India's Real Fiction Meets World's Popular Cinema - Film Adaptation of Vikas Swarup's Q&A

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Abstract

The Indian Foreign Services (IFS) official Vikas Swarup penned "Q & A", a work of fiction that portrayed the ground realities of Dharavi, a slum in Mumbai. A few years later Danny Boyle adapted the book and created an improbable yet scintillating success making it the best British film of that decade which portrayed Dharavi's rooftops in the most cinematic technique possible. In this context, this research paper attempts to explore and analyse critically, the purpose and the socio-political connotations such adaptation reverberated by an all new portrayal of Indian story on the celluloid both for the local and global audiences. Amitabh Bachchan commented on Slumdog Millionaire that "if the film projects India as Third World's 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." "(Times of India & The Guardian, 2009) So, what could be the hidden purpose behind such portrayal by Danny Boyle and How were the Indian reactions spoken or otherwise and why? are a few issues that are intended to explore and present in this paper.

Keywords: Popularity, Reality, Fiction, Adaptation.

Introduction

A work of fiction be it a novel or a film is boundary less but when it is viewed from social or political perspectives, there needs a critical debate and clarity. When Danny Boyle's film adaptation of Vikas Swarup's début novel *Q & A*, published in 2005, was released worldwide in 2008 as *Slumdog Millionaire*, many critics and viewers harped on its Dickensian overtones, but so far no thorough analysis of the novel and its adaptation has really substantiated this claim. It also tries to aim at analyzing the reception of these two twenty-first-century works, and how they have led to contradictory and even incompatible, but nonetheless extremely relevant interpretations of the novel in its cinematic adaptation.

Q & A and *Slumdog Millionaire* cannot be denied that faint but distinctive echoes lead readers and viewers to envisage the novel and its adaptation as loose transpositions to Indian realities. The novel endows the hero, Ram Mohammad Thomas, Ram is the narrator of his own life, and his early years. He is alone in the world unsure who abandoned him but fancies

it might have been his mother whom he pictures to himself as "a tall and graceful young woman, wearing a white sari" (Q & A 36). In his "mind's eye," he sees her "leaving the hospital after midnight with a baby in her arms" (36). The scene he imagines recalls the poignant and dramatic in contrast to the scenes in Slumdog Millionaire its film adaptation. Jamal Malik's mother is shown as taking her sons to school, worries about their education and wellbeing. Rain is used as a metaphor for portrayal as she hopes for better future for her sons. The action and weather conditions are otherwise extremely similar: The wind is howling. Her long black hair bows across her face, obscuring her features. Leaves rustle near her feet. Dust scatters. Lightning flashes. She walks with heavy footsteps toward the church, clutching the baby to her bosom. She reaches the door of the church and uses the metal ring knocker (Q & A 36)

The fictitious elements of reality:

Vikas Swarup's surreal, naked narration of life and politics around Dharavi, a slum in Mumbai are intriguing as they reveal the socio-economic manipulations and how they lead to youth desperate for a significant change in their lives in modern India. Such story in its visual adaptation of such episodes from the novel—the paradox portrayal made it easy for people to understand it as a mere demonstration effect. This circuitous reference to reality, via the cinema, nevertheless fits into Swarup's narrative strategy, inspired from filmic and televisual models and patterns, and it partakes of the inclusion of his writing in today's multimedia society.

Danny Boyle, on the other hand, surprisingly does not refer to this key episode of Vikas Swarup's novel, although, as a filmmaker, he might have been expected to do so. He chooses instead to make the hero's mother die during an interracial riot involving a frantic flight that bears resemblances to Ram's pursuit by an angry crowd to the repeated cry of "stop" in the novel Q&A, a striking episode with strong visual potentialities exploited in this film adaptation of the book. Boyle makes the most of this scene, since one of the opening sequences shows a group of street children—among whom feature the two main protagonists—running through the narrow and dirty, but also picturesque streets of the slums of Mumbai, with policemen in hot pursuit. A later scene also shows the heroes, Jamal and Salim, this time accompanied by the heroine Latika, running for their life to escape from Maman and his men.

