

**BOLLYWOOD EXILED TO HOLLYWOOD OR THE OTHER WAY
ROUND?:
THE (CURIOUS) CASE OF *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE*¹.**

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It is a truism of the (movie) industry that making even a bad movie is hard, so making a great one must be near impossible.
(David Carr, *The New York Times*)²

A film which has aroused many controversies despite its winning eight Academy Awards in 2009, *Slumdog Millionaire* is a paragon of global cinema. It is a film portraying India made by a British scriptwriter (Simon Beaufoy), a British director (Danny Boyle) and a British producing company (Celador Films and Film4), it is based on a novel written by an Indian author (Vikas Swarup), it has an Indian cast and is distributed by French (Pathe Pictures International) and American companies (Fox Searchlight Pictures and Warner Brothers). Part of the distrustful allegations argue that an Indian filmmaker couldn't have been able to make such a film or, a more insinuating statement, that a purely Third Cinema or Bollywood film shouldn't have found its way to the American Film Academy. An implicit dichotomy thus opens between Eastern cinema, which involves mainly India, with its oppositional Third Cinema films and commercial Bollywood productions, and Western film, including mainly the UK and the USA. Moreover, considering that many Indian productions internationally acknowledged as masterpieces (such as Satyajit Ray's *The Apu Trilogy* (1955-1959), Mehboob Khan's *Mother India* (1957), Raj Kapoor's *Awaara*

¹ Reference is made to David Fincher's *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Slumdog Millionaire*'s main rival in the 2009 Academy Award competition.

² Carr, David. "At Sundance, 'Slumdog' Casts a Long Shadow." *The New York Times*. January 15, 2009.

[http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/movies/awardsseason/16bagg.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=It%20is%20a%20truism%20of%20the%20\(movie\)%20industry%20that%20making%20even%20a%20bad%20movie%20is%20hard,%20%20%20so%20making%20a%20great%20one%20must%20be%20near%20impossible.%20%20%20&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/16/movies/awardsseason/16bagg.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=It%20is%20a%20truism%20of%20the%20(movie)%20industry%20that%20making%20even%20a%20bad%20movie%20is%20hard,%20%20%20so%20making%20a%20great%20one%20must%20be%20near%20impossible.%20%20%20&st=cse). 24 August 2009.

(1951), Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* (*Thirst*, 1957) and *Kaagaz Ke Phool* (*Paper Flowers*, 1959), Yash Chopra's *Deewar* (1975), Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* (1995), to name only a few) did not receive recognition in Western terms with Academy Awards or Golden Globes, one could infer that success for a valuable film is measured in Academy Awards, Golden Globes and various other awards that the film can win in Great Britain and the United States. This validation also becomes obvious if one considers the different film aesthetics of the two film schools, Bollywood and Hollywood.

It is then natural to wonder what was that made a film with an Eastern ideology resembling Bollywood style reach Hollywood. With a view to this, the paper will first reiterate the main grid that subsumes Indian film aesthetics, narrative form and style in what is known as Bollywood style. Secondly, it will identify the Indian mainstream conventions that were 'negotiated' in the filmmaking process in order to make *Slumdog Millionaire* eligible for eight Academy Awards. Taking into account that "Bollywood can be read both as defending itself and Indian values against the West, and as a dangerous courier of Western values to the Indian audience" (Tyrrell 356) this study is an attempt to decide whether Bollywood has been 'exiled' to Hollywood in a compromise made to redraw the cultural map of world cinema, whether Bollywood is no longer able to preserve the Hindi traditional cultural values intact from the Western imperialist influence or whether it is western cinema that goes to Bollywood movies.

Film economics and culture in Bollywood

The detractors of Bollywood have criticized issues regarding the audience's lack of elitism, the high degree of commercialization, the superficial themes, clichéd mise-en-scene and cinematography, in other words what composes a 'one star-six-songs-three dances' film. The cinematic nuclei of the Hindi films form the so called 'masala' movies or 'omnibus' or 'formula' films, which blend various genres in one film, such as melodrama, comedy, romance, thriller. These films offer highly predictable versions similar in their narrative structure, aesthetics, genre and star system.

1. Narrative structure and plot

The narrative structure of Hindi films descends from popular rural and urban theatres that thrived at the end of the 19th century, and is opposed to classical Hollywood narratives in that it has a loose storyline, it is fragmented by frequent digressions which break the main plot into subplots (comic or dramatic) often inserted by song-and-dance sequences. More often

than not, the plot is a rewriting of a previously successful film plot, which makes the spectator familiar with it.

