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## Chains and Choices: Rational and Submissive Women in Vikas Swarup's *Q & A and Six Suspects*

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### Abstract

This paper critically examines the portrayal of women in Vikas Swarup's novels *Q & A* and *Six Suspects*, focusing on their rationality and submission. The paper looks at how female characters cope. They are rational, which helps them live under the rules of society. It shows the subtle push-and-pull between giving in versus doing things their own way. Surviving in such conditions is a complicated matter, after all. The characters must live under constraints of society, of course. Swarup's female characters often seem to conform to traditional roles of submission, but on closer examination, they reveal a deep engagement with rationality, survival, and subversion within the patriarchal structures that limit them.

**Keywords:** Women, Rationality, Submission, Indian Literature, Feminist Criticism, Gender Studies

### Introduction

In contemporary Indian literature, how women are shown usually gets across the tricky back-and-forth between what society wants from them, but also what they want as people. It is a really complex topic. You see, it is a reflection of a deeper problem. It's a constant push and pull. This tension between the social and the personal, between expectation and individuality, has long defined the representation of women in Indian fiction. Women characters often inhabit a world that requires them to balance obedience and resistance, silence and voice, vulnerability and strength. The depiction of women in postcolonial Indian writing thus becomes more than a reflection of gender roles—it becomes a critique of cultural and moral hierarchies that continue to shape identity and agency.

Vikas Swarup, known for his intricate plots and vivid characterizations, explores this tension in his female characters, who must balance societal submission with personal rationality. His fiction offers an insightful social commentary that transcends surface-level storytelling to question the structures of power and morality embedded in everyday life. Swarup's female characters are never merely passive victims; rather, they represent the quiet rationality and inner strength that allow them to endure and, at times, resist. His novels *Q & A* and *Six Suspects* feature women who appear to accept their prescribed roles within the patriarchal framework, yet their internal worlds and actions reveal a sophisticated exercise of rationality. Through their choices, conflicts, and moral reasoning, they articulate forms of resistance that are subtle yet powerful, rooted in the lived realities of Indian womanhood.

This research aims to explore how Swarup's female characters negotiate this delicate balance, reflecting broader themes of gender, power, and survival in Indian society. By focusing on the everyday negotiations of his women—between obedience and reason, dependence and freedom—the study seeks to understand how rationality itself becomes a tool of resistance within oppressive social systems. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing feminist discussions on how women reclaim agency in contexts that deny them overt autonomy.

This paper employs feminist literary criticism to examine the ways in which submission and rationality coexist in Swarup's women, arguing that his works offer a critical lens on the ways women navigate and sometimes subvert societal expectations. Feminist theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, and Gayatri Spivak have argued that gender is both socially constructed and performative—a site of power, conformity, and contestation. In the Indian context, scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Nivedita Menon have highlighted how patriarchy intersects with class, caste, and modernity to shape women's lived experiences. Viewed through this lens, Swarup's fiction illustrates how women operate within these intersecting pressures, often using rational thought and emotional intelligence as survival strategies.

By focusing on key characters—Neelima Kumari and Nita in *Q & A*, and Munna's sister and Shabnam Saxena in *Six Suspects*—the paper will explore how Swarup presents a nuanced and layered depiction of women's lived experiences. These women, though positioned differently in terms of class and circumstance, share a common struggle against moral hypocrisy, gender inequality, and societal constraints. Their journeys illuminate the psychological resilience and pragmatic intelligence that define many of Swarup's heroines. Ultimately, the paper argues that Swarup's portrayal of women neither fully romanticizes submission nor glorifies rebellion; instead, it exposes the subtle interplay between endurance and intellect that shapes the reality of women's existence in a patriarchal society.

## Literature Review

### Representation of Women in Indian Literature

In Indian literature, the way women are shown usually focuses on how they submit or take control. This mirrors the social plus cultural limits women encounter, because society is mainly controlled by men. These themes are a constant push and pull. Women are held back.

Feminist critiques of Indian literature, such as those by Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Radha Kumar, have highlighted how women are often depicted as passive recipients of male authority, yet also capable of remarkable resilience and rationality in their navigation of oppressive structures (Kumar, 1993).

In authors like Arundhati Roy (*The God of Small Things*) and Anita Desai (*Clear Light of Day*), women's internal lives are explored as a site of quiet rebellion, where rational thought and personal agency play significant roles. In Vikas Swarup's works, this tradition continues, but his women are more complex, often reflecting a duality where they conform to societal expectations outwardly while exercising rationality internally to challenge or navigate the circumstances in which they are placed.

