



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Semiotics of Culture: The Representation of Urban Lower Class Youth Culture in Vikas Swarup's *Q & A*

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Abstract

Vikas Swarup's novel 'Q & A' brings to light the dreary and vulnerable lives of the young population belonging to the urban lower classes in India, through the protagonist, Ram. Swarup's text is replete with myriad signs and symbols that narrate the real-life struggles of the urban lower-class youth through the unjust treatment meted out to Ram and the many people he represents throughout his narration. This paper attempts to throw light on the urban youth culture in lower-class communities in India, through a semiotic analysis of the depictions of youth culture in Vikas Swarup's 'Q & A.' The present paper examines the portrayal of urban youth culture through four perspectives which include, lifestyle, lingua-communication aspects, psycho-ethical aspects, and professional aspects. The paper first sets a broader context through the conceptual framework that applies to the study of youth culture and then undertakes a semiotic analysis of the text by evaluating the signs and symbols used throughout the narrative that represents the urban lower-class youth culture in India.

Keywords Urban Youth Culture, Semiotics, Cultural Studies, Youth Culture

The term culture in its most simple sense refers to the manifold ways in which a group of people conduct themselves in society (Braganza and Peeradina 18). Pramod Nayar quotes Raymond Williams' to provide a deeper understanding of the term culture, where Williams defines culture as: 'Our description of our experience comes to compose a network of relationships, and all our communication systems, including the arts, are literally parts of our social organization, since our way of living, the process of communication is, in fact, the process of community: the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change' (Nayar 19)

Analysis of culture requires assessing it from multiple perspectives. One perspective refers to culture as a separate category among the myriad elements of human life. The second perspective analyzes culture as a concrete set of beliefs and practices, for example, Indian culture, American culture etc. (Sewell Jr 40-46).

Research on youth culture, their expressions in texts, pictures, music, styles, and other such facets of life are connected with culture and continue to become culturally significant in the current scenario. The attempts at conducting research in the field of youth culture can be traced back to Stanley Hall's publication titled 'On Adolescence', published in 1904. The exact beginning of research on youth culture is still debated in the academic sphere, though Talcott Parson in the 1950s and James Coleman in the 1960s are considered to have been influential figures who contributed to the field of youth culture during its initial stages.

From the 1970s, the studies on youth culture became more diversified and comprehensive, developing in several countries such as the United States of America, and spreading towards Britain. Britain made breakthroughs in the field with the efforts of researchers like Stanley Cohen, Phil Cohen, Paul Willis, Dick Hebdige and Angela McRobbie from the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in Birmingham (Fornäs and Bolin).

The studies on youth culture became connected with the larger school of studies in cultural studies. Cultural Studies emerged out of literary studies in the 1950s in Britain. It traces its origin back to Leavisism, a form of literary studies named after F. R. Leavis, which appeared with the purpose of re-disseminating 'cultural capital', as propagated by Pierre Bourdieu. The Leavisists advocated the 'great tradition' espoused through the works of classic authors such as Jane Austen, George Eliot, Alexander Pope etc. They categorically disregarded mass culture and the experimental works of modern writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce (During).

In the book 'Cultural Studies: Texts and Contexts' authored by Prantik Banerjee, he defines cultural studies as "a theoretical, empirical, and political engagement with the culture of everyday life whose primary aim is to identify and reveal the operation of power, control and dominance within the larger institutions, systems, and structures that make our society (Banerjee 11).

When culture and cultural studies are analyzed through the lens of semiotic theory, it is defined through an interdisciplinary approach where the focus is to produce the meaning of symbols, signs and images. This semiotic analysis is crucial to understand the urban youth culture in India among different categories of people.

Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and their use or interpretation. Within the field of semiotics is a research field called 'semiotics of culture' which attempts to define culture from a semiotic perspective where culture is understood as a system of symbols and signs (Chandler). The term 'semiotics of culture' was used for the first time in 1977 by Thomas Sebok and later popularized in the 1980s by Irene Porttis-Winner (Lorusso 3).

Semiotics traces its roots to the works of three theorists: Ferdinand de Saussure, the Father of Modern Linguistics, the Pragmatic Philosophy of Charles Pierce, and the Behaviourist Semiotics of Charles William Morris. Other theorists and philosophers such as Roland Barthes, Algirdas Greimasm, Yuri Lotman, Christian Metz, Umberto Eco and Julia Kristeva, too, have contributed significantly to the growth and development of

modern-day semiotic theory. The use of semiotics to analyze culture began in the 1960s mainly due to the influence of the writings of Ronald Barthes.

In the present study, semiotics is used to analyze the symbols, signs and meanings embedded within the novel, Q & A written by Vikas Swarup. The novel represents the harsh realities of life of the youth belonging to the lower classes of urban India. The story is narrated in the form of a flashback by the protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas, an orphan, who is unlawfully arrested after winning a reality quiz show. Swarup's Q & A touches upon various topics such as poverty, globalization, marginalization, and cultural politics to present a carefully crafted work that brings to the forefront the struggles of young men and individuals belonging to often-neglected strata of society.