In Q & A, Swarup's hero, Ram Mohamad Thomas, further resembles Jamal Malik in that after being abandoned by his mother, he is taken in by an orphanage. Like Jamal and his brother (modified inclusion in film), who is christened by the beadle Mr Bumble, Ram is baptised by the parish priest, but his name gives rise to cultural and religious rather than moral considerations. His triple name reveals an ecumenical concern to conciliate proponents of the three main religions of India, namely the Hindu, Muslim and Christian faiths. The influences in Slumdog Millionaire can be traced in Swarup's description of the Delhi Juvenile Home for Boys, an institution Ram is sent to at the age of eight. There the surly cook of the home "scolds anyone who asks for more" (74) and the deputy warden Mr Gupta, who wears two thick gold chains around his neck and carries a short bamboo cane which he uses to strike the youngsters, seems like a resurgence of Mr Mamman in twenty-first-century India, save that Swarup has endowed him with pedophile leanings. Among the juvenile offenders, Ram remains, like Salim in Mamman's gang, surprisingly pure and innocent. Ram,

Jamal & Salim both stand out commercially as well, Jamal because he remains practical to the business of the underworld, and Ram because he demands money even when Mamman asks him to sing his favourite song, "Dharshan do ghanshyam…" and his brother character Salim with his harsh attitude therefore is considered by his companions and by the people running the home as a cut above the rest of the group, so they use him as exploiter.

Thus Ram Mohammed Thomas in Q&A, one person is split into two characters in the film but their destiny bears resemblances to Ram's in that it alternates between a struggle for survival in squalid surroundings and life in more privileged environments where Ram enjoys the protection of sundry middle-class benefactors and employers such as a kindly priest, an Australian Colonel or an ageing actress. However, a closer examination reveals that Oliver and Ram's trajectories do not quite coincide, since the brothers duo experiences hell in the workhouse and escapade, survival by theft in Agra and then the drama that shows their separation. While Salim joined Mumbai underworld before becoming the don's protégé, Jamal works in a hetel supplying tea. Salim is haunted by the nightmare of being handed over to Mamman and his gang. This descent into the world of Indian criminality is followed by ups and downs, which prove more erratic than in Slumdog Millionaire. Both novel and the film however delineate the progress of their child heroes, a narrative pattern as popular and cinematic.

Themes that echo in the film are in the novel:

As Latika is sold by the Mamman group to a brothel home, Jamal and Salim come back to Mumbai in search of her, Vikas Swarup thus provided enough drama to Danny Boyle with a typology of situations and characters whose universality makes them applicable, beyond their period and their initial national frontiers, to human situations as vivid, as humorous and, at times, as poignant to us today as they were to readers of the world of storytelling. Among the characters in the novel, besides Ram, Salim, Nita and Maman who seem to have been paved suitably on the enliven major characters in the film, Jamal, Salim, Latika and other characters in the film. In the course of his travels through the country, Ram encounters a young simpleton called Shankar, whose wisdom in spite of his apparent deficiencies reminds the watcher of Jamal and Aravind in the film. Ram also finds employment in the house of an ageing actress, Neelema Kumari, whose traits seem to have been inspired for Latika, the dancer girl in the film, she was still a fashionable beauty, "world's most beautiful girl" for Jamal Malik. She hangs on to the paraphernalia associated to her past self, heedless of the discrepancy between her slave like life at Salim's and her dreams and attitude. Similarly, Neelema Kumari actually ends up, after also having been jilted and mistreated by a cruel lover, lying dead in her master bedroom, a rotting corpse dressed in a rich sari and adorned with sparkling jewellery (Q & A 233).

