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Is *Slumdog Millionaire* Only a Western Representation of the Underbelly of Indian Society?

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to study how the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* explores the different levels of marginalization of the street and/or slum children arising from a very intricately complex intersection of their age, gender, and sexuality. The basic proposition here is that the movie is not just a ‘poverty porn’ perpetuating western hegemonies upon India as the veteran Bollywood star Mr. Amitabh Bachchan claimed. Rather the representation of the predicament of the street children from the slum of Dharavi in Mumbai as shown here in the movie is quite critical keeping in mind the myriad perspectives upon the lives of such a heterogeneous community called slum children. So, this study draws heavily from the theories of Subaltern Studies with a view to foregrounding the following four factors that are central to the bad conditions of living for the slum or street children everywhere: 1) The marginalization of street/slum children in terms of their economic, political and physical subjugation, 2) Their unassuming ‘quiet encroachment’ in the form of illegal and criminal activities, 3) Prevailing dominant perception of the world about such street/slum children that ignores the qualitative differences in the potentiality of these subalterns, and 4) The question of solidarity amongst such a heterogeneous subaltern class.

Keywords: *Slumdog*, *Poverty*, *Begging Mafia*, *Prostitution*, *Precarious*, *Subaltern*.

The movie *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) is an internationally award winner film that created a lot of debate in the mind of the global audience. It won eight Oscars, seven BAFA

(British Academy Film Awards) and four Golden Globe trophies in 2009. It featured Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay (from the novel *Q & A*) of the 10 academy awards in 2009. What is interesting about this film is that the film was based on a novel written by an Indian author, but directed by a British director and produced and distributed by western companies. Yet, after its release in India (dubbed in Hindi) it hardly made any mark, and was severely criticized by the Indian audience. It was said that the film makers sold 'poverty porn' to grab attention. Some from the Indian film industry found it derogatory to the real culture of India. They argued it was all about poverty and crime, ignoring thereby the rich diverse Indian culture and heritage. The *Times online* ran a piece in January 2009 that explored some of the mixed responses to the film in India, led by Amitabh Bachchan, the veteran Bollywood star, who denounced it as a mere "poverty porn" that perpetuated western stereotypes about India. Amitabh Bacchan, an iconic figure in Indian film industry, criticized the film in the following words:

"If *Slumdog Millionaire* projects India as a third-world, dirty, underbelly developing nation and causes pain and disgust among nationalists and patriots, let it be known that a murky underbelly exists and thrives even in the most developed nations....It's just that the *Slumdog Millionaire* idea, authored by an Indian and conceived and cinematically put together by a westerner, gets creative global recognition." (*Guardian*, 15 January, 2009).

These comments from Mr. Bacchan have two dimensions. First, he rejects *Slumdog Millionaire* for projecting India as a poor and dirty third world nation and thereby offending the nationalist citizens of the country. By saying so, Amitabh not only denied the existence of the poor (a significant portion of the population) but also established the elite modern narrative through which 'India' is imagined. Secondly, he admitted that the film was a success, because it was made by a westerner. Now this again propounds the idea of an 'indigenous subaltern's dependence upon western intellectuals' (Spivak, 1988) or at least they need someone from the native, well versed in western discourse, if they are to go beyond the master narrative. Not much attention has been paid to the film by the academia to explore if the real picture of India was distorted or if it successfully projected the marginalized people of India. A J Sebastian (2009) argues in his essay that the film voiced the slum subaltern of India. But if this is indeed the case,

then the following question arises: is not the child with its own specific slum experiences further silenced when s/he is spoken about in terms of the broad/undifferentiated term 'slum subaltern'?

Subaltern theory claims that the 'norms are established by those in power and imposed on the "Other" who has had no voice because of race, class, or gender'. (Sebastian, 2009, p.899) Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), the Italian Marxist theorist is believed to be the person introducing the term 'Subaltern', meaning inferior status, quality, or importance. Gramsci considered the subaltern as a historically determined category that exists within particular historical, economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. Critics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Ranajit Guha, focus on signifiers while interpreting the term 'subaltern.' They argue that the colonialist discourse has socially constructed the signifiers from the colonial language, giving no real voice to the oppressed and colonized. It has, however, been claimed that, in the post colonial era subaltern studies often tend to focus on the class relation, functioning as a 'binary division of society into elites and the subaltern' (Chakrabarti, 2007, as cited by Sebastian, 2009: 900).

