

Dreams And Neoliberal Mirage: An Ideological Study Of Vikas Swarup's Novel *Q&A*



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Abstract: *Neoliberalism is an economic theory that claims to provide equal opportunities to all individuals. However, its main focus is to revive the power and control of the capitalists. The study is qualitative in nature, using the textual analysis to analyze the novel Q&A, using neoliberal approach offered by David Harvey, criticizing the socio-economic structure of the world, focusing mainly on the developing countries. The study focuses on the policies of neoliberal globalization that victimize the marginal voice and exposes the false claim of equal opportunities, commodification and the value of meritocracy in the neoliberal setup. The system has a merciful eye towards the sufferings and difficulties towards the marginalized voice due to their fallacious promises.*

Keywords: neoliberalism, globalization, commodification, marginalize.

Introduction

Neoliberalism emerged in the 1970s to reestablish the economic structure of the world by providing the solution to the economic turmoil. Many theorists, including David Harvey, believe that neoliberalism is the revival and continuation of the capitalism that only benefit the elite class. According to Mocombe (2022), globalization is the strategic management of the West to colonize the world under the framework of liberalism, where the focus of this theory is to dominate the world and promote capitalism. Following the concept offered by David Harvey, the study focuses on how the policies of neoliberalism has destabilize the social and economic structure of the world. Due to these policies, the lower or poor class were the one who suffered the most, as the policies favors only those belong to the elite class and corporate system.

Neoliberalism emphasized on the privatization of the institutions to prevent the economic depression after World War II. This shift has brought a temporarily relief and economic development in the advanced countries but much of the third world lagged behind leading to the poverty and worse living condition. Neoliberalism increased its focus on the individual and eliminated the moral aspect of the society like; “the public good” and “the community” are considered as secondary in policy discussions.

Social issues such as ecological disasters, unemployment, inequality, and poverty and the consequences faced by the locals are directed towards the individuals rather than to the system. Such ideology makes it easier to rationalize the concept that a certain privilege class is more deserving as the recipient of the wealth, which then prevails that the practice of neoliberalism

benefits only the privileged class. Some authors believe that in the name of globalization, neoliberals forwarded the idea of a uniform system where the beneficiary will be the capitalist class (Litonjua, 2008).

Neoliberal globalization has opened the doors of development to the third world countries. However, David Harvey has brought to the surface the real propaganda behind the policies of neoliberalism. David Harvey (2005), criticizes neoliberalism that it was a successfully planted system to maintain and restore the dominance of the elite powers to restore its control over the world. Neoliberalism claimed to be the solution of all the economic problems of the world.

In the book "*Capital Resurgent: Roots of the Neoliberal Revolution*", Dumenil and Levy (2004) argues that there was a significant increase in neoliberal influence on global hegemony through the renewal of finance capital, which employed specific mechanisms to facilitate the dominance of the wealthy in neoliberal society (Gerard Dumenil, 2004). To which Harvey (2005) says that neoliberalism is a project that is aimed to restore elite class power. Harvey, therefore, first explores how elite class power is reestablished in certain countries, and then go deep into the account that how the consent was created for the neoliberal state.

The novel deals with the current globalized economic situation. It states that how the labor is kept precariat and how thin is the margin of error for people who are trying to make it into the global economy. It gives an insight into the broader spectrum of neoliberal policies that greatly influence the socio-economic setup. It states that what happens to the workers in the globalized world setup. Ram Muhammad Thomas in the novel wins the quiz show by answering all the questions correctly but he is denied to receive the promised prize money. Instead, he is sent to jail on accusation of cheating during the show. He belongs to the labor class and he tried his luck by participating in the quiz show to adjust into the neoliberal economic desires. But, the handlers of the globalized economy brutally denied his right to

get the promised prize and become the part of the economic structure. He is tortured for dreaming to be given equal opportunities and individual liberty and is forced to live a life of social despair. It depicts that neoliberal globalization does not provide equal opportunity and individual liberty to everybody and they, in reality victimize and marginalize poor. Their policies facilitate only the Elite class to gain their power and influence.

