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### Coding Savage Modernity: Hard work crucifying Hardships

How can children survive in a cruel world? Would they be become good people, even though they encounter constant misfortune? These questions are explored in the novels, *Q&A* by Vikas Swarup and the *Women of Silk* by Gale Tsukiyama. These two novels demonstrate how even though children in the third world endure great hardship, they become good people. Despite living without parents, with oppression and poverty, these children develop healthy relationships, overcome resentment and achieved financial stability.

From the instant someone is born, they are introduced to two individuals, their parents. During childhood, every action that parents impose on their children influences them through a change in their judgment and personality. Children that have absent parents miss the tenderness of a parent's love and the guidance that will assist them in reaching their ultimate goal, a successful life. These children rely on their instincts and grow accustomed to their surroundings, which ultimately define their character. In the novel, *Q&A*, the protagonist, Ram Mohammed Thomas is thrown into an orphanage-the moment he is born. Like some orphans, Ram exemplifies an individual that behaves on his own whim and disregards the expectations others have of him. To prove this, Swarup says, "You're that idiot orphan boy who spilled soup on me the other day!" (Swarup, 60) which refers to Ram's recklessness and hatred towards prospering individuals. Without the guidance and enforcement of his parents, Ram develops the notion that he freely can do whatever he pleases, evidently illustrated when he spills the soup on Father John on purpose, simply because he dislikes Father John's appearance and snobby outlook on life.

Similarly, in Gail Tsukiyama's *Women of Silk*, Pei, the protagonist, is sent off to a city that is very divergent because her parents believe in a tradition of sending the third daughter away in the household away. Although, Pei has parents growing up, they, however were not ideal parents, meaning that hardly paid attention to her and looked for the first opportunity to cast her away. Pei abuses her freedom when she was away from her family and decides that she could do whatever she likes, even against the wishes of her family. For instance, "It was always Pei, with all her curious ways, whom Yu-sung worried about most." (Tsukiyama 5) proves that Pei's sister worries that one day, curiosity will have the best of her. When Pei is sent away, she abuses the absence of parents to free herself and acts on her own whim. Although this shows that absent parents can negatively influence their children's personality while they are growing up, it can also be a blessing in disguise. Growing up without any outside assistance gives Ram Mohammed Thomas an appreciation for the value of money and a strong will that could not be broken. His personality is portrayed by when Swarup says, "The confession statement is quite simple. 'I, Ram Mohammad Thomas, do hereby state that on 10 July I was a participant in the quiz show Who Will Win A Billion? I confess that I cheated. I did not know the answers to all the questions.'" (Swarup 14), which is the confession statement Ram rips up, when he sees what they ask him to write. Although Ram win the contest fairly, the police try to get him to lie and write a confession statement about cheating on the show so Ram would not receive the money he won. His personality of working hard to survive gives him the courage to withstand the harsh physical abuse the police are giving him. He develops this personality because he has no parents that provide for him, which conveys that Ram has to pull his own weight to survive. To contrast, Ram, Pei also learns to fend for herself in the harsh new city, Yung Kee where she was sent off. Her daily struggle to adapt to the harsh environment of the silk factory and the physical burden it brought her proffered her to build up her tolerance that her parents never taught her. As a result, The head of the factory promotes her many times through her time at the factory, eventually

securing a permanent position as general manager. Her tough life is portrayed when Tsukiayama says, "During the first year of learning the silk work, Pei realized there was very little time for memories." (Tsukiyama 53) which explicates how little time Pei has to enjoy herself and build memories because of how demanding her job is. The lack of parents allows Pei to be self-sufficient and to work for the food on her plate. This was a boon in disguise because it gives Pei an opportunity to learn the meaning of hard work and build a personality that can endure all types of hardships. Although in the beginning, Pei and Ram both start off relying heavily on their instincts and abuse their independence; however, they learn to channel that loneliness into personalities that will help them succeed in the future, even though they lack the guidance of parents.

Power in the hands of the wrong people can lead to disastrous consequences. Dictators are living examples of oppression, which is a term to describe authority over people that is abused and exploited. Ram Mohammed Thomas is constantly subjected to oppression as he struggles to stay alive on the streets of Mumbai. Ram is offered a job by a new Australian general that recently moved to Mumbai because his job required him to do so. Ram's job can be seen to some people as a slave's job, simply because he was constantly worked and received hardly any wage. Swarup explains oppression by saying, "And I do wish the Taylors would stop, their snobbish references to 'bloody Indians'. This must be the fiftieth time I have heard them use this expression since I have been with them." (Swarup 140) which exemplifies how the General looks down on Ram and feels like he can make him do as he pleases. Oppression wears its ugly head in the form of General Taylor who feels that Indians are trash and will do anything for a bottle of whiskey, and thus treats Ram like a slave and keeps him under 24 hour surveillance. Similarly, Pei also experiences oppression just like Ram, however, in the form of her parents. Pei's parents treat her very stridently while she grows up because they simply do not want another daughter as they already have two. To combat the lack of a man in the house, they make