Lifestyle

In the slums of Mumbai's Dharavi, the existence of the slum dwellers is constantly under threat. In a wasteland like that of Dharavi, legal identity and ownership are often a myth. The attitude of legal authorities towards these 'illegal occupants' is marked by this same sentiment, where the wasteland, its occupants and waste are considered synonymous. Ram Thomas, the protagonist of the novel is one of the ill-fated illegal occupants living in the slums of Dharavi, in a disheveled makeshift shack barely a hundred square feet in size, without any ventilation, proper sanitation facilities or access to clean, running water.

In this no man's land, the innocent are often arrested for no fault of theirs, except for the fact that their existence is illegal in the eyes of the authorities. In an ironic turn of events, Ram, too, bears the brunt of his life as a poor, slum dweller, as he is arrested for 'winning' the quiz show, "Who Will Win a Billion", instead of being rewarded and celebrated. The poor are always at a disadvantage before the law, as it is used or rather misused for the benefit of the rich and powerful (Swarup). Ram, devastated by the ordeal he had to undergo, says that the poor only have the right to use their legs and hands but not their brain.

The lowly status awarded to people living in the streets and slums is further revealed through the description of blue vans with wire-meshed windows frequenting the streets and rounding up stray dogs. It is this same vehicle that is used to transfer stray children from the streets to the Juvenile Home. The Juvenile Home, in turn, is a place housing over and above the specified number of occupants. In this shelter, even the bare minimum facilities it offers are barely maintained, and the children are left to live in unhygienic conditions. However, for street children, this place is a haven, that they prefer over their vulnerable lives on the streets.

Typical of Indian recreational activity choices is its link with cricket and Bollywood - both of which are 'religions' in the mundane lives of the young people of the lower class in urban India. Both activities play an influential role in building the character and perceptions of the young population. Bollywood, especially, influences them to form their worldview regarding lifestyle, relationships, career, social status, and other such human-social factors.

Ram, himself realizes the effect of the reel life on his real life when he experiences a real-life attraction towards Nita, a young sex worker he meets in Agra. His encounter with Nita makes Ram introspect his previously held perceptions regarding the concept of love and how it was warped by the depictions in Bollywood movies. Ram realizes that the experience of love in real life is drastically different from the fantasy-like depictions shown in Bollywood movies (Swarup 306).

With this extreme devotion to following Bollywood and Bollywood stars, also arises the 'hero worship' phenomenon. The hero status of a typical Bollywood star is the epitome of everything that the lower classes yearn to achieve, but do not dare to dream chase after. The poor live their dreams vicariously through these Bollywood heroes and this leads to them worshipping the heroes of these Bollywood movies. Citing the example of his best friend, Salim, Ram introduces Salim's craze for Hindi films, particularly those with an actor called Armaan Ali. Salim even goes to the extent of setting up a shrine dedicated to Armaan Ali inside the tiny room in the *chawl* he lives in. Posters of Armaan Ali occupy every inch of the wall in Salim's room, and he worships Armaan with great devotion and dedication.

Another factor that divides the lives of the poor from that of the rich is food. Food is not an item of luxury for the poor. While the poor struggle to afford one square meal a day, the rich waste food without a second thought. In this regard, Ram recalls his experience of eating leftovers at a McDonald, in a bid to satiate his hunger. Some other street kids, he recalls, had to survive on the leftovers found in the air-conditioned compartments of the Rajdhani Express and many others lived on the leftovers they gathered from the bin outside Pizza Hut outlets.

Food, in this sense, is intrinsically tied to religion and taboos. The poor who work tirelessly to deliver tiffin boxes to the office workers must take extra care to not mix up the order. Salim works as a tiffin delivery boy, and he keeps a constant check on the deliveries to ensure that even by mistake he does not deliver the wrong food container to the wrong customer. Delivering a tiffin containing beef to a Hindu or one with pork to a Muslim can become the basis of conflicts that extend much beyond the scope of food preferences, this, leaving the onus of ensuring communal peace in the hands of poor, overworked tiffin delivery boys like Salim (74).

Lingua-Communication Aspects

For the young population belonging to the lower classes of society, the command over a foreign language like English can open the door to a few more opportunities than is available and accessible to those sections in general. Ram, who could speak English, became the leader of the boys at the juvenile home, only because he could speak English, a language that was mostly inaccessible to the lower classes. Even the juvenile home authorities showed a special concern towards him because he could speak and read English.

Ram could speak this ‘magical language’ of the privileged that surprised Neil Johnson, the representative of New Age Telemedia and Billy Nanda, the producer of the quiz show. Viewing Ram from the position of privilege, they did not expect a lowly waiter working at a small restaurant to converse fluently in English, because it is a language that is reserved solely for the use of the elite classes. In urban India, access to diversified

linguistic capacities is intrinsically connected with one's socio-economic status, where an exception from this norm is viewed with a mixture of amusement and disbelief (15).