Statement of the Problem

The problem under investigation is the way neoliberal policies commodify and devalue humanity. The study explores that how neoliberal policies control economy in which the poor class suffer the most and are economically marginalized. Such policies lead to the discrimination aroused in the political, economic and social structure. Literature provides a space to question the unequal distribution of wealth and marginalization of underprivileged class. It critiques the market logic of neoliberalism over the social bonds and play a vital role in resisting the pervasive influence of neoliberalism by maintaining the humanities.

Methodology

The study keeps David Harvey's book titled, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005), as theoretical framework to study the novel *Q&A* qualitatively. Applying neoliberalism as a framework in literary studies, enables reader to critically examine how literature mirrors and critiques the policies of market-driven society, individual morality, and commodification of life.

According to Belsey, textual analysis is to perform a close reading of the cultural artefacts through the process of signification. Textual analysis is "understanding the process of interpretation as the effect of a relation between a reader and a text" (Belsey, 2014, pp. 160-178). The study first selects relevant text to study, relates it to the context of the theory, and then identify the instances from the text as evidence.

Research Question

How do the policies of neoliberal globalization

victimize the marginal voice in the novel *Q&A*?

Analysis

Neoliberal policies have only benefitted the elite class without realizing how the poor class would survive and make into the economic structure. Therefore, the policies have a negative impact on the marginalized voice where they live at the margin of survival point. The following arguments discuss some of the impacts of the neoliberal policies that make the lives of the already marginalized more difficult specifically of the labour class including women.

The setting of the novel, *Q&A*, is a slum, where people live in a miserable condition and hardly manage to provide a living for their families. The novel identifies the impacts of the neoliberal policies where the system failed to provide the basic needs to the marginalized communities. Ram Muhammad Thomas, the protagonist of the novel, reveals through his journey, the living condition of the poor class where the elite class enjoy the luxurious and comfortable life. The poor people are forced to live a life of depravity where they hardly manage to survive in the present economic structure.

The journey of Ram Muhammad Thomas, throughout the novel, introduced the readers to the different impacts of neoliberal policies on marginalized group. He himself belonging to the poor community became the target of neoliberal inequality. Ram from his early ages become a victim of the neoliberal system. He was an orphan raised by a Christian priest. He was deprived of the basic education that any nation and welfare state provide to the children. He won the prize in quiz show, but denied the prize, he was instead accused of cheating, as the program management were not able to accept that a person belonging to the poor class could become a competition, or could be able to know the answers to the questions asked. This attitude towards the poor community and judging an individual on the basis of their background leads towards the divide and inequality.

Social Stratification

Social stratification is a major drawback of the neoliberal policies, where the corporate and elite

class or those in power enjoy the blissful dispensing favors of the neoliberalism, while the poor class are forced to live a life of deprivation and continuous sufferings.

According to Wendy Brown (2015) "neoliberalism, a peculiar form of reason that configures all aspects of existence in economic terms, is quietly undoing basic elements of democracy. These elements include vocabularies, principles of justice, political cultures, habits of citizenship, practices of rule, and above all, democratic imaginaries" (Brown, 2015, p. 17). He implores that the system is not providing equal opportunities to all individuals as it promises to liberalize the individual and promote freedom. It talks about the democracy but the realities are totally different from the ideals neoliberalism has presented.

"They will wage a finger at me and remind me of what the elders in Dharavi say about never crossing the dividing line that separate the rich from the poor.... The brain is not an organ we are authorized to use. We are supposed to use only our hands and legs" (Swarup, 2006, p. 12).

It reminds the people of Dharavi to stay in their boundaries and never dare to think of a life that belongs to the upper class. They must dream within limits and if they try to surpass the clearly drawn boundaries, their failure is certain.

