

‘Ram Mohammad Thomas’ as Idiosyncratic Personality in Vikas Swarup’s *Q&A**

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.59136/lv.2025.25.1.22>

Abstract

Idiosyncratic personality is a modern personality style closely associated with the New Age movement. Individuals with idiosyncratic personalities are not easily influenced by others' ideologies or spiritual and religious beliefs. Their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth is entirely self-directed, and their beliefs are uniquely their own. This paper examines the experiences and challenges of a slum boy in Vikas Swarup's Q&A. It applies the theory of John M. Oldham and Lois B. Morris' "Idiosyncratic Personality" to analyze the character Ram Mohammad Thomas. The study is conducted within an Indian context, examining the impact of the protagonist's struggles and triumphs on the slum dwellers. In Q&A, Swarup highlights the protagonist's fight against the rich and powerful, ultimately showcasing his journey to becoming a millionaire through participation in a quiz show. The novel is a social commentary that addresses issues such as child labor, violence against women, juvenile delinquency, overcrowding, and poor sanitation in urban areas. This paper argues that self-efficacy-the ability to overcome life's obstacles-can lead to success regardless of one's socioeconomic status. No matter how poor a person is, they can achieve their goals through determination and perseverance.

Keywords: Idiosyncrasy, Personality traits, Oppression, Resistance, Self-Efficacy, Social Thriller, Slum

Introduction: A Diplomat's Journey to Literary Fame

Vikas Swarup, a retired Indian diplomat and acclaimed author, is widely recognized for his debut novel *Q & A*. Born on June 22, 1961, in Prayagraj, Uttar Pradesh, he pursued his education at Boys' High School and College in Allahabad, later graduating with a degree in Psychology, History, and Philosophy from the University of Allahabad. His academic foundation gave him profound insights into human nature, a quality that later shaped his literary creations. As a Foreign Service Officer (IFS), he served in multiple locations, including Washington, London, Turkey, and Ethiopia, gaining diverse experiences that enriched his storytelling. His debut novel, *Q & A* (2005), was published by Doubleday and translated into more than twelve languages. The novel's cinematic adaptation, *Slumdog Millionaire*, received widespread acclaim and won eight Academy Awards. Building on this success, Swarup penned *Six Suspects* (2008), a gripping murder mystery set against India's political backdrop, followed by *The Accidental Apprentice* (2013), which

***Article History:** Full Article Received on 31 May 2025. Peer Review completed on 17th June 2025, Article Accepted on 24th June 2025. First published: September 2025. **Copyright** vests with Author. **Licensing:** Distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

examines ambition and ethics through the challenges faced by an ordinary woman. His most recent work, *The Girl with Seven Lives* (2024), continues his tradition of blending suspense with insightful social themes. His short story “A Great Event” appeared in *The Children’s Hours: Stories of Childhood*, a story collection aimed at supporting Save the Children and highlighting its mission to end violence against children.

Voices from the Slums: Swarup’s vision in *Q&A*

Swarup’s *Q&A* is a social thriller that explores pressing societal issues, including child labor, violence against women, juvenile delinquency, overcrowding, and poor hygiene, particularly in urban slums. Swarup says in his interview, “I created my own genre called social thrillers. I wrote about society, but in a thrilling way” (*Times of India*). The novel is written in the form of narration, where Ram is telling his story to the lawyer about how he (an uneducated boy who did not attend any school), can answer all the questions in the reality show. The novel starts with the protagonist Ram, a slum boy who has been arrested for participated in a quiz show. He becomes the voice of the slums (particularly representing the working class). It is evident even from the opening lines of the novel,

Arrests in Dharavi are as common as pickpockets on the local train. Not a day goes by without some hapless resident being taken away to the police station... My departure from Asia’s biggest slum would make no difference to their lives. There would be the same queue for water in the morning, the same daily struggle to make it to the seven thirty local in time... 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 11-12)