Psycho-Ethical Aspects

Religion is intricately woven into the social fabric of the Indian subcontinent and the Indian psyche, where this social institution has the power to permeate into and influence various aspects of Indian life, which can range from food habits and clothing to identity, status, and career choices. Religion is also a topic that must be dealt with sensitively, as any attempt at changing the status quo or its core beliefs can lead to catastrophic consequences. Q & A's protagonist, Ram, is a living testimony of the overbearing consequences of religion in a multi-religious country like India, where even abandoned children like him, too, become sacrificial lambs in a bid to deflect religious disputes. Ram has a rather peculiar name - Ram Muhammed Thomas, which was the result of an attempt to appease the representatives of all the three major religions in the country when the question of forced conversion arose before Fr. Timothy, the priest who took care of him at the orphanage (53). To an extent, Ram can be considered a true representative of religious harmony in a diverse country like India, but at the same time, it is a boundary that must be tread across with utmost care.

For the protagonist, Ram, his identity, too, is dictated by religion as his name bears witness to the fact that peaceful co-existence is dependent on pacifying religious sentiments. Shelton Charles in *“Adolescent Spirituality”* published in 1983, defines identity as “a person's acquisition of a meaningful sense of self, of who he or she is, of what he or she is about, and of where he or she is going.” (Charles, 38) The identity of an individual is influenced and shaped by the socio-cultural and economic realities of their environment. For the youth from the lower classes of urban India, their identity is volatile, and they remain largely invisible in the eyes of the privileged, the government authorities and employers. Emerging out of this veil of invisibility that is cast upon them is close to impossible and even if one of them does succeed to break out of it, they are immediately forced to return to the same position by those in power. The unjust arrest of Ram after winning the quiz show, fair and square, is an example of this dichotomy that exists in the urban Indian scenario.

Ram's encounter with a sex worker in a Red-Light area in Agra reveals the existence of a different community whose identity is synonymous with the status accorded to pet animals. Ram asks the sex worker for her name, and she answers, rather promptly, that it is Nita. Ram, overcome by curiosity, prods to know her full name, to which he receives an answer that leaves him pondering over the volatile and self-deprecating nature of identity. Nita explains to Ram that sex workers like her do not enjoy the luxury of having a full name; they are like pet animals who are known only by their first names. Nita's identity and self-image are tied to her profession - one that is looked down on with disgust and disrespect, which allows no scope for them to rise beyond the label of a sex worker. Thus, for the lower classes in urban India, identity becomes an aspect of their existence which is intrinsic to their survival but also one that leaves them invisible and vulnerable at the hands of the privileged.

Professional Aspects

The young people belonging to the urban lower classes are generally found to be involved in daily wage jobs. Despite being talented and skilled, they are often left to opt for such menial jobs because they constantly struggle to make ends meet and dreaming of a big career is a luxury they usually cannot afford due to their circumstances. The dire situations that they are used to living in throughout their life leaves them without any or close to no desire to aspire for white-collar jobs such as that of a pilot, banker, or prime minister. For example, the boys at the juvenile home are wired to believe that their status as inhabitants of a juvenile home will never allow them to get a job beyond that of a cook or cleaner.

The lack of access to primary education in a country that ensures it as a fundamental right under the Constitution, further widens the gap between the rich and the poor, leaving the youth from poorer sections with no formal education. While many turn out to be victims of their circumstances, some never even attempt to pull themselves out of their present situations, and a few others who attempt to do so have to face overwhelming amounts of hurdles.

The talented and motivated young population are thus left to fend for themselves and any attempt to better their situation is met with backlash at the hands of the privileged and the powerful. Q & A presents the

multifaceted nature of their struggles with poignant details and Ram Thomas Mohammad becomes the spokesperson for the many such unfairly treated young individuals who belong to the lower strata of society in urban India.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to understand youth culture in the urban lower-class Indian society through a semiotic perspective applied to Vikas Swarup's Q & A and the visual narrative as provided by Ram, the protagonist of the novel. The young people in lower-class urban India are often classified under certain cultural, economic, and social frameworks by their social status and de facto identity. They cannot afford the luxury of dreaming of a better lifestyle, education, or career; those who do are stopped even before they can take the first step. The growth of young urban poor is hampered by their social settings, which play a vital role in shaping their worldview and the extent to which they can dream of a privileged life. The divide between the rich and the poor and the power-play of the rich further puts the poor at a disadvantage. Independence - physical, emotional, and financial - are often a myth for the young urban poor. Swarup's Q & A represents the story of every young individual belonging to the urban lower class in India, who must face situations similar to that narrated by Ram and the many people he mentions throughout the novel.

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