Such situations and prototypes transposed into a twenty-first-century Indian setting can be found in Danny Boyle's free adaptation of Swarup's novel. In one of the most memorable episodes of the film, the three child heroes, Jamal, his elder brother, Salim, and a young girl called Latika, become the protégés of the criminal Mamman, who, under false pretence of protecting street children, exploits them by turning them into beggars and sometimes even maims them to make them more pitiful and thus more profitable. Mamman feeds the children and introduces them to begging and petty larceny while appearing to educate them or let them play. Furthermore, the child-like innocence but also the ingeniousness shown by the main

hero, Jamal, in coping with adversity. The resourcefulness and resiliency of Jamal's elder brother, Salim, bring to mind the skills. These resemblances are reinforced by the children's petty thieving, performed first under Mamman's supervision, and later on their own devices. Such illicit activities call to mind the pick pocketing skills of Salim's boys. As for the young heroine of the film, Latika, her near escape from becoming a prostitute working for Mamman, and her subsequent position as mistress of the rival gangster Javed, who brutally beats her when she attempts to flee from him.

In both novel and film, the protagonists' distress, but also their endless inventiveness in coping with difficulties in the squalid and overcrowded district of Dharavi at the heart of India's financial capital, Mumbai, recall many Bollywood action dramas in which hero struggling for survival, fights injustice to emerge as heroic, the underdog more than as a hero emerges as a winner of his lost love in Danny Boyle's adaptation of Q&A. The film's rendering of the rubbish dump on which the children live and scavenge after their mother's death is reminiscent of the dust heaps depicted in the most realistic manner that became popular and then made Slumdog Millionaire a block buster film across the world. The visual reality of these heaps is remarkably and powerfully rendered by Danny Boyle as feast by projection the realities of an emerging economic and technological power that is India.

Adaptation as an approach of Story-telling:

Bearing in mind that the novel only gained worldwide attention when it was adapted to the screen, and that the film's enormous success, which culminated in its Oscars—the ultimate Western consecration—led to the renaming of the book as Slumdog Millionaire, one may say that the film supplanted the novel and, in so doing, imposed its more Westernised image of India upon the public. This is all the more striking since Danny Boyle offers a very loose adaptation of the novel's contents, which he considerably revises and transforms to make them understandable and more appealing to a global public. Indeed, as A.J. Sebastian has shown, while keeping the bare bones of the novel—that is to say the idea of a television quiz show as a structuring device and the successive stories told by the hero to account for his accurate answers to each of the questions of the show—the film noticeably alters the questions and answers, as well as the stories which lead up to the hero's answers (Sebastian 906). These changes and rearrangements, made to adapt the storyline to a global audience, all seem to confirm the sense of a symbolic colonisation of India by the Western world.

They raise issues that go beyond the mere understanding and deciphering of India today. The first question which comes to mind when reading Swarup or seeing Boyle's realistic renderings of twenty-first-century Indian slums and their occupants are whom these representations target. One may wonder who, if anyone needs western lens to view and understand India today and why. Bearing in mind that the memory and legacy of the British Empire still awaken mixed feelings in the Indian population, it is doubtful whether the Indians themselves unmitigatedly appreciate such references, which can be associated with the idea of British domination.

In this light, the realistic intertext in Q & A and in Slumdog Millionaire can be considered as a lens through which contemporary India is represented, first by a cosmopolitan Indian diplomat influenced by the West, and then by a British film director, albeit seconded by an

Indian co-director. In this respect, it is worth noting that the name of this co-director, Loveleen Tandan, is far less frequently mentioned than Danny Boyle's name in reviews of the film, which in itself may be indicative of a primarily Eurocentric perspective. Loveleen Tandan's role is said to have been to advise Boyle on Indian realities and help avoid cultural blunders in the making of the film. However, in spite of this precaution, and though some details of the film scrupulously follow Indian culture, its overall plot and interpretation do not seem to have appealed to the Indian population, who objected to the image the film gave of itself and of the country. While Slumdog Millionaire makes allowances to Indian culture and feelings, it nonetheless adopts an overall Western point of view, exemplified by the Dickensian input. This "Westernisation" of India may account for the indifferent, when not hostile, reception met by the film when it was released in India. The Indians were particularly appalled by the sequence depicting communal latrines, which they deemed degrading and, considering their reaction to the film, they were presumably reluctant to accept Swarup's description of Dharavi where the narrator goes to live halfway through the novel:

Dharavi is not a place for the squeamish. … Its open drains teem with mosquitoes. It's stinking, excrement-lined communal latrines are full of rats… Mounds of filthy garbage lie on every corner, from which ragpickers still manage to find something useful. And at times you have to suck in your breath to squeeze through its narrow claustrophobic alleys.