Spivak acknowledges the 'epistemic violence' done upon Indian subalterns. In her views, any outside attempt to amend their condition by granting them collective speech will certainly lead to problems such as: i) a logocentric assumption of cultural solidarity among a heterogeneous people, and ii) a dependence upon western intellectuals to 'speak for' the subaltern condition rather than allowing them to speak for themselves. She further argues that by speaking out and reclaiming a collective cultural identity, the subalterns will in fact re-inscribe their subordinate position in society (Sebastian, 2009, p. 900-1). I wish to adopt subaltern theories here in my analysis of the movie *Slumdog Millionaire* to show the following:

- 1) The marginalization of street/slum children in terms of economic, political and physical subjugation
- 2) Their unassuming 'quiet encroachment' in the form of illegal and criminal activities
- 3) Prevailing dominant perception of the world about street/slum children that ignores the qualitative differences in the potentiality of these subalterns
- 4) The question of solidarity amongst such a heterogeneous subaltern class.

The setting of the film is located in the slum of Dharavi in Mumbai, India's famous business city. Not necessarily the real Dharavi has to be exactly the same as it looks in the cinematic frame of *Slumdog Millionaire* but the context of the place is realistically drawn in the film. It is still considered world's largest slum spread over an area of 535 acres inhabiting around a million immigrants from all over the country. In expensive Mumbai, Dharavi provides cheap accommodation for these low wage earners (Time Asia 2006). But unfortunately, the basic facilities for minimum standard of living in this area are the matters of pity. Dharavi has serious health hazards because of the scarcity of toilets. People living here also suffer from problems with inadequate supply of drinking water. (The New York Times, 2006) This 'filthy' condition was established in *Slumdog Millionaire* with that disgusting but equally creative scene where young Jamal jumps from the toilet 'sprawling headlong into a year's worth of human waste' (Beaufoy, 2007, p.14) only to see his favorite hero Amitabh Bacchan (dummy appearance in the movie) who came to visit the slum people by helicopter.

One of the forms of child-exploitation projected in the film is the organized child beggary run by the beggar mafia. Jamal and Salim after their mother's death in a communal riot become homeless and abandoned in the street. Then they are picked up by Maman who appears to be a benevolent figure to them. The film offers a scene where Aravind is intentionally blinded by Maman, the head of a group of gangsters, and his accomplice Punnoose so that the boy can earn more as a beggar. It reveals the alarming situation of a metropolitan city like Mumbai in India where many street children are abducted by criminals and later forced to beggary after being mutilated. According to police statistics, 44,000 children disappear in India each year. Many are eventually recovered, but one fourth remains untraceable. Organized begging is believed to be the cause of these abductions of children (*The National*, 2009).

The film also shows the issue of girl children being forced onto prostitution. The beggar mafia Maman and his gang keep Latika (Jamal's childhood companion) unharmed after Jamal and Salim flee from their hand. She is being groomed by them in singing and dancing so that she can be the most desired prostitute in the red light town of Mumbai. According to a source, minor-prostitution is a billion dollar industry in Mumbai which is thriving with patrons in Mumbai

police. Surprisingly, affluent businessmen, some members of the film and advertising industries, diamond merchants, and politicians form the select clientele.

In the film, the two brothers Jamal and Salim, for the sake of survival, keep looking for opportunities to earn money, but often in illegal fashion. Sometimes they are mobile vendors on trains and sometimes they are just petty thieves ripping off the passengers. In both cases they have been subjected to the repressive course of action by the authority and the affluent. On both occasions they are kicked out off the train by the ticket master in the train for traveling without a ticket and by passengers for stealing food from their lot. They take this dangerously informal and unusual way of living, enjoying the little scraps of freedom that it allows. They are not at all afraid or ashamed of their situation, but rather take this as an advantage. That's why they can pose the question back to the ticket master while being thrown out of the cabin -- "Is this train your father's property?"

In this way Jamal and Salim travel through the country, which not only builds their interactions with many different people but at the same time it serves as a way of increasing their practical knowledge of life. In Jamal's words - "we criss-crossed the country from Rajasthan to Calcutta. Every time we were thrown off we got back on again. This was our home for years. A home with wheels and a whistle" (Beaufoy, 2007, p. 45). Their around-India train journey ends when they reach Agra, the city of tourists glued to the beauty of Taj Mahal. As Jamal quickly learns the art of speaking 'convincingly' with foreigners, he becomes a fake tourist-guide who fools his clients with misinformation about the Taj while Salim organizes his own network of thieves ripping off the rich tourists. Jamal and Salim were brought into this condition by the conflicting events in the society on which they hardly had any control. And now they have learnt how to use this condition as a shield. The film has one scene where Jamal is severely beaten up by a driver of a car transporting two American tourists:

Jamal sits up. He is bleeding from his nose and mouth.

