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Between dreams and despair: Social consciousness and personal agony in Vikas Swarup's *The Accidental Apprentice*

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Abstract

The article examines the connection between social consciousness and personal agony in *The Accidental Apprentice* by Vikas Swarup. The protagonist Sapna, a middle-class salesgirl, gets a chance to become the CEO of a multinational company. She will become the CEO of the company if she passes seven tests given by billionaire Vinay Mohan Acharya. Through the character Sapna, Swarup explores the major issues of social inequality, corruption, the struggles of women and gender discrimination in modern India. Additionally, the article explores how individuals' thoughts and action are entangled with the changing social conditions in contemporary India. It also highlights resistance and social responsibilities in *The Accidental Apprentice*. Sapna's personal agony becomes the site of negotiation between ethical integrity and systemic injustice.

Key Words: Social Consciousness, Personal Agony, Social Inequality, Corruption, Discrimination.

Sociology and Literature have incorporated the concept of Social Consciousness, which relates the inner life of the individual with the moral values of society. According to Emile Durkheim, the collective consciousness is "the totality of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of a society" (63). It is established that personal suffering and moral dilemmas are intertwined with the ethical and social environment. In

Vikas Swarup's *The Accidental Apprentice*, Sapna Sinha's personal agony is intertwined with social conscience. Cole highlights that "Durkheim observed that in traditional or primitive societies, religious symbols, discourse, beliefs, and rituals fostered the collective consciousness." Cooley states that "Social Consciousness, or awareness of society, is inseparable from self-consciousness, because we can hardly think of ourselves excepting with

reference to a social group of some sort, nor of the group except with reference to ourselves.”

Social Consciousness refers to being aware of social issues and injustices impacting the people in the social environment. Swarup fosters social consciousness in *The Accidental Apprentice* through the life journey of Sapna. Vikas Swarup is one of the best novelists in post-millennial Indian society, and his novels are best-selling novels. He has published short stories, articles and book reviews. His first novel, *Q&A*, was adapted into the movie “*Slumdog Millionaire*”, which won an Oscar Award. All his novels are an attempt to analyse social, economic and political issues in modern India. His novels explore the rapid changes and social issues, including exploitation, violence, corruption, discrimination, and crime in contemporary Indian society. His novels revolve around common people and the underprivileged. Vikas Swarup, through his narrative technique, portrays some of India’s most social and contemporary issues.

He exposes India’s systemic social issues in the novel. The social problems, such as corruption, exploitation, inequality, and injustice, are highlighted through the experience of Sapna. She observes how bribery and manipulation spread throughout every aspect of her life. The novel criticises the structural injustices such as discrimination, organ trade and child labour. It also highlighted an inequality between a billionaire like Vinay Mohan Acharya and a common girl, Sapna. Lohat asserts that “Acharya Vinay is much powerful to easily manipulate the things in the life of a proletarian girl like Sapna” (322).

Sapna Sinha is a salesgirl in an electronics store in Delhi. Once, Vinay Mohan Acharya, a billionaire, offers her the position of CEO of her company. To become a CEO, she has to pass seven tests. The tests are unexpected and critical. She has passed six tests while facing personal conflicts. Each situation explores an aspect of corruption in India. After her passing

each test, Acharya explains the relevance of each quality such as the quality of leadership, integrity, courage, foresight, resourcefulness, and decisiveness. Meanwhile, Acharya is also facing competition from his violent twin brother, AK Acharya. In the final test, Vinay is found murdered strangely, and Sapna is accused of the murder. She manages to escape from it. In the end, Ajay Krishna Acharya, the brother of the deceased Vinay Mohan Acharya, visits Sapna and hands over a letter written by Vinay in which he nominates her as the CEO of his company, the ABC Group. Sapna rejects it and reinforces her self-worth and personal happiness.

The seven tests are as follows: The first test is the test of leadership, responsibility, and integrity. Sapna travelled to help farmer Kuldip Singh to set up appliances and met Babli, a daughter of Kuldip Singh, who was facing forced marriage. She rescued Babli from her situation. She doesn’t know that it was her first test until Archarya calls her the next day and informs her that she has passed the first test. Archarya says, “You decided to fight an injustice even when the odds were stacked against you. In my book, that qualifies you as a leader” (Swarup 116).

In the second test, Bollywood actress Priya Capoorr comes to Sapna’s showroom. Sapna is selected as Priya’s attendant. Priya loses her engagement ring at the promotional event, which also involves Sapna. Sapna found the ring, but after so much internal conflict, she returned the ring to Priya. It earns Sapna the acknowledgement from Acharya. In the third test, she rescues children from the illegal factory with the help of her friend Lauren. Sapna struggles to balance to helping the children and also protecting her family from consequences. She recognizes her courage in standing up for justice.