Swarup vividly depicts the harsh realities of Mumbai’s slums. Dharavi is an “Asia’s biggest slum” (Swarup 11), which has no natural light, water and sanitation. The roofs of the houses are covered with a metal sheet and they vibrate when a train passes. People living in Dharavi “live like animals and die like insects” (Swarup 11). Most of these residents migrate from several parts of India and settled there. These occupants come to Mumbai with the hope of living upper-middle class life. Cities are having a mass of population clutched in a small space. This is well demonstrated by not quite but all the big cities of India. It leads to a chronic problem of shortage of houses in urban areas. This issue is explicitly more desperate in those urban spaces where there is large inflow of jobless settlers who have got no place to live in when they come into cities from the surrounding or rural areas.

The researcher believes there are two key factors that make the novel unique and popular among young readers worldwide. The first is the story of an orphaned and uneducated boy who, without any support, participates in a world-famous quiz show. Swarup, in an interview, answers why he chose a boy from slum to participate in a reality show. He says “If my contestant is a millionaire, it does not create tension to give a billion to a millionaire. I produced contrast” (*Rediff.com*). He draws inspiration from a newspaper article reporting that children from the slums have begun using computers without any assistance. In 1999, HiWEL (Hole-in-the-Wall Education Limited) launched an innovative learning project aimed at providing education to children in underprivileged areas through various engaging methods, such as playing video games and watching educational videos. As part of this initiative, the research team installed computers in the walls of the slums, allowing children to learn through interactive games and self-directed exploration. The supervising committee observed that these children were rapidly acquiring knowledge and skills with the help of computers, without any formal guidance from teachers. Hence, Swarup creates a character Ram who is from slum area can answer all the questions on that show. Secondly, the name ‘Ram Mohammad Thomas’ is significant – as it denotes the names of

three religions: Hindu, Muslim and Christian. When Ram was born, he was not given a name by his parents, he was simply called as 'Baby'. As he is 'too dark', 'too ugly' and 'too colicky' (Swarup 49), no one is ready to adopt him when he was "put up for adoption" (Swarup 49). Father Timothy, a Catholic clergyman, adopts the boy and names him Joseph Michael Thomas. Later, members of the All Faith Committee visit the church, accusing Father Timothy of converting orphaned children to Christianity. To address their concerns, he renames the boy Ram Mohammad Thomas, reflecting multiple religious identities. He says "I accept both your suggestions and change the boy's name to Ram Mohammad Thomas? That should satisfy everyone" (Swarup 52-53). Talking about the protagonist, Swarup says in his interview with *Rediff.com* that "If I have been able to succeed in creating a character which is believable, which is realistic, with which people can identify and can empathise with, I will feel my job as a writer is over. This is the best novel I could have written at that point of time" (*rediff.com*). Swarup portrays Ram as a highly realistic and lifelike character, allowing readers to connect with him and empathize with his hardships throughout the novel. He delves into Ram's personal background, starting from his childhood - his family dynamics, economic struggles, and the life-changing event of winning a quiz show.

John M. Oldham and Lois B. Morris' Theory of "Idiosyncratic Personality"

Idiosyncratic personality is a modern personality style associated with the New Age movement. Individuals with this personality are not easily influenced by others' ideologies, spiritual beliefs, or religious views. Their pursuit of knowledge and personal growth is entirely self-directed, and their beliefs are uniquely their own. However, being involved in the New Age movement does not necessarily mean that a person has an idiosyncratic personality. Idiosyncratic personality refers to someone with distinct and unconventional traits, behaviors, or habits that set them apart from others. Their personality is marked by unique mannerisms or perceptions that make them memorable and sometimes even a bit eccentric. The term "idiosyncrasy" is originated from Greek word "*idiosynkrasia*", which means a "peculiar temperament, habit of body". Merriam Webster dictionary gives the meaning of the word "idiosyncrasy" as "a peculiarity of constitution or temperament: an individualizing characteristic or quality" ("Idiosyncrasy"). Idiosyncratic Personality is defined by distinct characteristics that shape an individual's approach to life. These individuals are deeply connected to their inner world, guided by personal thoughts, ethical convictions, and spiritual values that fuel their persistence. Their keen observational skills allow them to notice even the smallest details, demonstrating a heightened awareness of their surroundings. They often create a personal world that is independent and liberated, preferring solitude over frequent social interactions. Their way of life is unique, unconventional, and highly motivating, shaped by qualities such as honesty, self-confidence, individuality, and creativity. They are not "joiners" - they neither affiliate nor conform, nor are they easily persuaded to adopt others' beliefs. Their pursuits are deeply personal, and their convictions are entirely original. They are keen observers but not imitators. They are highly self-motivated, possessing the drive to pursue and achieve their goals. Hardworking and persistent, they remain committed to transforming their lives. Even when their expectations are not met, they do not become frustrated; instead, they stay motivated. A person with a strong idiosyncratic personality naturally expresses these traits through their actions and mindset, establishing their distinctive presence in the world.

