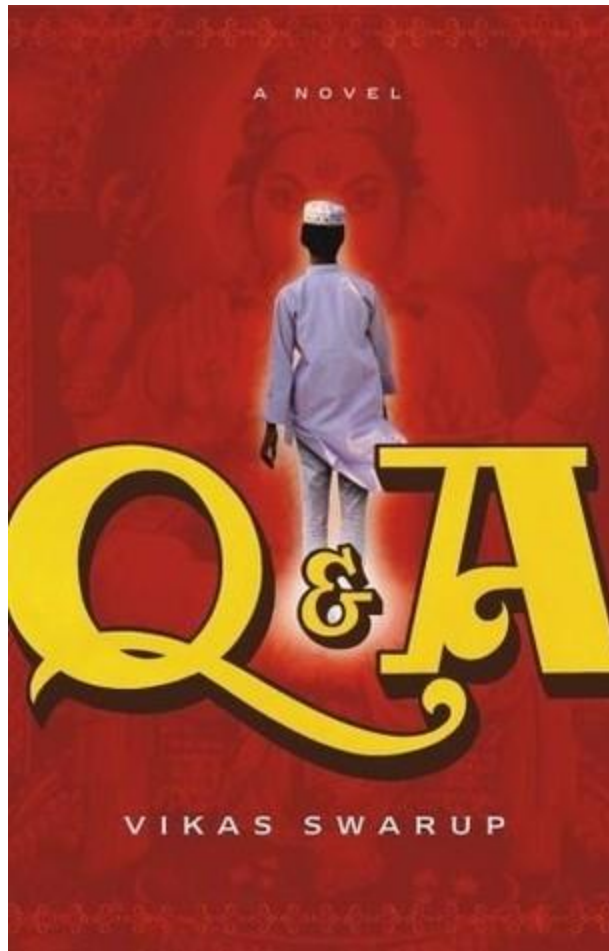
- 1) Human behavior, experience and cognition are largely determined by the innate desires and drives.
- 2) Such drives are highly unconscious.
- 3) Attempts to make such drives could result in psychological resistance in the form of defense mechanisms.
- 4) One's personality development is determined by the events in their early childhood.
- 5) Conflicts between the consciousness and unconscious repressed memories cause mental disturbances such as anxiety, depression, neurosis, etc.
- 6) Liberation from the repressed unconscious memories is possible by a skilled guidance.

Unconscious is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges and memories that outside of our conscious awareness. Most of the contents of the unconscious are unacceptable or unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety or conflict. According to Freud, the unconscious continues to influence our behavior and experiences even though we are unaware of these underlying influences.

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Ram Mohammad Thomas in *Q & A*

Let us consider the life of Ram Mohammad Thomas, the protagonist of the celebrated novel *Q & A* written by Vikas Swarup. Vikas Swarup is a high-flying Indian diplomat; by night he's a bestselling author. And now *Slumdog Millionaire*, the film based on his first novel, has won four Golden Globes. The central character in the novel is Ram Mohammad Thomas whose life is filled with all repressed memories and he recollects most of them as he participates in a quiz show. The novel is all about a penniless orphan who wins India's most popular quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* Every chapter, in the novel, ends with a question for which Ram Mohammad Thomas answered in the quiz show earlier. He explains Smitha, the lawyer who saves Ram Mohammad Thomas from the commissioner's ill-treatment, how he knew the answers for those questions. When she was demanding Ram to be true to her and disclose everything about the quiz show, he just answers,

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"Do you notice when you breathe? No. you simply know that you are breathing. I did not go to school. I did not read books. But, I tell you, I knew the answer" (Q&A 30)

Questions and Answers

Smitha gets a clear picture of what he tries to say and just nods her head saying, "I think that is the key. After all, the quiz show is not so much a test of knowledge as a test of memory... I want to listen to your memories. Can you begin at the beginning" and there goes the novel. Ram starts narrating his memories from his childhood which helped him to answer those questions in the show. These memories were not the ones that Ram keeps thinking all the time but for years, those were stored in his mind somewhere deep inside which he recollects within himself as he is questioned in the show. The questions which had connections to his life instances kindled his unconscious mind to relive those moments in his imagination. His reservoir of stalked repressed memories comes out in each chapter. Psychoanalytical critics mention this as the Unconscious memories.