The fourth test describes how Neha prepares for her singing competition and her sister Sapna accompanies her to Mumbai. The

test is all about how she saves her sister, Neha, from the nexus of reality TV shows in Mumbai. The test centers on Sapna's reaction and interaction with fame, which also showcase its attraction and dangers. The fifth test is for Sapna's integrity and courage. Nirmala Ben, a Gandhian neighbor, voiced concerns about corruption, particularly focused on the company, Atlas Investments. In this test, Sapna got involved in Nirmala Ben's cause and helped her by making her fast sensational news in the media with the help of Karan. Acharya says, "You've passed the fifth test, the test of resourcefulness, by showing you can be a good problem solver. To make Nirmala Ben's fast succeed you even navigated the messy terrain of mass politics" (Swarup 264). "...you made people believe that what Nirmala Ben was doing was worth supporting" (Swarup 265).

The sixth test is the test of decisiveness. Dr. Mittal informs Sapna that her mother suffers from end-stage renal disease (ESRD), also known as chronic kidney failure, which requires a kidney transplant immediately. After facing the internal conflict, she decides to become a living donor herself. However, she later comes to know that the whole setting was plotted by Vinay Mohan Acharya as a part of Sapna's series of tests on her capability. Acharya says, "You showed this ability by your brave decision to donate your kidney" (Swarup 308).

The seventh test is the final and most critical test faced by Sapna. It is a psychological and moral test for her. Neha becomes a victim of an acid attack, and Sapna feels guilty and confused about her unwavering ambition and also thinks that she is responsible for her sister's suffering. She was arrested for murdering Vinay Mohan Acharya. She manages to escape from jail and finds the murderer and become free.

Sapna's personal agony is portrayed as a result of broader societal systems such as capitalism, corruption and patriarchy. Through her emotional turmoil, Swarup makes the readers identify social injustices. The tests

symbolise not only her pain and experiences but the realities of India's socio-political aspects. Ultimately, Sapna's Journey shows an interconnection of self-awareness and social consciousness. The article highlights that social issues and personal agony are inseparable. It also illustrates that by recounting Sapna's hardships, Swarup encourages readers to become more conscious of societal problems and systemic injustices.

This article examines how a middle-class woman navigates seven allegorical moral tests. Through each test, she faces many obstacles and challenges, such as corruption, failure, exploitation and gender discrimination. She represents how a woman makes ethical choices and fights against social issues in post-millennial Indian society. The novel portrays the protagonist's moral tests are not just a narrative device but a commentary and symbolic reflection of contemporary Indian society. The tests reveal systemic injustice and corruption in the country. Through these tests, Sapna faces gender and class-based inequalities and moral dilemmas. Cheeran says that "This is an unputdownable novel. Swarup succeeds in arousing the reader's curiosity from the very beginning and manages to hold the suspense intact till the end."

The protagonist, Sapna, undergoes emotional and psychological problems during the seven tests. Her personal agony is portrayed when she utters, "God made the human body like a machine with built-in obsolescence" (Swarup 12). She has faced psychological weariness, as she is pulled out of a series of tests by Vinay Mohan. "Built-in obsolescence" has the feeling of being used up and undervalued. It suggests that suffering and death are both parts of human life, whereas the human body is compared to a machine. The stress and burden of the responsibilities caused her to suffer physically and mentally, like a machine without rest. This reflects her inner turmoil and burden of responsibility.

Sapna Sinha's personal agony is depicted from the beginning to the end of the novel. Each step she has taken in her life has been very difficult, and she has had to face many obstacles to survive. When her elder sister hanged herself after her father opposed her affair with her boyfriend, the family collapsed and moved to Delhi to overcome the grief. Her personal life is entangled with pain, challenges, tragedy, oppression, and injustice. She recalls her painful memories of her sister Alka's suicide. It is difficult for her to recover from the grief that she has experienced. Her sister's death haunted her and deeply impacted her life. The family relocated to escape the pain and loss of her sister, but fate followed them. The family was once again devastated when Sapna's father died in a road accident. Her father's death left her family in a state of extreme poverty. It is time for Sapna to take up responsibility. As a breadwinner in her family, she had to give up her higher education after the death of her father.

The unexpected opportunity to become the CEO of a multi-billion-dollar company by completing seven tests led her to face many challenges throughout her life. She experienced a crisis in each test, which also made her stronger. Sapna manages to complete six out of seven life tests by Acharya. Even though each test makes her stronger and more determined to move forward, she still has to overcome inner turmoil and obstacles to complete each test. The seventh test is the most challenging and pushes her to the limits. Although Acharya proposes Sapna for the position of CEO by completing seven tests, and even offers her money to participate in the tests, she refuses to sign the agreement form. Despite her family's financial difficulties, she later agrees to take part in the tests with fear and curiosity and signs the agreement. She is excited about the possibility of a better life, but she is also concerned about the risk of becoming a victim. Dhote and Dhote claim that, "Swarup has dealt with the women's world with keen observation and with

penetrable sight. Swarup clarifies how women are treated as a puppet in the hands of males, and every woman aspires to have empowerment and liberation, free will and inner space" (377).