Unconventional Path of Ram Mohammad Thomas

'Idiosyncratic Personalities' – "are true originals and often they stand out, sometimes as eccentrics, sometimes as geniuses" (Oldham and Morris). Ram Mohammad Thomas is a typical example for

idiosyncratic personality who stands out from the crowds. He possesses a strong sense of self-efficacy, an essential trait that enables a person to persevere and fight for a meaningful life. When other boys from slum have no courage and confidence to participate in a quiz show, Ram participates. Though he is not attended any school, he learns English and for some time he works as a tour guide with the help of his language skill. When he is in Juvenile home, he becomes the leader for the boys only because of his English. He states that “I became their leader. Not because I was bigger, not because I was more aggressive, but because I spoke English. I was the orphan boy who could speak and read the magic language” (Swarup 93). While his friends wander aimlessly through the slums, enjoying life without direction, Ram is determined to set and achieve a goal. His friend Salim, an ardent fan of movie star Armaan Ali, has watched all his films and knows everything about him. Instead of focusing on his own aspirations, Salim wastes time rewatching the same movies and worrying about Armaan Ali’s breakup with his girlfriend. Unlike him, Ram does not chase after film heroes or squander his time on movies. Instead, he seizes every opportunity that comes his way to shape his future. One day, while wandering through the streets of Delhi, Ram is unexpectedly approached by a Japanese couple who ask him for information about the Taj Mahal. Though initially unfamiliar with it, he confidently guides them as if he knows the details. When the couple rewards him with fifty rupees, he realizes that he can earn money through this work. With his knowledge of English, he gradually gathers information about the Taj Mahal and eventually becomes a renowned tour guide. He is also a keen observer, capable of remembering even the smallest details of the incidents that have shaped his life. This remarkable ability allows him to recall past events with clarity and answer all the questions in the show with confidence. He carries a lucky coin, which he frequently tosses into the air to determine his fate. However, in the end, it is revealed that the coin has heads on both sides, symbolizing his unwavering optimism and positive outlook on life. Swarup portrays the character Ram as a self-confident boy who works hard and endure many hardships in order to achieve great things in his life. Generally, orphans struggle with self-confidence and often experience depression. They tend to have negative thoughts, feel lonely and isolated, and find it difficult to form friendships. Ram has also experienced depression many times, but he develops self-confidence and encourages others to shine in their lives as well. He works in a foundry to pay his room rent. Not only does he work hard, but he also encourages his friend Salim to persevere in all situations. His support helps Salim develop self-confidence, allowing him to live independently in Delhi for a long time. He also supports Gudiya, who suffers under her alcoholic father. Her father physically abuses his wife and daughter and harasses Gudiya. Seeing her struggles, he informs the landlord about her situation and helps her escape. Through Ram’s encouragement, Gudiya builds self-confidence and eventually becomes the lawyer who rescues him from his legal troubles. These incidents clearly show that without self-confidence, Ram would not have succeeded in life.