A recurrent code of thematic practice is that of romance, and most Indian films are romantic musicals. The protagonist is a charming woman, usually shot in sensual close-ups, who becomes the object of men's pleasure of looking or scopophilia just as in Western cinema. What is different is the way in which the female body is displayed to the patriarchal eye. Censorship included the British code of censorship that banned "excessively passionate love scenes", 'indelicate sexual situations' and 'scenes suggestive of immorality' "(qtd. in Gokulsing and Dissanayak 80). Associated with the decadent immoral Western performance, public kissing is a sensitive issue in real life and forbidden on screen. In *Indian popular cinema: a narrative of cultural change*, Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayak, inventory the following cinematic strategies by means of which female sexuality is transposed on screen: a) tribal costumes that unveil the woman's body, b) dream sequences which suspend a forbidding reality and allow the exploration of female sexuality especially by a dance in which the protagonist's sari gets soaked in down-pouring rain, and thus reveals her repressed carnal lure. c) 'Love behind the bush' is another tactics inserted in the dance-and-song sequence, where the couple disappear behind a bush or a tree and after a while the woman returns wiping her lips (81). In this respect, *Slumdog Millionaire* is another monolith, which places the female protagonist Latika as a mere object of male attraction and desire.

This 'magic formula' poor-boy-meets-rich-girl is most preferred by Indian filmmakers. The couple fall in love but their love is hindered by various agreements that the girl's father has closed: a marriage contract, a long-lasting rivalry between the families. It is the young man's role to disclose fraud or to dissuade the father in order to be accepted in the family.

The function of kinship

Kinship is pivotal to Indian cinema in various ways, but central is the lost-and-found brothers who are separated at birth and are reunited later in life. The two grow up usually in Bombay, and they soon share the dichotomy hero-villain from traditional western fairytales. At a climactic point in the film, the hero is on the verge of eliminating the villain and it is only a *deus-ex-machina* denouement (a birthmark, a pendant, a photograph, etc.) that brings the revelation to the former in order to save the latter. Sometimes the villain totally affronts these sacrosanct family ties and ensures that he is hopelessly beyond redemption. As a generic pattern, the good/evil polarize the central conflict, where the "Hindu concept of *dharma* (duty), kinship ties and social obligations play a crucial role" (Thomas qtd. in Kasbekar 384).

The affective principle

Another hinge point and a trademark for Indian films is the astounding emotional load that the film narrative bears. The affective principle articulates the spectator's cinematic experience and is central to the film's texture. This principle originates in the traditional Indian theatre whose aesthetics were theorized by the author Bharata in the 2nd century A.D. In his view, drama was played by acting modes and styles meant to move the audience and conveyed eight basic emotions called *bhava*: *love, humor, energy, anger, fear, grief, disgust, astonishment*. Bharata also identified another eight sentiments, called *rasa*, which correspond to these emotions and which must be aroused during the plays: *the erotic, the comic, the heroic, the furious, the apprehensive, the compassionate, the horrific, the marvellous* (Warder qtd. in Kasbekar 384). Indian cinema has assimilated these conventions by perpetuating these cultural traditions into modernity, thus preserving the liaison with the past, which is another secular value of India.

2. Film aesthetics

The song-and-dance sequence

Hindi films are descendants of Parsi³ theatre, which included such dramatic performance on stage, and this trait was adopted and adapted later into this modern form of entertainment, the cinema. In the complex film design, the song and dance are part of the glam and grandeur of the spectacle, articulated in extravagant palaces, impressive landscapes and glittering outfits. A typical Indian film includes an average of six songs, each inserting its own hypodiegetic subplot. The main diegesis is structured in such a way as to allow these song-and-dance sequences at regular times. The traditional Indian film has rooted this feature to such an extent, that films with no song-and-dance sequences proved box-office disasters in the overall economics of the film. It is just natural then for the music director of the film to be placed next to the name of the producer and director in the film publicity. In contemporary films the soundtrack of Indian productions form a distinct genre popularized in festivals, national holidays, on the radio or television.