(Q&A 134)

In their description of Dharavi, the largest slum in Asia, situated at the heart of the city of Mumbai, Swarup and Boyle emphasise the glaring contrasts between extreme poverty and wealth, archaism and modernity. Moreover, Swarup underlines, as Dickens did in his time, the cancerous nature of the slums amid the modern skyscrapers and neon-lit shopping complexes of Mumbai (Q & A 135). Swarup brings together in one textual image two realities that Boyle juxtaposes in his adaptation, by contrasting the slums of the opening sequences of Slumdog Millionaire with the modern skyscrapers repeatedly shown at the end of his film. Danny Boyle and Vikas Swarup's Dickensian reading of India's economic and financial centre thus seems to have simultaneously managed to appeal to large audiences all over the world—doubtless attracted by this entertaining and, to all appearances, authentic view of India—and to alienate the Indian's themselves who considered these representations of their country as false and symptomatic of a surviving Western desire to dominate the East by manipulating and controlling its image.

The Indian imagery and its impact:

Swarup and Boyle with their tools of producing an impactful imaginary representation of twenty-first-century India, helped readers and viewers apprehend and comprehend the complex reality of Indian megalopolises. Amitabh Bachan a leading actor in India and his reaction showed such apprehensions, he said, "if the film projects India as Third World's 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."(Times of India & The Guardian, 2009) But, the novel and its film adaptation emphasise India's mixture of splendour and squalor, baffling progress and extraordinary archaism, beauty and ugliness. They both depict a country where immeasurable wealth cohabits with utter destitution. In representing such contrasts they both seem to be drawing from the real life in Mumbai, by juxtaposing grandeur and dire poverty, so skillfully captured

with camera in the film that eneded up winning Oscar Award for such a high skills and craft of story-telling.

As a matter of fact, according to Sadanand Dhume, the Oscar-winning film was rather tepidly received in India where it played in half-empty theatres and was considered by some Indian critics as an exaggeratedly negative vision of the country focusing on misery (Dhume). It was even described by an Indian film professor, Shyamal Sengupta in the Los Angeles Times as "a white man's imagined India" (qtd in Dhume).

Similarly, one may wonder about the Indian reception of Swarup's novel. For one thing, the novel was written in English by an Indian diplomat living abroad, and its initial success seems to have been primarily overseas—it won the South Africa's Boeke Prize in 2006, was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writer's Prize the same year and was awarded the General Public's Prize at the 2007 Paris Book Fair. Though the novel gives a more subtle view of the fabric of Indian society than the film—it distinguishes between those living in slums, those living in chawls and the wealthy classes—the very definition of "chawls" by the narrator as "a bundle of one-room tenements" whose lower middle-class inhabitants are "only marginally better off than those who live in slums like Dharavi" (Q & A 56) points to Swarup's desire to address a global audience, since in India itself the word "chawl" would have sufficed. In many respects, the novel seems to have been written primarily for foreign readers by an author observing his country from the outside. Moreover, Ram's repeated allusions to his mastery of the English language and to the advantages he draws from this seems to confirm that the novel, like the film, conveys a sense of British (Danny Boyle) and Western (Hollywood) superiority.

Strangely enough, the Indians seem to have been, on the whole, impervious to the film's message of hope and to the humour and drollery it contains. These two crucial features of the film, but also of the novel, are incidentally also typical of realistic spirit. They are exemplified by sequences of sheer comedy and pleasure in Q & A and in Slumdog Millionaire. Among such moments of pure delight features the opening scene of the film, where the children are shown playing on an airport runway, before being followed by the camera through the narrow streets of Dharavi, as they give policemen the slip. Another exulting episode in the film and in the novel is the scene where the children pretend to be official guides of the Taj Mahal and provide gullible tourists with fanciful and extravagant commentaries on the monument. In this light, realistic references were seen as part and parcel of a strategy aimed at asserting Western cultural superiority over India through the promotion of a depressing image of the country as miserable and still steeped in poverty.