The novel depicts how the various difficult and challenging situations Ram faces in his life shape him into an idiosyncratic personality. The first major challenge he encounters is in “Juvenile home for boys, Turkman Gate” (Swarup 91). While he was in Father’s house, he was happy and free, but in Juvenile home, the situation is different. “The Juvenile Home has a capacity of seventy-five and a juvenile population of one hundred and fifty... it has just two toilets... being sent to the Juvenile home from Father Timothy was like a transfer from heaven to hell for me” (Swarup 91-93). He meets Salim and other boys who have come from different parts of India and different backgrounds. “They came from the slums of Delhi and Bihar, from the shanty-towns of UP and even from as far as Nepal” (Swarup 93). After leaving the Juvenile Home, Ram and Salim are sent to a school for disabled children. There, they witness the harsh treatment of the children by the

owner, Maman, who trains them in singing but ultimately exploits them by forcing them to beg on trains.

One by one the children start trickling in, and instantly challenge our definition of hell. I see boys with no eyes, feeling their way forward with the help of sticks; boys with bent and misshapen limbs, dragging themselves to the table; boys with two gnarled stumps for legs, walking on crutches; boys with grotesque mouths and twisted fingers, eating bread between their elbows. (Swarup 108)

Ram later discovers that the children are not school students; some are pickpockets, while others struggle with drug addiction. They are not criminals by choice but are forced into pickpocketing. Escaping from the school is nearly impossible, as there is nowhere to hide in Mumbai, and other gangs strictly control begging within their territories. Although Salim is a Muslim boy, he learns all the Hindu bhakti songs. As their musical training comes to an end, both Ram and Salim fear that they will be forced to sing on local trains like the blind singer. Realizing their grim fate - either being blinded by Maman and turned into beggars or being forced into pickpocketing - they decide to escape. Determined to free themselves from this cruel reality, they make their daring escape.

The second challenging situation occurs on the train. In the chapter “Murder on the Western Express”, Ram bravely confronts and kills a dacoit who harasses a woman while she is feeding her child, as the other passengers merely watch. This moment marks the first time in his life that Ram travels in the sleeper class of a train. He says, “Today I am a bona fide passenger, travelling to Mumbai, in the sleeper class, no less and with a proper reservation” (Swarup 174). Many passengers are traveling on the train alongside Ram and Salim. At midnight, while everyone is asleep, a group of dacoits boards the train, attempting to rob the passengers. One of them tries to molest a young girl traveling in the same compartment as Ram. Enraged by the dacoit's actions, Ram fights back, leading to a struggle in which the dacoit is ultimately killed by a shot from his own revolver. The name “Clot” is engraved on the revolver that Ram holds in his hands. This detail later helps him answer the seventh question in the quiz, “Who invented the revolver”? (Swarup 192). Later, he encounters another difficult situation when he attempts to rescue a girl from forced prostitution. She belongs to the Bedia community, a tribal group in north-central India. Swarup provides an account of the Bedia community and their traditions. In this tribe, one girl from each family is forced into prostitution, while the men spend the money she earns on drinking and gambling. Nita is chosen by her mother for this fate because she is more beautiful than her sister. Ram encounters her in the red-light district when his friends bring him there. He falls in love with her and describes her, “I gaze at the Taj and then I gaze at Nita. The sterile perfection of the Taj begins to pale in comparison with the flawless beauty of her face” (Swarup 312). Ram is determined to rescue Nita from prostitution, as she has endured severe mistreatment in that environment. To secure her freedom, he needs money to pay her brother. This drives him to participate in the quiz show - a revelation unveiled at the end of the novel.

