

## Representation of Subaltern Children in *Slumdog Millionaire* by Vikas Swarup

Mr. Dilip M. Bawane

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Dr. Khatri Mahavidyalaya, Tukum, Chandrapur  
Email: - dilip3bawane@gmail.com

### Abstract

This research paper aims to focus on micro narrative of the novel *Slumdog Millionaire* (originally titled as *Q and A*) written by the novelist Vikas Swarup to explore the realistic representation of poor street children moving around the big cities of India. In recent times, child poverty poses to be a catastrophe of serious magnitude for many developing countries around the world. Children unable to meet minimum acceptable standard of life for the nation where they live are called poor. Their poor condition is sometimes caused by the poverty of their own families or the weak economy of the state where they live. The child poverty causes the nation great harm as it is then linked with forced labor, lack of education and health facilities and also involvement in criminal activities. These subaltern children are repressed and exploited by adults as well as elite class of the society. Differing from the hegemonic depiction of poor class subordinated by elite the novel *Slumdog Millionaire* tries to portray the realistic image of subaltern street children. In this paper the researcher aims to explore how subaltern children are represented as marginalized, who still recover and claim mechanism of control in the adult's political and economic sphere.

**Keywords-** Subaltern studies, children, adult, representation, marginalization, exploitation

### Introduction

The term 'subaltern' has been defined by different theorists and scholars in different ways. Lexically, the English word subaltern came from the Latin words sub-alternus which means under other. In that sense, the word subaltern refers to the inferiority of someone or something. Most studies conflate the word subaltern with several synonymous term including subordinated, downtrodden, marginalized and oppressed. It was Antonio Gramsci who first applied the term subaltern to the Italian downtrodden, especially Italian workers marginalized by the hegemonic politics of Fascist party. Indian scholars namely Guha, Spivak and others applied the term in a broad sense to south Asian subalterns from both colonial and post-colonial times. Now a days, the word subaltern has become a euphemism for all browbeaten people suffering under the oppression of elite groups. According to subaltern theory "the norms are established by those in power and imposed on the 'Other' who has had no voice because of race, class or gender". (Sebastian, 2009, p. 899)

As noted by the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF),

"Children living in poverty are those who experience deprivation of the material, spiritual and emotional resources needed to survive, develop and thrive, leaving them unable to enjoy their rights, achieve their full potentials or participate as full and equal members of society". (UNICEF, 2005)

The poor children inhabiting streets and using it as a means of survival are not only seen as the ill-defined sector of the child population but also in some cases as the physical menace to authority. These children are considered as the disordered and demonized children who generate demands for mechanism of control in adult's space. (Wyness, 2006, p.78-80) Such children who live in constant poverty in urban streets are the most deprived and depraved member of society and easily prone to crime and evil practices.

The enduring poverty of their family and weak economy of the state in which they live compel them to choose urban streets for accommodation which latter becomes subjected to more disciplinary

courses of action by the state. They are doubly marginalized in both elite-poor and adult-children relationships. They face subordination in position, class and prominence which is associated with their age as they are perceived as immature; financial deprivation and dependency on adults in order to represent themselves properly. In this way a distinctive subaltern group is made by these street children in the society.

In order to explore the authentic representation of marginalized street children in India the researcher selected the Booker Prize winning and Commonwealth Writer's Prize nominated novel *Slumdog Millionaire* (originally published as *Q and A*) written by the novelist Vikas Swarup which was first published in 2005 and later adapted to the movie. The novelist Vikas Swarup, an Indian diplomat developed plot of the novel on Indian Background with his protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas who wins the biggest quiz show *Who Will Win a Billion*. The novel deals with the life of Ram who is an orphan, uneducated young waiter. When he wins the game show, the host of the show, Prem Kumar doesn't have money to pay, accuses Ram for cheating and has him arrested by the police. They considers Ram as an uneducated street boy unable to answer more than a few questions but when he answers all the questions they become hostile to him. However, Ram gets legal support from the lawyer Smita Shah to whom he explains how he managed to give all the answers. All the questions that he is asked are based on his real life and when he relates we get into its flashback.