CLARK (CONT'D)

You okay?

JAMAL

*You wanted to see the 'real
India', Mister David. Here it is.*

ADELE

*Well, here's a bit of the real
America, too, son.*

(Beaufoy, 2007)

Adele pulls out his wallet and rummages for dollars. A lot of fund is collected for the welfare of the poor children in the Third World from the benevolent west. Yet one can question the outcome of such charity. Without creating awareness in the political sphere of the country where these children reside, charity alone will not bring the result desired by the policymakers and activists.

A proper strategy and willingness of bringing a constructive development of these marginalized children is missing in the agenda of the authority. Often we see the children entering into the prevailing dangerous system in order to claim mechanism of control in the adult domain. Salim organizes his network of thieves with fellow street children. He murders Maman as he becomes a life threat for both Salim and Jamal while rescuing Latika. Salim also shows himself to be street-wise in joining Javed, the leader of the rival gang so that no one of Maman's men can retaliate. Thus Salim enters the underworld and serves Javed as a hitman. Later when Jamal meets Salim after a long time, Salim expresses satisfaction over his achievements:

*Jamal and Salim are sitting on the very edge of the building. They can see for miles
across the city. Salim has rediscovered his attitude.*

SALIM

*Can you believe it? This was our
slum. We lived just there, huh?
Now it is business, apartments,
call centres...Fuck USA, fuck
China. India is at the centre of
the world, now, bhai. And I am*

at the centre of the centre
Jamal. This is all Javed-bhai's.
(Beaufoy, 2007)

The sexual exploitation and subordination attributed to the precocious puberty of the girl child further barricade the process of her empowerment. Both 'anti-prostitution' and 'sex-positive' feminists' groups, apparently opposing to each other, will reach a consensus at this point that they describe this exploitation as a violence against the girl child and for the latter, it is also a form of 'patriarchal control' of her early matured sexuality. Thus the sexually precocious girl child can be differentiated within the category of subaltern child in general. *Slumdog Millionaire* projects Latika's vulnerability as being held by the beggar mafia Maman in her childhood for prostitution and later in her teenage she serves Javed as his mistress. The fear of Javed, a violent underworld criminal confuses Latika while Jamal offers his love towards her. Latika wants to leave this disgraceful life but instead she questions Jamal's ability to provide a luxurious life as Javed has done for Latika. Thus Latika in the film may seem like a passive Indian girl who does not have enough courage and self-confidence to bring a change to her life.

If the struggles and gains of the street children as subaltern agents are not 'at the cost of the fellow poor or themselves', then how could Salim exploit Latika and make her a gift to his gang leader Javed? This leads us to the following problem; if the girl street child is facing further exploitation from their boy counterparts, which is obviously the case with Salim and Latika, then what of the possibility of the girl-child's empowerment? It is in this way that the film has the merit of showing in what way the predicament of street girls places them in a separate, a more precarious, subaltern category.

Intellect seems to be the sole property of the elite in a classed society. The brain is not an organ the subalterns are authorized to use. They are supposed to use only their hands and legs. The elite or the superior has always undercut the poor and the weak by labeling them without minimum human dignity. Jamal is tortured inhumanly by the police to reveal the way of alleged cheat.

CONSTABLE SRINIVAS

Maybe he did know the answers.

INSPECTOR

Have you gone soft, Srinivas?

Professors, lawyers, doctors,

General Knowledge Wallahs never

get beyond sixteen thousand

rupees. And he's on ten million?

What the hell can a slum dog

possibly know?

(Beaufoy, 2007)

To the Inspector, Jamal is not a human; rather, he is a filthy slum dog and he is deserving of such treatment for his 'illegal' achievement. As Jamal does not confess, the Inspector typically reaches the assumption that his ((Jamal's) stubborn resistance is due to love of money and women: "Well, well. *The slum dog barks. Money or women. The reason for most mistakes in life. Looks like you got mixed up with both...*" (Beaufoy, 2007, p. 32). His hypothesis seems accurate as all of Jamal's yearnings is to win money for Latika (Sebastian, 2009) and to lead a life with respect yet not at the expense of his honest spirit. So he dares to participate in the quiz show, a legal way to riches. Jamal's success is the 'proof to the resilient spirit of slum-kids, who are intelligent and earnest in whatever they do' (Sebastian, 2009, p. 913).