Resistance Against Social and Economic Oppression

Resistance is a key strategy in combating oppression, and it can take both active and passive forms. Active resistance involves direct confrontation, often through physical conflict, which may result in injury or even death. In contrast, passive resistance is a non-violent approach that seeks change without physical harm. It includes tactics such as marches, fasting, debates, and other forms of peaceful protest. In *Q&A*, Ram encounters various forms of social oppression, including economic and class-based struggles. Economic oppression manifests through enslavement (serfdom), forced labor, low wages, exploitation, and the denial of equal opportunities. Swarup vividly portrays how Ram resists and fights against oppression. The real conflict begins when he participates in a reality show. Against all odds, Ram answers all twelve questions correctly and wins the prize. However,

the corporate company behind the show is unprepared to pay such a large sum, as they never expected a boy from a slum to emerge victorious. In an attempt to avoid payment, the company seeks assistance from the police commissioner, who arrests Ram and coerces him to confess that he cheated on the show. Police man named Godbole, advised by Neil Johnson, a worker “from new Age Telemedia, the company that licenses the quiz” (Swarup 15), tortures Ram to confess that he “cheated on the show. That he couldn’t have known all twelve questions without an accomplice” (Swarup 18). This is also a form of oppression - an intentional act of inflicting pain on a helpless victim, which is legally unacceptable. However, the police officer subjects Ram to brutal torture using various instruments. Ram describes how the officer returns every half an hour with a new tool, continuing the cycle of torment. He says,

Godbole has been punishing me for more than one hour but he has still not finished. Every half-hour or so he comes up with a new instrument of torture. First he inserted a wooden rod into my anus. With chilli powder smeared on it... Then he thrust my head into a bucket of water... Now he is holding a live wire in his hand like a sparkle on Diwali... the electric current shoots up my body like hot poison. (Swarup 23-24)

Smita, a lawyer who comes to Ram’s rescue, is initially skeptical about his victory in the quiz show. In response, Ram narrates his entire story, explaining how he was able to answer all the questions correctly. Ram asserts that the wealthy cannot truly answer even a single question from the perspective of the poor, “if poor conducted a quiz, the rich wouldn’t be able to answer a single question” (Swarup 29). He says that rich and powerful always want the poor to be like a slave and does not want them to become rich, “That I am meant to live life like a dog, and die like an insect” (Swarup 29). Suchismita Ghosh in her article says,

Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger* (2008) and Vikas Swarup’s *Q and A* (2005) in their respective choice of making Balram and Ram Mohammad Thomas, the protagonists... in trying to explore the outstanding lives of the labelled antagonists, beg to differ. These novels attempt to bring to focus on the rift between the glorified neoliberal hope of inclusion and the actual social exclusion and marginalization that the poor Indian has to suffer. (Ghosh 58)

A similar conflict unfolds in Aravind Adiga’s *The White Tiger*. Balram, while working at a tea shop, is treated with utter disregard, almost like a servant rather than a human being. His father, a rickshaw puller, is forced to stand all day and is even denied the right to sit on public chairs. Despite his own struggles, he dreams of his son receiving an education and living a dignified life. Determined to escape oppression, Balram breaks free and rises to become a successful entrepreneur. Similarly, Ram in *Q&A* seeks to liberate himself from the cycle of exploitation and injustice, striving for a better future. Ram demonstrates his resistance against the wealthy elite by learning English, a language once regarded as exclusive to the upper class. Determined to free himself from oppression, he leaves the slum and moves to areas predominantly inhabited by educated individuals. Through this act of defiance, Ram uses resistance as a tool to combat societal oppression. Barbara Korte in his article says, “The two protagonists share a spirit of resistance to being victimized and sweepingly categorized. This spirit is revealed not only in their outspokenness, but also in their various transgressive acts. Transgressing boundaries is an element in their behaviour that Ram and Balram are quite obviously pleased with” (301).

Conclusion

Ram Mohammad Thomas exemplifies an idiosyncratic personality through his unconventional thinking, self-reliance, and resistance to societal norms. Unlike other characters who succumb to their circumstances, Ram refuses to be constrained by oppression, using his unique worldview and experiences to navigate life’s challenges. His ability to learn, adapt, and resilience showcases his

distinct individuality. Through his personal struggles, he demonstrates that success is not uttered by social class but by resilience and determination. The novel highlights how Ram's idiosyncratic nature allows him to overcome adversity and redefine his fate, making him a compelling and unforgettable character.

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