### Discussion-

Generally, major historical, political, social events, trends and practice of the contemporary world find its place in art and literature. All the spheres of human society are source of the Narratives. A novelist recollects all those narratives and incorporates them to create his own creations. It means no novelist can produce his creations only on the basis of his imaginations. According to Mishra,

“Cultural and aesthetic text use their own referential frames to mediate history. In so doing, they generate hypothetical ‘reals’ that do not necessarily coincide with historiography but which may be said to comprise an account of history nonetheless”. (Mishra, 2009, p. 322)

So when we go through the novel, we are reminded of the subordination of poor street children living in metropolitan cities. As for as the novel *Slumdog Millionaire* is concerns the whole story revolves around the protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas who suffers lot of subjugations. In the novel we find the case of discriminations on the basis of religion when Ram and his friend Salim offer themselves as household servant. The Bollywood actress Neelima Kumar asks them their name in order to know their caste and religion:

“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 Muslims. I personally don't believe in this polluting contact nonsense, but what I am to do? (*Slumdog Millionaire*, 245)

Because of this middleclass hypocrisy street children have to suffer a lot of discriminations on the basis of their religion that they are unable to find their job. They are looked upon as criminal underclass, ineligible to be accepted. Salim being Muslim could not get job as a household servant at house of Bollywood actress whereas Ram Mohammad Thomas poses himself as a Hindu by telling his name Ram and gets a job there.

The novel also depicts the incidents of rape, sexual assault and violence against the children. In one incident father rapes his own daughter where we are reminded of sexual abuse and incest that are perpetuated by close blood relatives. The protagonist, Ram Mohammad Thomas who regards Gudiya his sister narrates:

“I rush to my room. I hear Shantaram snoring, and Gudiya screaming that she is dirty, ‘Don't touch me! Nobody touch me! I will infect whoever comes near me. I think she is losing her mind. And I am losing mine...I will not live much longer... I will commit suicide”. (*Slumdog*, 84)

In the novel we get another example of sex trafficking in the case of Neeta. Neeta is Bedia tribal girl in the novel. In her community, girls are not burden, rather they are the cause for celebration, as it

is the practice in her community that one girl from each family has to work as a communal prostitute. Such girls are called Bendis who earn money for their families, while male members enjoys drinking alcohol and playing cards. Neeta tells Ram that she got into prostitution at the age of just twelve. She knows the consequences of being into this Filthy profession, but she believes that “It is better to die of disease tomorrow than hunger today”.(Ibid:300) It is so surprising and shocking that the pimp at the brothel is none other than her brother himself, Shyam. (Palwekar, p. 155)

In the novel, we come across another issue of child subordination, namely child abuse in India. The novel has two reference where two friends of Ram are said to have been sexually abused by adults. First Ram’s friend Salim by a disguised film star and second English teenager tourist Ian from York by Father John in the church of St. Mary in Delhi.

In nutshell we can say that the poor street children in India are exploited and marginalized by the adults of both categories- criminals and also rich elite people in power. After losing their parents, street children become homeless and are abused by susceptible circumstances created by adults. They even don’t get proper protection by laws of state to get rid of the torment. Such susceptible circumstances compel them to become frantic as to survive themselves. Such children without any support from family as well as authorities often get involved in criminal activities, generate their own network only to challenge and repel their exploiters.

According to Spivak, “Subaltern cannot speak”. She is quite unconvinced about the ability of subaltern to articulate an authentic counter narrative with which to challenge the prevailing social system. The subaltern street child is thought to be inherently dependent on the dominant adult narrative when claiming representation. But it is seen that with the advent of globalization, the new generation child can obviously create its own space and claim representation to some extent.

### Conclusion-

The *Slumdog Millionaire* has given a great shock to its global reader delineating the realities of the poor street children. The novel has that much potential that compels readers to develop empathy towards the poor street children but at the same it also depicts the rigor and potential of the street children who can suffer but ultimately fight the danger and exploitations to achieve their place. It is almost impossible for a person belonging to elite group to understand the subjectivity of subaltern poor children because he has never gone through this circumstances. Society in which these children live often tries to neglect them as they are considered criminals ineligible to be accepted as a good citizen but when we go through this novel, we are made aware about their situation, their struggle, and their exploitations though being subjected to subordination they can have that much potential to fight their poverty and to reach their destination for love and a better life with dignity.

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