The dividing line is so deep that even the existence of the marginalized community is questioned.

"When Your whole Existence is 'illegal', when you live on the bank of penury in an urban wasteland where you jostle for every inch of space and have to queue for a shit, arrest has a certain inevitability about it. You are conditioned to believe that one day there will be a warrant with your name on it, that eventually a jeep with a flashing red light will come for you". (Swarup, 2006, p. 12)

The life of these marginalized class does not matter at all. Nobody cares if any of the poor is killed, molested, victimized or brutalized. They have been conditioned to such a life where they are vulnerable to any accusation, commodification, brutality and deprivation.

The life becomes a hell and open to any discrepancy in such living conditions.

Unemployment

According to the *Australian Catholic Social Welfare Commission* (1999), “The psychological and social costs of retrenchment and prolonged unemployment during the productive years of life impact harshly on the quality of life of affected individuals and families. Experiences of low self-esteem and loss of self-identity impact on physical and mental health and can extend to broader consequences of social isolation and the loss of social networks and support. The impact of redundancy causes family disruption and breakdown. At the very least it reduces people’s sense of membership and contribution to the life of the community”. (O’Connor, 1999)

According to O’Connor 1999, the unemployment has not only socially impacted individuals but also led towards retarded behaviour. Individuals experience less social contact with others, feel alienated and depressed, leading towards the family problems and distressed life. The Unemployment leads to many unpleasant consequences as the psychological condition of the individual does not process the social security of other individuals that leads to immoral deeds. The unequal distribution of wealth leads to frustration that causes disruption in a society.

Harvey (2005) asserts, “the analogy with the deliberate creation of unemployment to produce a labour surplus convenient for further accumulation is exact. Valuable assets are thrown out of use and lose their value” (Harvey, 2005, p. 163). Unemployment is deliberately created to lower the wages due the surplus of the workers, which enable the employers to use more power and control the employees. This intentionally created unemployment give profit to the corporates, they take more work from the employees, keeping their wages low to get more profit from the work.

Anlam FİLİZ (2020), in their work states that unemployment is initiated by neoliberalism. The novel has introduced us to many instances, where the valuable assets are devalued leading

to the unemployment. One example is Shantaram, the father of Gudia, that fits on the statement of Harvey of losing the valuable assets. Shantaram, who lost his job despite being the most talented and knowledgeable scientist. He had the command and knowledge of stars, galaxies, milky way, but his talent has been lost in the circle of poverty. His knowledge was evident when he was discussing the galaxies etc. and Ram and Salim were listening to his arguments through the wall.

“We hear about stellar constellations and galaxies and comets. We hear about the Great Bear and the Little Bear. We hear of something Milky Way and the Pole Star. We learn about the rings of Saturn and the moons of Jupiter.” (Swarup, 2006, p. 74)

He became unemployed and eventually left him to be a drunkard. He was a sober and well reputed person but the circumstances have made him a father who molested his daughter, who beaten his wife and never give any importance to others. The unemployment made him frustrated and, in his frustration, he was unable to understand what ills he has brought home.

Similarly, the hard work of Ram was not recognized and his knowledge was disregarded till he won the quiz show. He switched his jobs multiple times and every time he was afraid of losing a job and left unemployed. He worked with Nelima, then worked as a guide at Taj Mahal, worked for the Australian diplomate and then as a bar waiter. He was unable to ask for his rights of inquiring about his salary which was unpaid for several months. He was unable to tell his bar tender to let him go home when he was asked to go for overtime and nor he was paid extra.

“‘But... Manager Sahib, it is past midnight. We should tell him to leave or I’ll miss the twelve-thirty local’

‘Don’t you dare argue with me or I’ll break your jaw’ he snarls at me. ‘Now go, engage the customer in Conversation. Get him to order the Scottish single malt which came in yesterday. He come in a Mercedes.’” (Swarup, 2006, p. 159)

But he was afraid of losing his job and being

unemployed. The neoliberal employment contracts are short-term and got no long-term effects.