Sapna's rhetorical question, "What am I? An animal to be kicked around? A plaything to be abused? Just because I happen to be a woman?" (Swarup 175) reflects Sapna's anger against patriarchal injustice and oppression. Sapna utters these words in response to exploitation and gender discrimination. It appears to be her innermost voice of resistance. As a result, it shows her self-realisation. It depicts her pain and gender injustice, embodying the personal agony of a woman who was pushed to her limits.

As the quote is structured in a series of rhetorical questions, each has an intensity. She was overwhelmed and dehumanised. As a result, it portrays the realities of women's oppression in a patriarchal society. The rhetorical question, What am I? shows a crisis of her identity. By contrast, instead of asking Who am I? she asks What am I? This implies that she is being humiliated, mistreated, and exploited. "An animal to be kicked around?" "A plaything to be abused" implies how badly she has been treated in society without respect and dignity. It suggests how she is being objectified and used. "Just because I happen to be a woman", illustrates her suffering and how she is mistreated. It reflects Sapna's personal agony and the way she is underestimated and manipulated as a woman.

In addition, the quote also functions as a social critique. It focuses on the patriarchy in Indian society and raises social awareness by revealing violence and oppression. Through the protagonist Sapna, Swarup reflects an unequal power dynamic in India. It also illustrates how her individual pain is directly linked to systemic issues. The emotional pain of the quote makes readers reflect on the accepted oppression of women in society, fostering awareness of

patriarchal power in society. This instant illustrates how personal suffering can become a catalyst for collective consciousness.

Sapna has experienced guilt, pain, sorrow, despair, plight, and conflict throughout her life. The opening quote, "In life you never get what you deserve: you get what you negotiate" (Swarup 1), frames that Sapna's life is ruled not by justice but by negotiation. It emphasises the personal battles she faces in a corrupt and unequal setting. It also encompasses personal suffering and social conflict. The closing line of the novel, "Life does not always give us what we desire, but eventually it does give us what we deserve" (Swarup 434), signifies Sapna's development from being subjected to external influences to becoming an individual whose principles and strength earn her equitable acknowledgement and independence.

Vikas Swarup presents the common middle-class struggles in contemporary Indian society. A billionaire offers her a chance to become CEO of his company. Her typical middle-class life takes a dramatic turn. Her intense emotional and physical suffering is vividly depicted during each of her tests. The challenges she faced in each test were a result of class and social inequalities. Lohat asserts that, "Swarup very skillfully carves out the set of circumstances, the vortex in which Sapna is struck. Pertinently, she is found sandwiched between economic burdens leading to the rise of her need to look further a better job and the hectic working hours and bullying of the Gulati and sons in Delhi."

At the beginning of the novel, when Viney approaches her and offers her a position as CEO of his multi-national company with the condition of passing seven moral tests, she asks him, "Why me?", which is the moment of disbelief, fear, and confusion for her, which also marks her emotional and personal agony. Her inner conflict begins here. Her emotional turmoil and disbelief can be clearly seen here.

Sapna Sinha's journey in *The Accidental Apprentice* is marked by intense personal agony.

"Hope is a recreational drug, giving you an artificial high based on a dosage of unrealistic expectations" (Swarup 52). It implies that hope has let Sapna down many times in her life. She faced a world of betrayal and exploitation. As a young woman, Sapna has a responsibility to care for her family after her father's death. She sacrificed her dreams, worked hard to fulfil the needs of her family, but she did not experience any uplift in her life. This created an internal crisis for her.

Conclusion

Vikas Swarup portrays a woman's suffering in each phase of her life. Consequently, the novel develops a sense of social consciousness and addresses social issues such as inequality, corruption, poverty, etc. Her emotional distress and her rhetorical questions explore her psychological burdens. Sapna's suffering not only reflects the external events in her life but also exposes her internal conflict waged on her emotions of fear, guilt, and desire for self-respect. In completing each test, she faces challenges, experiences a crisis and understands she has been manipulated and her identity is questionable. Sapna has to face moral challenges through the seven tests, which force her to confront her fears and her values.

Lohat states that, "Having almost the same formalistic strain, the novel *The Accidental Apprentice* vibrantly echoes the truth of testimony to the writing ethics in strong conformity to its protagonist Sapna Sinha, who emerges triumphant through all tests in life." In *The Accidental Apprentice*, Sapna experiences intense personal agony as a result of her encounters with systemic injustices, gender discrimination and internal conflicts. Sapna's life is shaped by grief, sacrifice and betrayal. Through Sapna, Swarup reveals that individual challenges, such as emotional and gender-related are connected to social structure. Swarup's narrative strategy foregrounds the

need for an equitable society. The personal agony of Sapna becomes a vehicle for social consciousness. Sapna's agony is not limited to her individual experiences; it reflects the collective plight of women negotiating their identities in patriarchal India. Swarup links the path of personal agony with the awakening of social consciousness.

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