3. Genre

Unlike classical Hollywood productions which belong to genres easily definable in terms of film conventions (the musical, the western, the

³ The name has its origin in *Parsis*, an ethnic group of Persian descent, who used to own these theatres.

comedy, the thriller, etc.), Indian films assimilate different genre patterns. The Indian omnibus genre provides romance, comedy, melodrama, action within the same narrative space, since movie viewing is a 'spectacle' where the audience is the entire family. Thus, each film section targets at different tastes and interests of all family spectators. This structural feature has a pragmatic motivation: while Hollywood divides its audiences and hence turnover according to genre, Bollywood blends its film audience according to section and has better revenue per film.

4. Representation of women in Indian films

Female representation in Indian films have been conventionally influenced by Valmiki's *Ramayana*, India's most famous epic, which established the code of conduct for the daughter and wife since ancient times. This consensual code of women's behaviour in traditional India was to be later perpetuated on screen, where the woman appears as selfless, totally devoted to her husband and family. The woman has to obey drastic rules in her primary role of daughter (*Betni*), wife (*Patni*), mother (*Ma*), they must prove totally obedient towards her husband and must honor his memory even after his death. This mode of conduct governed social life in traditional India and was naturally reiterated on screen. But despite the fact that women were not allowed any independence beyond their patriarchal subservience, on screen they are permitted to engage in romances, which - somehow paradoxically- are at the core of all popular filmic narratives. Hindi cinema relies on the old mythological Radha Krishna deities, and reinforces the romance pattern where men and women indulge in pure absolute and eternal love, like Krishna's for Radha. In mainstream films the women who accept these traditional rules are gratified with a blissful life, whereas those depicted as transgressive of these enforcements are punished and victimized.

***Slumdog Millionaire*, a formula film**

A formula/omnibus film is a production which has a recognizable plot pattern, comprises dramatic family ties, comical instances, a mythical good /vs./ evil opposition, "traditional concepts of 'duty' (*dharma*)" (Kasbekar 390), and inserts song-and-dance sequences. Considering these filmic patterns, Danny Boyle's film is an omnibus and a masala film in the following respects:

1. Narrative structure and plot

Slumdog Millionaire opens in medias res and incorporates the story of Jamal, an illiterate 18-year-old boy, who is on the point of winning the Indian version of the contest 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire'. The police

and the show host himself believe him an impostor and the entire film is a vacillation of analepses that reveal the ways in which certain key experiences in Jamal's life provided the correct answers to the questions in the game show.

The film takes the much-preferred Bollywood theme of two brothers, Jamal and Salim, who follow opposite paths, but immerses it in a contemporary realist setting of modern day underworld India. It is assembled on the pattern of the central hinges of Hindi films: meeting, falling in love, separations, suffering, reunion. A western influence for this narrative core concerns its superposition on a contemporary game show, which is another pretext for the director to foreground various afflictions of India. The film incorporates those song-and-dance interpolations, requires empathy from the audience concerning the misfortunes of Jamal and Latika, paradigms of other abandoned children, and has a happy ending: Jamal wins the incredible amount of money as he has the chance to know the answer to the very last question; Jamal and Latika are rewarded with each other's love. In the case of *Slumdog...*, the plot has many predictable instances on a principle of sameness with the basic pattern:

- a) In most Hindi films, the moment the protagonists meet and fall in love instantly is backgrounded by rain, thunder, thunderstorm. The moment J-L meet, there is a close-up shot the two, Jamal rescuing Latika in downpouring rain with a close-up of the two hands holding each other, which is another visual mark of Bollywood.
- b) As in other Hindi films, the stage of Jamal and Latika "falling in love" is achieved instantaneously.
- c) The subplots showing the life experiences that provided the poor illiterate Jamal with correct answers in a 20-million-rupees show are circumscribed as satellites to the central love plot. One of them recalls the death of his mother during anti-Muslim violence and thus subsumes a historical document of the 1993 anti-Muslim attacks in the Mumbai slums. These subplots are juxtaposed in the plot narrative by means of flashbacks, picturising these past events by means of parallel editing and connecting them by sound bridges.
- d) The theme works both on the sameness and difference principle: the true moral values which gratify protagonists with love in traditional Hindi films have a western consumerist addition in the amount of money Jamal wins, which will again reward him with a replete careless life. Another thematic insert, more metaphysical this time, which draws the film closer to Hollywood again is the nature of things we think we know, opposed to what is really worth knowing.

The function of kinship

With the essence of humdrum operating at the level of the basic story, the film follows the rule of two brothers, Jamal and Salim, who follow divergent principles and incorporate the good/evil duality. Salim, Jamal's brother, constantly breaks the rules of sacred fraternity and betrays his younger brother, despite Jamal's reassuring acts of devotion; the former's death is an act of redemption towards people he betrayed, his own brother and Latika.