Corruption

The *Anti-Corruption Plain Language Guide* (2009) Transparency International defined corruption as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain”, so whoever use the power incorrectly is a corrupt person. David Harvey (2005) says; “the drive towards market freedoms and the commodification of everything can all too easily run amok and produce social incoherence” (Harvey, 2005, p. 80). The social incoherence eventually leads a society towards the corruption. Due to corruption, whole system collapses of any society and the coherence and flow of social mechanics disrupts.

So, corruption is one of the social problems that has created a major chaos and disruption in the society. The dispensing favor towards the interests of the elite class leads towards the unjust social coherence. For example, the arrest of the Ram on the basis of false accusation of cheating during the show and another example of corruption is in chapter; How to Speak Australian, where the wealthy family of Australian origin, were trying to dismiss the ongoing survey by giving bribe to the census man.

“Mrs. Taylor whispered to her husband, ‘Oh Charles, we don’t want Ramu and Thomas wasting their time on this silly exercise. Can’t you get rid of this drongo” (Swarup, 2006, p. 124).

Charles handed him a bottle of Johnny Walker Red Label, and sending the census man from his house and his wife commented:

“These bloody Indians, she smiles. Give them a bottle of whisky and they’ll do anything” (Swarup, 2006, p. 125).

The society gets corrupted when the powerful use their power to favor their wrong doings, where only the poor comes under the law. The Australian family realized that they can use and abuse the law at their favor, no matter what they do, as the whole system can be bought only at a bottle of wine. The corruption has made the

system so much rotten that the outsiders when come to these developing nations, they try to take advantage of its weak system.

Vulnerabilities of Women

Neoliberalism has greatly impacted the social value of women; they have become vulnerable to so many atrocities and subjugation. The women became an easy target to slavery and forced work as they agree to work under low wages due to their primary needs of survival.

Jiang (2023) has discussed in her article that the women in the neoliberal setup have left behind as they are considered to take low-pay, unprotective and unsafe jobs. This structure has also disturbed the family structures including the migration of the workers to other cities for better opportunities. She also discussed that the dismantling of the welfare state due to neoliberal policies and limited government funded services has negatively impacted the lives of women to a great extent. The global liberalization and privatization of the sectors has given a rise in the service works that includes sex bargaining, domestic work and surrogacy (Jiang, 2023). These changes forced women to work upon low wages and keep working under the unprotective environment.

David Harvey (2005) says “The loss of social protection in advanced capitalist countries has had particularly negative effect on lower-class women, and in many of the ex-communist countries of the Soviet bloc the loss of women’s rights through neoliberalization has been nothing short of catastrophic” (Harvey, 2005, p. 170). He says that ex-communist countries were providing many facilities to women, child care, maternity leave and such other welfares, but due to neoliberalism, the woman life has become more hard in the developed countries. So, if the women in the developed countries are suffering this much the condition of the women in the developing countries is horrible. They are searching for jobs that could only facilitate them to survive.

Harvey says that neoliberalism has disrupted the social life of disposable workers, specifically of women, where her protection is at the stake because of the short-term contracts and flexible

labour market. The survival for women in such situation has become a risk, she has to put her life in danger for the mere survival as the state has freed itself from the responsibility of the job security. Women's rights are everywhere protected but in neoliberalism she is treated as the commodity and the protective cover of the social security has been stripped off. Due to which the women in neoliberal state feel horrible.

The unprotective situation of women could be observed in the novel *Q&A* where the women are treated as commodity and she is subjected to the labour to live a life of misery. It is the poverty that led them to go for such low-paying jobs. Through the journey of Ram, we come across so many women who have become the victim of neoliberal structure. The very first female who become the victim of the social setup is Gudia, the new neighbor of Ram in Chawl. She was a little girl whose father was fired from his job. This is what the neoliberalism has done, no job security. He became so disturbed that he started drinking and due to which he started abusing his own daughter. She seeks protection with Ram and he promised to take care of her as a sister.