Function and Role of Unsolved Conflicts

Freudian theories point out that adult problems can be traced to unresolved conflicts from certain phases of childhood and adolescence. Freud, based on the data gathered from his patients early in his career, suspected that neurotic disturbances occurred when children were sexually abused in childhood. In this novel also we could witness incidents that people closely associated with Ram personally, are being affected by child abuse which in turn affected him as well, but indirectly. Much research has been done on those types of trauma in childhood and there are cases where many adults with symptoms of neurosis and character pathology have no history of childhood sexual or physical abuse. In Ram's case, it is not Ram being abused but his soul mate, Salim Ilyasi, who has dreams of becoming a Bollywood movie star, gets hurt emotionally due to the unimaginable action of his dream hero, Armaan Ali-his Bollywood idol. Freud realized that all humans cultivate different fantasies in different stages of development. He found the stage from about three to six years of age, now called as the first genital stage, to be filled with fantasies of having romantic relationships with parents which Freud calls it as Oedipal and Electra complex. And in the adolescence, a child gets attracted to any popular personality in such

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a way that they find tremendous pleasure in fantasizing about that personality and they start putting themselves into the shoes of the persons they admire. When Salim was younger, a fortuneteller predicted that he would be more famous than his Bollywood idol, which spurred on his dreams. He is two years younger than Ram and very handsome, with a clear, musical voice. Salim's tiny room in the chawl is Armaan Ali's shrine. It is filled with posters with all kinds of the hero's various poses salim knows everybody associated with Armaan Ali's movies. He knows who are wardrobe man, makeup man, hairstylist, production manager, and all assistants. He already watched the movie eight times and even crazy memorizing a new name every time he watches the movie. Salim says

'My ambition in life is to shake his hands at least once. I probably won't wash it for a month after that' (QA 81)

The Wish

When Ram was asking Salim what wish he would ask to the Goddess Matha Vaishno Devi, if she appears before him, Salim crazily answers, "I would ask for Armaan to be reunited with Urvashi", without even thinking for a second. As Salim was watching his hero's movies with all passion he encounters a man who misbehaves with him by touching his private parts, he swears the man as a filthy pervert and screams and slaps the man's face hard. He weeps in distress after finding that the pervert is the hero he worshiped. Salim got into a blind rage and started tearing of all the posters of Armaan Ali which were adorning the walls of the small room for about three years. He just tore of Arman's poster in leather jacket into pieces; he put the poster, in which Armaan was sitting in the horse in fire; he damaged one of the posters, where Armaan on the motor bike, with the knife. This act of expelling unacceptable impulses into harsh behavior is a defense mechanism which Freud calls it, sublimation. This act of venting out frustration is a sign of maturity that allows people to function normally in socially acceptable ways.

Smitas Shah, the Lawyer

Smita Shah is Ram's lawyer and childhood friend, she saves him from torture and listens to him tell his story. Later in the novel we come to know that she is Gudiya who was acquainted

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to Ram in the over-crowded chawl where he lived and they both shared a brother-sister relationship which he always treasured. It was in the hospital that Ram first met Gudiya. She was admitted because of her drunken father's ill-treatment. Her father Santharam calls himself a scientist and there were times when Ram envied Gudiya as he overhears the conversation between the father and the daughter. When Ram feels diffident approaching the girl for the first time and he feels that he is given importance after a long time. He says, "She listens to me with rapt attention and makes me feel very important and wanted" (Q&A 79).

Santharam, the Drunkard

Santharam makes a good father but loses his senses only when he is drunk. Santharam being a famous space scientist developed the habit of drinking after his fellow astronomers took credit for his own scientific discovering. This kind of relieving stress through another source, psychoanalysts call as Displacement, a kind of defense mechanism where the ego has extreme feelings towards a target and builds tension. During these times, a person sheds out his/her frustrations, feelings and impulses on other people, especially to those who are less threatening. Here, Santharam expresses his anger towards his wife, daughter and pet instead of showing it to the concerned persons who would in no way bring in positive consequences to his profession. Ram experiences a kind of unspoken bond between Gudiya and himself and goes void of words as he hears from Gudiya, "You are the brother I never had." (QA 80)

This is a new relationship that Ram has never had. For so many years he has imagined himself as someone's son but not someone's brother. Now he feels all the more secure. One day after Gudiya returns home from hospital, Ram hears Gudiya screaming "Pappa, don't touch me!" As he hears Godiva's plaintive cry, he is affected in a strange way. He desperately searches for all possible ways to comfort her. He pushes his hand through a small opening, in the thin wall that divides both the rooms, and comforts her not to weep and cries to hold his hand. As Gudiya's finger interlock with Ram, he feels a magical feel and in that instance, he becomes one with Gudiya. Gudiya sobs that she would commit suicide rather than submit herself to her father. Ram promises that it would never happen as he would save her as her brother. The next day,

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when Santharam was walking with all his clothes smelling whisky, Ram watches him walking and suddenly slams him from behind. Santharam loses his balance and drops down like a rock. Only when Ram sees Santharam's limb body on the ground, Ram realizes what he have done. Ram takes Santharam for dead and he starts running the next moment. He ran away leaving Mumbai, Salim, Gudiya, chawl and left to another city, Delhi. Ram's act of pushing Santharam to death is not his conscious act but somewhere deep in his unconscious mind he cultivated a notion that he is the only responsible person to save Gudiya from distress. So this feeling of overwhelmed responsibility, a strange feeling of belongingness, that he had on Gudiya, the unexplained feeling that he had whenever he hears Gudiya weeping, altogether made Ram to go the extent of having the thought of making Santharam disappear from the world. This incident affected Ram to a greater extent that he imagines he would be sentenced to death if he was caught by the police. The obsessed fear made him leave the city, where he spent almost all his life with Gudiya who threw a ray of hope in is life after Father Timothy and Salim, his soul mate.

