

Q&A: A runaway success

As an Indian Foreign Service officer, Vikas Swarup's job was to manage India's image abroad. He was far away, posted in London, at the time when he wrote his novel Q&A, more famously called Slum Dog Millionaire. He was miles away from the grit and grime of Dharavi but was able to write an account out of his imagination. In a candid interview with The Asian Outlook, while posted in Pretoria, South Africa, he says that he wrote the book almost in frenzy while in between postings. Excerpts of an interview with Dr Neelam Batra-Verma:

You would be tired of answering this one....how do you feel now that your book is a movie hit?

It is wonderful to see something I dreamt up in my head resonating from the podiums of Hollywood. It is all quite credible.

When did you start writing the novel? Where did you get the inspiration from?

I wrote this novel in the last two months of my diplomatic posting in London in 2003. I have always been interested in the psychological processes which are at work in quiz shows. As one of my characters in the book says, "A quiz is not so much a test of knowledge as a test of memory." And our memories are produced by various things, by our experiences, our dreams and desires, not just by what we are taught in school. In fact, I have always been impressed with the knowledge that even a common man possesses. I had also read a news report, a decade ago, of how street children, who had never gone to school, had begun using a computer entirely on their own. (It was called the Hole in the Wall project, started by NIIT in a slum in Kalkaji, Delhi). This told me that knowledge is not the exclusive preserve of the school going elite. There is a tremendous awareness, even amongst people that you would normally consider disadvantaged. So the basic idea behind Q&A was to show that privilege and wealth is no bar for ingenuity and that sometimes "street" knowledge can be as important as "book" knowledge to win a game show.

Is this the first one or there are sequels?

I don't really believe in sequels. I will write a sequel only when I have run out of all other ideas.

Is it all a piece of fiction or some events are from real life you would have encountered?

The characters I have drawn are entirely fictional but I wouldn't be surprised if some people find familiar echoes in them. And we all know Ram Mohammad Thomas. He could be the street kid who cleans your windscreen in Khan Market or the tea boy who washes dishes in a restaurant in Colaba.

Have you come across street urchins dripping in human faeces as portrayed in the movie? There have been protests in Mumbai and other places for slum people being called dogs.

Obviously not. These are cinematic touches given by Danny Boyle (the director) and Simon Beaufoy (the screenplay writer). I think it is unfortunate that the film has created this controversy in India over its title. My book, to be sure, was called Q&A.

You sold your novel to a foreign film maker. Did no Indian producer approached you or he was just the only one?

The book came out in 2005 and Film 4 optioned the movie rights in 2004, one year before the book was even published. So obviously Hindi film producers couldn't really get a look at it. After the book came out I was approached by several top Bollywood producers and directors, but Film 4 control the global rights. Only they can licence the Hindi remake. I knew that my book had a unique plot but even I couldn't have imagined that it will get translated into almost 40 languages around the world.

Why do you think India's poverty when shown in movies is always a hit in the West? We have had such good movies like Taare Zamin par etc with excellent themes, crashing at the Oscars while SDM gets a string of awards?

Poverty doesn't sell. Who wants to see a depressing film? Slumdog Millionaire is a hit because it is a piece of riveting cinema. It is not a documentary on slum life. As the reviewer in the Times of India put it, it is "a masterwork of technical bravura, adorned with inspired ensemble performances and directed with astonishing empathy." We should also not forget the pulsating music by A.R. Rahman. Hindi films never make it so big internationally because they always compete for the best "foreign language film", not "best film" and that makes a huge difference.

Which was the most difficult part of writing the book?

Well, obviously, not having lived the life of a street kid I had to find an authentic voice for my protagonist. Then, some of the episodes in the novel are quite heartrending and I was writing them again from imagination rather than personal experience. I have never actually lived in Bombay. And I have never visited the slums of Dharavi where my protagonist Ram Mohammad Thomas is supposed to reside. So I did a lot of research. But research can only help you create an authentic backdrop. To get under the skin of your characters you need the quality of empathy – E.M. Forster's "only connect". At a fundamental level, I believe all human beings are alike, with the same dreams, desires and passions. One only has to take certain things out of the equation (e.g. money) to visualize life for the disadvantaged. So I thought to myself, how would I feel if I did not know whether I would get my next meal, if I did not have a roof over my head, and wrote from that perspective. The writing of "A Brother's Promise" and the section in the Agra chapter relating to the death of the autistic boy Shankar were the toughest. Even finding the right words to describe those emotions was gut wrenching. But the fact that I myself had tears in my eyes when I re-read the Shankar episode convinced me that it had been written with my heart and soul.

Did the producer do justice to the novel?

On the whole I am satisfied with the film. It is visually dazzling and emotionally satisfying. It does differ from my novel in some significant ways but it also preserves the soul of my novel and borrows the entire narrative structure. My book was about survival and hope and the triumph of the underdog and the same things can be said about the film. Many of the characters in the film are also from the book. But I was sorry to see that Ram Mohammad Thomas had become Jamal Malik.

Did you become a millionaire too in the process?

Only in rupee terms!

Are you planning to resign and start novel writing as a profession not a passion anymore?

Not at all. I love my job and take pride in representing my country especially at a time when India is the flavour of the world. So I prefer to describe myself as a diplomat who writes.

What difficulties you encountered while selling your book?

I am a lucky author. I don't have a pile of rejection slips and ten unpublished novels languishing in my cupboard. I wrote my debut novel Q&A in two months, found an agent almost immediately in London and he found a publisher within a few months. The rest, as they say, is history.