Moreover, Lajwanti is another character whose sole purpose of life was to provide a sustainable life to her sister, Lakshmi. She was trying hard to give her best to win the trust of her mistress but her mistress, who belonged to the Elite class disappointed her when she asked her to lend her some money for the expenses of her sister, Lakshmi, wedding. She desired to give best departure to her sister and that was her only desire.

"I have been saving up for Lakshmi's wedding. I have accumulated nearly fifty thousand rupees. And I will borrow another fifty thousand from Rani Sahiba." (Swarup, 2006, p. 309)

She has been working so hard but at the end she was unable to get enough arrangements for her sister's wedding and eventually she stole a necklace from Rani Sahiba, and get arrested for the theft. The system tries to punish the crimes of minute values but avoid taking action against the broader system of the social structure that

push an individual to take extreme actions.

Nita, another female character who was dragged into the prostitution to feed her family, is another example of the horrors of neoliberalism. The unjust social structures are responsible for compelling the female to sell their bodies to earn the bread for her family. In Nita's community it was a tradition that one girl from each family have to serve as a communal prostitution to provide her family. Willingly or unwillingly, they had to pay the price for her family to survive in such unjust setup of the society. At the very young age where the kids enjoy their childhood, the girls are put to the profession of prostitution, where they were not allowed to say 'no' to this filthy profession. Nita explains that;

"So, at the age of twelve, my virginity was auctioned to the highest bidder and I was put on the sale inside this brothel" (Swarup, 2006, pp. 305-306).

The women are treated as commodity without emotions and any willingness, on which a deal could be made and the family could live at the price of the lives of these women. The women being marginalized group became the easy target of the neoliberal setup. They are sold, pushed to the prostitution, subjected to the brutality, and subjugated.

The neoliberal effect on women's social life is not limited to the poor only. Even if a woman is earning well, she is still not safe as she is also treated as commodity. She is excluded from the society and is exploited by the patriarchal tradition.

Increase in Crimes

According to Harvey (2005) neoliberalism has not only prevailed inequality but due to this inequality the crimes have been increased too. The individual competition has made people criminal; they could violate any human right for their own benefits. Human trafficking has increased and they are used as mere the commodity to gain wealth. Ram Muhammad Thomas and his friend Saleem also became the victim of such violation. They get into the trap of the begging mafia, where the human beings are brutally getting blinded or their body parts

are distorted to use them for gaining wealth.

Maman is one of the leaders of such mafia and he on the surface was working for the welfare of the orphans but on the other hand he was using these kids for begging. Such crimes are the creation of the neoliberalism where the government intervention is limited and has given a hype to the corruption. "In its crowning achievement, it has managed to redefine what it means to be human. No longer the sentient, cooperative and empathetic beings scientific evidence suggest we are; humans have been reduced to competitors. Coldly rational, ruthless even, neoliberalism has set people against each other, valorizing the notion of 'getting ahead', the question of whom, and by what means, too infrequently asked" (Pearse, 2021). Pearse has rightly said that neoliberalism has altered the moral structure of society, now every human being is a commodity to the other human. They use each other to gain wealth through them. The humanity factor of the society has been neglected since neoliberalism has introduced its policies to manipulate all the aspects of life. The focus of individuals, entrepreneur, businessmen is just to take advantage of the labors and workers, providing as less wages as possible. Due to these reasons the human survival has become more complex in this self-investing human capital.

In her book, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (2007), Naomi Klein asserts the tactics that are used to impose the policies to control the economy. Naomi has named them as shocks; the authorities create shocks and sometimes take advantage of the natural disasters. According to her, the authorities or handlers of the economy use the critical times of any country to introduce their policies to overcome the damage. These critical times are either natural disasters or is created by the handlers. Neoliberals come to cure the shock as shock therapy and impose their policies on a country and its people and then they give another shock to the people who tries to resist them through police, soldiers, and prison investigators (Klein, 2007).