Throughout the novel, we could see his frustrated thoughts about his mother. He sees his mother-image in almost all the woman he gets acquainted to. For example, once he sees Neelima Kumari, who gave him a household job and shelter, being harassed by her lover. She discloses all the secrets about her love and the pains that she was experiencing all these years. When she just says, "Come to me, my child" and draws his face to her chest, he feels all his consciousness of the outer world in his brain ceased for the first time. He feels,

"I felt as though I was not an orphan anymore. That I had a real mother one whose face I could see, one whose flesh I could touch. And the salty taste of my tears merged with the sweat and the scent of her body in the most moving experience of my thirteen-year-old life. All the pain and suffering, all the insults and humiliation I had endured over the years melted away in that moment. I wanted to stop all the clocks of the world and freeze that moment forever."

(QA 265 – 266),

Motherly Touch

After thirteen years, he experiences a motherly touch of a woman. According to Freud, every child experiences Oedipus complex, the obsessive feeling of a boy child towards his

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mother. The boy in his infantile sees his mother as the primary love object which leads to a desire of complete union with her. The boy will eventually abandon his incestuous desire for his mother out of fear of being castrated by his father. Thus, a boy represses his incestuous desire, adjusts to the reality principle, and waits for the day when he will be a patriarch. In this way, the boy identifies with his father and the symbolic role of manhood. Here, Ram, being an orphan, experiences fixations and feels socially unacceptable because he didn't even experience the primary feelings like oedipal conflicts, possessiveness towards his kith and kin, personal sharing and understanding towards his blood relatives, priority choose his own clothing, toys and things that a child loves, physical cuddling from his parents and encouragements from loved ones for petty things and so on.

Most importantly, the abuses and harassments, that all the people he was closely connected with emotionally, affected him so much. The sexual harassments that Salim - his friend from early childhood, Ian-father Timothy's son being ill-treated by father John, the cigarette marks on his motherly figure- Neelima Kumari, fatal bruises that needs a plastic surgery on his lady love Nita, the pretty train girl whom he admired so much being tortured by the dacoit, Gudiya-his only sister personality that he has, being tried to be harassed by her own father, all these gave Ram Mohammad Thomas a bitter sense of facing life.

Shankar, the Gentle Friend

The most touching character is Shankar, gentle friend who has a speech defect and is Swapna Devi's unacknowledged son who acquires rabies and dies. When he was very young, he caught his mother and Uncle in bed together and, as a result, his mother kicked him out. He still has the mind of a six-year old boy and cries out coherently for his "Mummy" when he is delirious from rabies. He has a blue notebook full of pictures that he has drawn for and of his mother. He experiences hydrophobia and his deepest depression of being dejected by his own mother shake the deepest consciousness of his little mind, and from that moment he begins speaking only nonsense syllables, 'Q Akip Sxip Pk Aqe,Nxej' for so many years. But before he dies out of rabies, he mumbled a last few words,

“Please don’t beat me, mummy why did you throw me out, mummy? I am sorry I should have knocked. How could I know uncle was inside with you? I love you, mummy. I draw pictures of you. My blue diary is full of pictures of you. I love you, mummy. I love you very much. Don’t hit me, mummy. I promise I won’t tell anyone, mummy, mummy...”

(QA 322)

This incident shows Shankar has been regressed to a long-lost time. When something highly dreadful happens, a person who is not emotionally strong will lose the capacity to speak out their emotions in their consciousness but the feelings deeply inside the heart will come out when their unconscious mind is awake, i.e., during their dreams. That is what happened in Shankar’s case.

To Conclude

Throughout the novel, Premkumar, the show host of the quiz show 'Who Will Win a Billion?' uses the defense mechanism, Reaction Formation, to hide his unwelcoming feeling towards Ram Mohammad Thomas. It is later revealed that he is the man who abused both Ram's former employer and Nita, and Ram joins the show to get revenge on him. By the end of the book, he has helped Ram win the show and commits suicide in his car, though Ram suspects the show's producers had a hand in his death.

Therefore, in the novel, Vikas Swarup has probed deeply into the unconscious of all the characters and hence making *Q & A* an excellent study of human psyche.

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