In the eyes of the so called elite modernists like Prem (a film star and the moderator of the quiz show) or the police (an agency of the state) Jamal is a filthy underclass individual not even fit to be considered a human. But Jamal is not ashamed of his reality. Rather he has the courage to challenge the dominant modernity of the traditional Indian society. Whereas Prem is projected as a figure of a lustful elite exploiter of women, Jamal tries to restore a prostitute's life by marrying her, giving her the same virtue of a pure protected woman in Indian society. Jamal surely ignores the relevance of the so called modernity in his philosophy of life. To the materialist elite like Prem, possession of wealth is the indicator of one's success. But to Jamal money is only to win

love and passion, and is not for any exploitative pleasure hunting. It is on this basis that the ‘slumdog millionaire’ Jamal shows a better human quality.

It is assumable that Danny Boyle has not named the street children as ‘slumdogs’, rather he is trying to be satirical while questioning the dominant view about the street children. Subsequent debate about the film has often cohered around the fact that the depiction of Indian life and culture is an insult to the Indian nationalists and patriots. But this discussion, not premised on the lives and experiences of the subaltern child, is often subordinated to the interest of elite nationalists. Jamal in the story is honest to his situation and not ashamed of it at all. Rather he positively continues to overcome his ordeals. India as a modern nation should also be honest and courageous in recognizing the subaltern street children.

Some Indians feel their country’s ugly underbelly has been magnified by locating and filming part of the story in the slums of Mumbai. But director Danny Boyle, who sees his film as a Dickensian tale, says that he shot in real, gritty locations “to show the beauty and ugliness and sheer unpredictability” of the city. Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup, who wrote the 2005 novel *Q and A* on which the movie is based, has a similar view. “This isn’t social critique,” he told *The Guardian* in an interview. “It’s a novel written by someone who uses what he finds to tell a story. I don’t have firsthand experience of betting on cricket or rape or murder. I don’t know if it’s true that there are beggar masters who blind children to make them more effective when they beg on the streets. It may be an urban myth, but it’s useful to my story.”

To me, *Slumdog Millionaire* feels like a cross between the acclaimed Brazilian slum movie *City of God* (Portuguese name: *Cidade de Deus*, 2002) and *Quiz Show*, the 1994 American historical drama film about TV quiz scandals in the 1950s. The depiction of narcotic drug rings, hold-ups, street violence and police corruption in *City of God* may not have been what the upper middle class Brazilians wanted to showcase to the rest of the world, but the film’s stark and grisly authenticity resonated with movie audiences around the world.

The makers of *Slumdog Millionaire* adopted a similar approach. Its co-director Loveleen Tandan says she likes to get as close to reality as possible. This drove her to the slums of East

Bandra to look for young children who resembled the protagonists in the story. As she recalled in a recent interview with Tehelka: “I was very keen to get real slum kids, which is why I convinced them (producers) to do one-third of the scenes in Hindi. I made a scratch tape with real street kids. The team was surprised that Hindi actually made it brighter and more alive.” Indeed, *Slumdog* doesn’t feel like a ‘foreign film’ despite it having a fair number of English subtitles, which only enhance the overall cinematic experience.

Feature film makers can exercise their creative license far more than factual film makers. I doubt if the creators of authentic movies like *City of God* and *Slumdog Millionaire* set out with any specific social agenda. They are in the business of entertainment, and just happen to find plenty of drama in real life in places like urban slums. We might argue that in the right hands, dramatized movies can draw mass attention to development issues and challenges far more effectively than the often dull and dreary documentaries. In a perceptive essay in *The Indian Express*, Kalpana Sharma flagged some important concerns:

“In the end you realize as a writer, a journalist or a filmmaker, that the best you can do is to shine a torch, a searchlight, on an entrenched problem. But the solution will not be found merely by that illumination. For that, there are many more steps to be taken. *Slumdog Millionaire* has focused its lens on the children of India’s slums through a work of fiction. What we do to change their future is the non-fiction that has yet to be written.” (as cited in Gunawardene: 2009).

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