Pei work like a man. By forcing Pei to work long hours on the farm and prohibiting any type of play throughout the day, her parents subject her to a severe form of oppression. A good example of their oppressive nature is when Pei's father says, "Sometimes things don't work out as they're planned, and there have to be sacrifices in order to make things better again." (Tsukiyama 76) this explicates the hatred that Pei's parents have toward her; proven when out of all their children, they pick the youngest and the most fragile one, to be sent off. Pei is one of the biggest victims of oppression in the novel because the people that would usually love and comfort her, are the people that are doing the oppressing. While oppression can sometimes take a heavy toll on the lives of Ram and Pei, there are occasions and situations, where Pei and Ram benefit positively from being told what to do. One situation that works positively for Ram is when he works for Neelima Kumari, a famous Indian actress, as her personal servant, because he learns a valuable life lesson, which is that even rich and famous people have problems just like him. The actresses problem is explained when Swarup says, "I recoil in shock when I see the cigarette burn marks all over her chest, looking like little black craters on the smooth white flesh. I begin to cry." (Swarup 240) and refers to the actresses' physical abuse by her spouse when she was younger. Ram was dumbfounded when he sees that such a successful actress could also be subjected to the same abuse, a poor orphan boy like him suffered. From that day onward, Ram realizes that everyone is equal and everyone has similar problems like him. He could not learn this lesson without being oppressed by Neelima because otherwise he would not be able to know so much about her. Pei, just like Ram, also learns a valuable lesson through oppression, which was to stick up for your rights as a human. Pei was a victim of sweatshop conditions while working at the silk factory, which causes her much anguish, as well as the death of her close friend, Lin. Her anguish is evident when Tsukiyama says, "Her death made so little sense, Pei wanted to scream out loud. And in the end, the money was useless, it couldn't bring back Lin's life..." (Tsukiyama 172) and explains that all the money in the world could not bring her friend

Lin's life back, so Pei decides that to make sure no one else suffers the same death as her friend. The tough conditions Pei endures during her shifts at factory, along with the death of her dear friend changes Pei completely, she decides that no one else should suffer these horrid conditions and thus, starts advocating for changes in the factory to ease the stress of the workers. All these positive changes would not be possible without the oppression that the factory heads caused. Although oppression causes Ram and Pei much distress, it has also a blessing in disguise, because it gives both of them life experience and knowledge to better apply themselves in the future.

Poverty has touched millions of people around the globe; it is also the problem that many governments are trying tackle by implementing ways for citizens to meet the standard of living that the economy imposes. Ram Mohammed Thomas is literally living in poverty his entire life. At one point in his life, he breaks in and steals four lakh rupees from a rich actress he works for, simply because he wants to satisfy his thirst for his love that a pimp was keeping from him. His desire is vividly illustrated when he says, "I feel no qualms about stealing from the safe. I stuff the four bundles into my pockets, close the safe, return the painting and the key to their original locations and exit the way I came." refers to Ram feeling no remorse for stealing from someone for this own desires. Since Ram loves the prostitute that Shyam, the pimp, owns, he must pay him 4 lakh rupees to buy her from him; however, poverty has left him with nothing but the clothes on his body and thus, he resorts to steal from someone that trusts him, simply to satisfy his sexual desire. Poverty has also negatively affected Pei in the sense that she is sent away from her family because they cannot afford to keep her any longer. Pei's distress is explained by the quote, "Just understand that you may think this is not a very good place, but its not a bad place, either. It's just another place for you to be right now.'" (Swarup 41) which Pei's father exclaims as they send her off to the new city. Although poverty causes Pei to be sent away from her family, Pei is able to escape the harsh reality that poverty creates once she is in the new city, by

making new friends and earning enough money to go back home. On the contrary, poverty also proves to be a positive for both of these characters as they learn how to fend for themselves in their harsh communities. To start off, Ram learns the value of money because poverty has put him in a situation where he has to cherish every single penny he earns. To prove this, Swarup says, “ The pandit gives me an old one-rupee coin. ‘What’s this, Panditji?’ ‘It’s a lucky coin. Keep it. You will need it.’ I hold it in my fist.” (Swarup 78) which refers to the pundit telling him that every cent or coin is valuable. This situation helps Ram understand that letting go of one cent now because its worthless, will leave him short one cent when he needs it and that hard earned money should always be close to your heart. This not only helps Ram get out of poverty, but also helps him become a better person when he shares his winnings with orphaned kids when he wins the game show. Poverty also teaches Pei a lesson that she will never forget, this lesson is that one should never rely on other people’s earnings because the moment they stop or slow down, they will start cutting loose ends. For example, Tsukiyama says, “It is a lesson, her mother would say, thought Pei would never understand what the lesson was” (Tsukiyama 129), to explain Pei’s parents abandoning her and calling it a lesson she needs to learn. Even though Pei’s parents abandon her because of poverty, she is able to survive in a strange new town and is promoted in the local silk factory. It goes to show that while poverty can take away your family and home, but it can never take away your hardworking spirit. Clearly, poverty is negative in certain aspects; however, through the analysis of Pei and Ram, it is proven that is able to overcome through hard work and perseverance.

After analyzing both of the novels, the themes of oppression, poverty, and lack of parents is prevalent on many occasions. Both of the novel’s respective protagonists, Pei and Ram, endure very challenging situations throughout their childhood and their careers. Yet in the end, they are able to find love, escape the clutches of poverty by finding a job or source of income and fend off oppression by finding life lessons in every encounter. *Q&A* and *The Women of the Silk* are

very similar in nature, even though their settings, India and China, are worlds apart. It is evident that there is one concept in both books, which is the protagonist conquering the obstacles he/she meets in the beginning of their lives. For Pei, it was being abandoned and for Ram, it was being born an orphan. In conclusion, the novels, *Q&A* and the *Women of Silk* both revolve the themes of oppression, lack of parents and poverty and how the choices that were made were matched with suitable repercussions.

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