These kinds of strategies can be observed through the character of Ram as he tried to resist

the system but ended in jail, facing interrogation for desiring a better life. One can see these shocks through the novel in chapter eight when an emergency has been declared in the state due to the war and everything from the market suddenly disappeared.

"Mehta has reliable information, straight from the Ministry, that petrol is to be rationed. Onions and tomatoes have virtually disappeared from the market. Better start hoarding milk." (Swarup, 2006, p. 136)

One can say that as Naomi has said that these shocks are engineered by the authorities to declare the emergency situation and by doing so, the corporates take advantage of the panic situations. Moreover, these corporates appear to be the savior of the people and sell their goods at high price and lure the customers to buy expensive things.

Moreover, Ram's friend, Salim Ilyasi, while striving to survive in the system met another character, Ahmad Khan, who saved his life from the hindu rioters. He was, on the surface, seemed to be a businessman but in reality, he was a gambler and killer. The human life was less valuable than money, the commodification has increased to the level that it overtook the value of humanity. The capitalist societies have made the world so much senseless towards the humanity to gain material possession that taking someone's life means nothing to them. Ozel (1997), has said in his dissertation that fictitious commodities namely; labor, money and land, produce dehumanization. It resulted in commodification of human life itself, that alienated human being from their surroundings. He argues that market-based societies deprive the human being from the basic moralities that make them humans (Özel, 1997).

The contracts Ahmad received were mostly of the elite class, corporates and businessmen. The competition that is encouraged by neoliberalism has led to the extreme actions. David Harvey says, "the upper classes, insisting on the sacrosanct nature of their property rights, preferred to crash the system rather than surrender any of their privileges and power" (Harvey D. , 2005, p. 153). So, the upper class

would not mind even taking someone's life for their personal privileges and profit. The competition of neoliberalism has made the human barbaric and senseless. Such competitions disrupted the flow of life; every individual tries to make more wealth as the priority of the life is money.

Conclusion

The textual reading of the novel, *Q&A*, directs the reader's attention towards the rising inequality within the global world and the dreams of the marginalized group. Where the neoliberal structure deprived the marginalized group of having dreams to become successful and have a better life for themselves. This inequality leads to many crimes including theft, treachery, prostitution and frustration. To protect the society from chaos and mishaps, the equality among the individuals is essential. This equality has been claimed by neoliberalism but the realities are still far from the narratives of neoliberalism. The impacts of neoliberalism have been so far negative where the most impacted people are the marginalized group.

The novel *Q&A*, depicts a glimpse of the life of the marginalized, their living standard and their sufferings while dealing with the social economic setup. The slum scene and the living standard of the struggling and labour class proves that the neoliberal policies failed. They are forced to live a life of misery and sufferings; they have to stand in a queue just attend the washroom for hours. Their homes are no more than a square foot where it is hard to breath but they live with an entire family because it is hard for to afford a big house. It is not that they were not hardworking, these labor class work hard from day to night but still are only able to provide the needs for survival as they are not allowed to desire a better life.

A marginal voice, Ram, tries to make it into the economic structure but the access was denied to him as he belonged to the poor class. He sees the suffering of every character while narrating their stories. He was accused of cheating; he wanted to earn for the bread but was insulted every time for his hard-earned money. They were considered to be humans with no respect anyone

could kill them, rape them, or accused of crimes they might have not committed.

The inequal distribution of wealth, due to the policies of neoliberalism, gave birth to crimes, corruption, unemployment, mafias, prostitution, human trafficking, theft etc. in which the victims are mostly the labor class. The concerning issue is, that no one counts them to be the human to have the very basic right, to live. It seems that the world belongs to only the elite class and corporation businessmen, who enjoys the luxurious life.

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