However, such postcolonial jibes are worth investigating. In fact, this censorious Indian perception of the film and of such realistic references it contains can in turn be criticised as a biased desire to turn a blind eye to the massive poverty which persists alongside undeniable and extraordinary growth. As S. Dhume puts it, "India may boast homegrown programs in space exploration and nuclear power, but—as a first time visitor to India immediately notices and as the film mercilessly reveals—it also struggles to provide its people with electricity, sanitation and drinking water" (Dhume). In truth, Q & A and Slumdog Millionaire can be seen, in spite of a slight sensationalist tendency to insist on the sordidness of daily life in Indian slums, as fairly accurate portrayals of this undeniable paradox of Indian growth which the Indians are so keen to ignore and which strongly calls to mind Victorian England and

particularly Dickens's London. In fact the Indian interpretation of the film and its Dickensian references may be considered as symptomatic of what S. Dhume calls "the chasm between the country's self-perception and projection and any reasonable measure of its achievements" (Dhume).

While realistic references in Q & A and in Slumdog Millionaire awakened mixed feelings in the Indian public, they nevertheless successfully partook of the promotion of an Indian story on a global scale. Such realistic portrayal of an aspiring underbelly helped both Swarup and Boyle achieve worldwide success.

Conclusion:

The novel and the film's astute fusion of Indian and Western references, aimed at reaching cross-cultural publics, partakes of what has been defined in film terminology as "cinematic clustering" (Cowen qtd in Pandey 87), but could also be extended to texts as "textual clustering." In fact, the realistic allusions, the worldwide recognised quiz show—added, in the case of the film, to an international production team, which brought together a British director working in Hollywood, an Indian co-director, a British screenwriter, and Indian lead actors belonging to the India diaspora or stemming from the most cosmopolitan Indian cities (Dhume)—give the book and, to an even greater degree, the film, a truly global quality, emphasised by Joe Morgenstern in his review of Slumdog Millionaire for the Wall Street Journal. The previous observation shows that, strangely enough, the image of India, in spite of the country's cultural vitality and its rapid emergence on the word stage, still seems to need the mediation of references to the work of an author from the Western canon to be relayed to the world at large.

Besides their adaptations of the basic and typical Dickensian pattern of resilient street children and youngsters fighting to survive in Indian cities, Q & A and Slumdog Millionaire also share essential structural features with popular writing. Swarup's plot progresses haphazardly moving back and forth unexpectedly, in a rather bewildering manner, and it forces the reader to work out the precise chronology of events. They happen to be part and parcel of Indian culture. As a matter of fact, they are a key element of popular Indian plays of the end of the nineteenth century, and later of Hindi films, sometimes called, for that very reason, "masala movies" (Chiru-Jitaru 97). Some articles on Q & A and its adaptation have therefore claimed that Dickens had been "bollywooded" (Wadehra), but in fact Dickens's novels already contained the blending of genres which Swarup and Boyle are thought to have imposed upon them. Consequently, Swarup's novel and, up to a point, Danny Boyle's film can be seen neither as a colonisation of Indian cultural productions nor as an Indianisation of western ideologies.

At the end of the day, this creative process at work in Q & A and Slumdog Millionaire can be seen as a way of representing Indian twenty-first-century life in all its variety and paradoxes. The novel and its adaptation combine a variety of realistic narrative strategies in subtle and different ways, which reveal how strong but also how complex such portrayal influences till today, and how it can be used to understand and represent new and seemingly disconcerting social and cultural phenomena, like tentacular Indian megalopolises. A question however remains as to the relevance of this blend of realistic narratives through adaptation and portrayal of Indian culture more from other fictional tropes than from reality,

then what can it possibly tell us about today's India (Davie)? The answer lies in paying close attention to what Davie calls the "multi-layered complexity of social reality such narrative strategies and use of fictional tropes," point to substantiated historical facts. This "stereoscopic view" can be understood in this adaptation of Q & A and to Slumdog Millionaire. In both of these works, Realism and such references are used to reveal stark contrasts within Indian society, to reflect Indian anxieties about the country's identity and, last but not least, to flesh out Western imaginary constructions about India.

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