The affective principle

The affective principle works to the extent to which Jamal and Latika meet, suffer a great deal of ordeal, which extorts empathy from the audience concerning the tribulations of the couple.

In terms of emphatic feelings, *Slumdog Millionaire* triggers six of the eight basic emotions called *bhava* in ancient tales: *love* - between Jamal and Latika; *energy* - in the former to pursue the latter; *disgust* and *anger* - aroused in the audience at the injustices of a corrupt, iniquitous society; *fear* and *grief* - at the repeated separation and the tribulations the couple undergo. The ancient author Bharata also identified another eight sentiments, called *rasa*, which correspond to these emotions. *Slumdog*... again abides by six of eight feelings that must be aroused by staged plays in the past, and by films at present: *the erotic* - Latika's pursuits; *the heroic*: Jamal proves a modern hero who wins 'Who Wants To Be A Millionaire' and his love; *the furious* and *apprehensive* - the injustices of this underworld causes (prostitution, begging, tyranny, crime); *the compassionate* - compassion of the audience; *the horrific* - the aggression of patriarchal presence on womanhood. The presence of most of these emotions and sentiments in the same film makes *Slumdog*... a 'masala film' (masala is an Indian spice), a spicy Western-Indian film overwhelmed by emotions.

2. Film aesthetics

The song-and-dance sequence

If at the beginning of Indian cinema and in the golden age songs had classical and folk inspiration, by the 1950's producers started using Western genres (samba, rock'n'roll, classical music). The soundtrack of *Slumdog*... was composed by the famous A.R. Rahman and its music is a hybrid of east and west: the final score in the film's last scene shot on location at Victoria station is hip-hop music. The global marketing of cinematic productions ran to the extent to which this final track "Jay Ho" was re-recorded by Pussycat Dolls and reached the top of European and American pop charts.

As to the rest of score leit-motifs, *Slumdog Millionaire* abides by the standard number of songs (six) that feature a formula film. Just like other Indian films where these sequences do not further the film's narrative and suspend action for aural and visual spectacle, some of Boyle's songs, which do not display sumptuous costumes or lavish indoor settings, are indirect descriptors of the romantic and sensitive protagonists. Thus, the close-ups of the Latika character emphasizing her beauty and even glam despite her humble origin acquire a scopophilic function.

3. Genre

Under the same hybridization of Hindi films, *Slumdog...* offers violence, sentimentalism and melodrama in the same act. This makes it an omnibus film accommodating the Hollywood classics melodrama, thriller, romance and musical in once narrative space. To a certain extent, Boyle's product is what film theorists call an Indian 'social movie' a manifesto revealing the underworld of India with begging, prostitution, aggression; it is a complex generic type that assimilates traditional concerns of such films like beggar networks, the life of street children in Mombay (part of the cast are street children in former Bombay) or woman subservience (whose paragon is Latika) towards a patriarchal society.

4. Representation of women in *Slumdog Millionaire*

Boyle's film deals with a message against feudal patriarchy: where in other films the woman functions as an object of carnal desire under patriarchal forces and is denied the completion of her own desires, Latika bears the same voice up to a point in the film. Under patriarchal imperialism, Latika is taught to beg in the streets of Mumbai next to other children including Jamal and Salim; the kids are under the patronage of Maman, who, under the guise of an orphanage, gathers street children in order to train them to beg for money. Years later, Latika -now a young woman- is forced into prostitution in Mumbai under the prisonship of Salim and Javed.

Conclusions

The question whether Bollywood and non-western countries are able to resist Hollywood imperialism and western culture is given an answer, that is, it is Hollywood that obeys Bollywood and Third Cinema rules.

A masala and formula film which requires a suspension-of-belief plot placed amid poverty and gangsters, *Slumdog Millionaire* does not simply adapt Bollywood formulas for a western audience, as its detractors have stated. In spite of the fact that the film is infused a contemporary western style in terms of cinematography, editing and sound, *Slumdog...* uses Bollywood clichés to impress the audience (Jamal finds the love of his

life, his brother Salim does one last good deed before he dies, and Latika and Jamal are united at the end of the film). In doing this, it is the colonizing Western cinema that goes to postcolonial Bollywood, and negotiates a cinematic marketable space with the purpose of achieving global consumerism expressed in awards and Box Office revenue.

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