### **Swarup's Narrative Style and Thematic Focus**

Swarup's novels, particularly *Q & A* and *Six Suspects*, blend realism with elements of fate and chance, placing his characters in morally ambiguous and often oppressive situations. His female characters, in particular, are often bound by societal expectations, but they exhibit agency through rational decisions. While at first glance they may seem passive, deeper analysis reveals the ways in which they subvert their circumstances, either through overt actions or subtle manipulations of their roles.

Swarup's novels focus heavily on survival in a corrupt, patriarchal society. By embedding his female characters within this framework, he provides a fertile ground for exploring the intersection of rationality and submission. Feminist theorist Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity is particularly relevant here, as it provides insight into how these women "perform" submission while retaining a rational consciousness that allows them to assert agency in private (Butler, 1990).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The feminist literary approach applied in this paper draws on Judith Butler's theory of performativity, which suggests that gender is not an inherent trait but a series of actions and roles performed according to societal norms. This concept is crucial in understanding the actions of Swarup's female characters, who perform submission in accordance with patriarchal expectations but exhibit rational agency in moments of crisis or in their internal thoughts. By analyzing these performances of submission through a feminist lens, the paper uncovers the layers of resistance and agency that underlie these outward acts.

The analysis will also draw on Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which argues that women are historically positioned as "the Other" in relation to men, and that they must either accept or resist this imposed role (Beauvoir, 1989). In Swarup's works, this dynamic is evident in how female characters navigate their identities within the patriarchal structures of modern Indian society, where submission often masks rational acts of resistance.

### **Analysis of *Q & A*: Rationality in the Face of Submission**

#### **Neelima Kumari: Submission as a Calculated Strategy**

Neelima Kumari in *Q & A* is a tragic figure whose life exemplifies the tension between submission and rationality. As a former Bollywood star, Neelima's career deteriorates with age, leading her to submit to the affections of a wealthy man in order to maintain her status and financial stability. This outward submission, however, is a rational decision- a strategy to secure her survival in a society that values women primarily for their youth and beauty. Neelima is acutely aware of the limited options available to her, and her choice to become dependent on a man is not a surrender but a calculated move (Swarup, 2005).

Neelima's ultimate act of defiance- her suicide- serves as a rational rejection of continued subjugation. While her death might seem like a passive surrender, it is actually an assertion of agency in a world where she has been stripped of her autonomy. In choosing the time and manner of her death, Neelima exerts control over her fate, embodying a rational decision to escape a life

of exploitation. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, the ability to choose- even the choice to die- can be an act of profound autonomy (Beauvoir, 1989).

Neelima's tragedy highlights the harsh contradictions of a gendered social order that celebrates women's beauty while stripping them of enduring dignity. Her story serves as a commentary on the commodification of women in both film and society, where self-worth is often measured by male approval. Through Neelima, Swarup illustrates how patriarchy forces women to adopt submissive roles for survival, yet also shows how they seek to reclaim their agency within those limitations. Thus, her death represents not just a personal act of defiance but also a symbolic critique of a world that offers no room for aging, independent women. In this light, Neelima's rationality emerges as both her strength and her vulnerability—a testament to her intelligence and a reminder of the tragic price paid for seeking freedom within a restrictive social structure.

#### **Nita: Rational Aspirations Within Submissive Constraints**

Nita, a prostitute in *Q & A*, is another character whose submission masks a deeper rationality. Forced into prostitution by her family, Nita conforms outwardly to the role expected of her. However, her dreams of escaping this life reflect a rational understanding of her circumstances. Nita is acutely aware of the exploitation she faces, but she also recognizes the economic realities that keep her in this profession. Her submission to her family's demands is not a reflection of passivity but a means of survival while she plans for a better future.

Nita's pragmatic approach to her situation reflects a keen rationality that challenges traditional notions of submissiveness. Her decision to save money and seek a way out of prostitution is a calculated move to regain control over her life, even as she remains outwardly compliant. In this way, Nita embodies the duality of submission and rationality, using her submission as a strategic tool to achieve autonomy in the long run (Swarup, 2005).

Nita's story highlights the difficult intersection of gender, poverty, and social hypocrisy in urban India. Her sensible aspirations reflect a quiet rebellion against a world that commodifies women while stripping them of their dignity. In contrast to Neelima, whose rebellion leads to self-destruction, Nita's resistance manifests as endurance and cautious hope. Through her journey, Swarup illustrates how rationality can flourish even in oppressive situations, turning compliance into a subtle form of defiance. Nita's quiet perseverance emphasizes a powerful truth: within systems of control, women often transform submission into a route toward self-liberation.

