

## "Slumdog" is an English Word

In December, when we could no longer turn a blind eye to our plummeting economy as it provoked unparalleled records of carpools and ramen-noodle Saturdays, America fell in love with *Slumdog Millionaire*. The summer's action thrillers were quickly forgotten and replaced by a film that offered a different kind of escapist fantasy for depressed Americans. What could be more therapeutic than watching a poor foreign boy win a fortune on a TV game show? (A game show modeled after one of our most beloved, nonetheless; although we did borrow it from Britain). Audiences relished comparing their hardships with the truly harrowing childhood of Jamal, and delighted in the fantasy of simply lucking into more than enough money to set them up for life. *Slumdog Millionaire* is Disney for grown-ups. But does examining why we love it so much unveil some of the darker aspects of our character and our increasingly globalized society?

*Slumdog Millionaire* slams you in the face by opening with Jamal's torture by stereotypically corrupt Indian police. The eighteen year old is suspected of cheating on the game show "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" because it's hard for the authorities to believe a boy from the slums would know enough answers to get him to the final round, which Jamal managed to do. The rest of the movie unfolds in flashbacks that explain how specific experiences in Jamal's life led him to each correct answer.

Many parts of *Slumdog* are hard-hitting, emotional, and difficult to watch. Yet throughout the entire movie, the viewer knows there will be a happy ending. After all, the film isn't called *Slumdog*, it's called *Slumdog Millionaire*. Behind every somber scene gleams a comforting beam of hope, a promise of well-deserved redemption. Comedian John Stewart called the Oscar Best Picture winner "the most depressing feel-good movie I think I've ever seen." But as its subject is India and the creators aren't

Indian, one must wonder: where do we draw the line between curiosity and voyeurism? This question has been the topic of no small number of internet blogs, articles, and editorials.

In his New Yorker article "Curious Cases," film reviewer David Denby calls *Slumdog* "a jumpy, hyper-edited commercial for poverty" in which Director Danny Boyle "uses the squalor and violence touristically, as an aspect of the fabulous." One cannot deny that the film's flashy photography, editing, and sound techniques are mesmerizing; but is it, as London Times columnist Alice Miles blatantly professes, "poverty porn"? Amitabh Bachchan, the popular Indian actor, certainly thinks so. In his blog, he defends India by calling out other nations: "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." Amulya Gopalakrishnan, who writes for the Indian Express, addresses Bachchan's comments in her article for the online site "The Daily Beast" entitled "What Does India Think of *Slumdog Millionaire*?" She notes that although many Indians agree with the actor, others, such as writer Sharma Kaplan, see *Slumdog* as a chance to generate awareness of the abhorrent conditions of slum life in India.

Globalization is evident both behind the scenes and within the film's plotline. It is a testament to the universal nature of modern society that such a transnational film could even come into being never mind win such international critical acclaim. (British) Director Danny Boyle's film about overcoming adversity (in India), featuring fresh-faced (British) actors and the musical score of a renowned (Indian) composer, recently won a slew of (the United States') prestigious awards. In the movie itself, young boys earn their meager living by duping ignorant tourists who flock to the Taj Mahal (undoubtedly to satisfy their craving for a new cultural experience in a world where national boundaries fade with every fresh Wikipedia entry.) At one point Jamal finds work in Mumbai serving tea to tech

support workers, who are prime examples of foreigners filling jobs western companies export overseas to defray payroll costs.

Globalization does not necessarily engender solidarity. Although in some ways borders may dissipate and dissolve, in other ways, they just become all the more apparent. Soon after arriving on location in India, Boyle tells [Newsweek.com](#), he decided to cast local slum children in his movie and even set up a charity for them. ("Slum Voyeurism," [Newsweek.com](#), Jan. 30 2009). Before this could happen, the fast pace of international exchange enabled British screenwriter Simon Beaufoy to encounter the book Q&A, written by Indian author Vikas Swarup, and turn it into a movie for Boyle to direct.

However, Miles notes that "as the film [*Slumdog Millionaire*] revels in the violence, degradation and horror, it invites you, the Westerner, to enjoy it, too." [Newsweek.com](#) reports that a lawsuit has been filed against the movie, claiming it "defames Mumbai's urban poor." Even the title, which is a made up English word that combines "underdog" and "slum," angers many Indians because it incorporates the word "dog" and has no Indian language equivalent. ("Slum Voyeurism"). Boyle defends his work, claiming it is more about the universality of the main character's story than the setting, and "it doesn't matter where [Jamal] comes from." Yet Boyle also concedes that the film's appeal largely stems from westerners' fascination with India; in fact, it was one of the reasons he made the film in the first place!

I don't mean to take anything away from the film's quality-1 thoroughly enjoyed it and appreciated it for its deft storytelling and artistry. The visuals and the music were both superbly stimulating, and as a cinematic experience *Slumdog* goes above and beyond. If nothing else, the film's association with and treatment of issues as consequential as globalization, extreme poverty, courage despite adversity, and voyeurism make the viewer think critically about both the good and bad

components of human nature, and the degree in which one's culture influences the way one sees the world.

Still, I personally can't help but feel a little guilty for feeling so positive immediately after the movie. Could I this easily dismiss the intense poverty so accurately depicted in the film? Could I let the token Bollywood dance number during the end credits glaze over my entire perception of the film and its contents? Perhaps the reasons westerners love Slumdog Millionaire are not solely based on the film's story and cinematic artistry. In exalting the film so excessively, we are trying to mask our misguided notions of cultural superiority; but in effect, are we revealing them all the more?