#### **Analysis of *Six Suspects*: Navigating Power Through Rationality**

##### **Munna's Sister: Silent Resistance**

Munna's sister, a relatively minor character in *Six Suspects*, represents the silent, submissive woman who nonetheless exercises rationality in her choices. Living in the shadow of her brother's criminal activities, she must navigate a world where her options are severely limited. Her outward compliance with traditional gender roles- remaining quiet, obedient, and subservient- reflects a rational survival strategy in a dangerous environment.

Her submission is not born of weakness but of necessity; it is a rational response to a world where open defiance would likely lead to violence or marginalization. This kind of rationality, though less overt than that exhibited by characters like Shabnam Saxena, demonstrates the subtle

ways in which women can exercise agency even within rigidly defined roles (Swarup, 2008). This aligns with Judith Butler's argument that performance of gender roles can sometimes serve as a cover for more subversive forms of agency (Butler, 1990).

Munna's sister embodies a quiet yet powerful form of resistance—one based on endurance rather than confrontation. Her silence, often seen as compliance, serves as a protective mechanism that helps her navigate a male-dominated and morally corrupt world. Through her character, Swarup highlights the subtle rationality of women who resist by adapting, exercising patience, and employing emotional intelligence rather than engaging in open rebellion. Her existence critiques the limited social space available to women from marginalized backgrounds, where mere survival becomes a political act. In this way, her understated presence reminds us that resistance doesn't always have to be loud to be meaningful or transformative.

### **Shabnam Saxena: Rationality as Defiance**

Shabnam Saxena, a famous actress and one of the suspects in *Six Suspects*, stands in stark contrast to Munna's sister. As a modern woman who refuses to submit to traditional gender roles, Shabnam uses her fame and influence to challenge societal expectations. Her actions throughout the novel reflect a proactive rationality; she makes calculated decisions to protect her career and personal autonomy, even when faced with threats from the men around her (Swarup, 2008).

Shabnam's character demonstrates how rationality can be a tool for defiance rather than mere survival. Unlike other female characters in Swarup's novels, who use rationality to navigate or mitigate their submission, Shabnam actively resists the structures that seek to confine her. Her success as an actress and her assertive personality challenge the notion that women must be submissive to thrive in a patriarchal society. Through Shabnam, Swarup presents a model of female agency that is unafraid to confront and defy patriarchal norms, embodying the potential for women to assert control over their lives through rational thought and action.

Shabnam's defiance represents a notable shift in Swarup's depiction of women—from mere endurance and compromise to active confrontation and empowerment. Her rationality is not merely reactive; it's strategic, enabling her to navigate the very systems meant to oppress her. In this way, she redefines femininity as a strength rooted in intellect rather than emotion. Shabnam's bold decisions underscore the transformative power of self-awareness, illustrating that rational thought can break down hierarchies just as effectively as it can uphold dignity. Ultimately, through her character, Swarup portrays a modern Indian woman who is both self-driven and socially aware—a symbol of resistance and renewal in today's fiction landscape.

### **Conclusion: Rationality and Submission in Swarup's Female Characters**

Vikas Swarup's novels offer a rich exploration of the interplay between rationality and submission in the lives of women. Characters like Neelima Kumari, Nita, Munna's sister, and Shabnam Saxena demonstrate the complex ways in which women navigate patriarchal structures. While some characters use submission as a survival strategy, others employ rationality to challenge and subvert the societal norms that seek to limit their agency.

Through these nuanced portrayals, Swarup critiques the rigid gender roles that define women's lives in contemporary Indian society. His female characters are not simply passive

victims of patriarchal oppression; rather, they exhibit a complex blend of submission and rationality that allows them to survive, and in some cases, subvert the system from within. While some of them perform submission to navigate societal expectations, they maintain an internal rationality that drives their decisions and actions. This duality of their existence reflects the broader struggles of women in patriarchal societies, where submission often coexists with subtle forms of resistance.

Through his depiction of characters like Neelima Kumari and Nita in *Q & A*, and Munna's sister and Shabnam Saxena in *Six Suspects*, Swarup challenges the simplistic binary of passive versus active women in literature. Instead, he presents a spectrum of female agency that acknowledges the constraints of society while emphasizing the rationality with which women negotiate these limitations. This nuanced portrayal highlights the importance of understanding women's experiences in literature not merely through the lens of submission, but as a complex interaction between personal agency and societal expectations.

Swarup's works thus contribute to the broader discourse on gender in Indian literature, presenting women who are rational agents within a patriarchal framework, and offering a critical lens on how submission can sometimes be a means to survival, while rationality offers the potential for resistance and autonomy.

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