

*Slumdog Millionaire:*

Politics of Representation and Global Culture

by

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### Abstract

The film *Slumdog Millionaire* follows Jamal Malik, a young man who achieves the full prize offered on an Indian game show based on the British *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*, but his origins in the slums of Mumbai convince the show's producers that his credibility is suspect. The film reveals how he knew the answer to each of the game show questions by chronicling Jamal's perspective from childhood to adulthood. *Slumdog* was adapted for screen by *The Full Monty*'s Simon Beaufoy from a novel by Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup, *Q&A*. *Slumdog* is an international production, a collaboration between Hollywood and "Bollywood," India's film industry. Immediately following its release, the film received critical acclaim, but since produced a controversial discourse about the film's subject material, its representational work, its status as a cinematic production, and its political nature.

In each chapter, I address those major concerns expressed in *Slumdog*'s critical discourse. In Chapter One, I interpret *Slumdog* as an adaptation, offering close readings of its scene construction, character dynamics, and formal techniques as they relate to their textual source. I argue that *Slumdog* inserts additional scenes, manipulates character dynamics, and employs formal methods that work to strip away the ideological landscape present in Swarup's source novel. Those changes from text to film also work to render the specifically Indian cultural subject matter of *Q&A* into the film's negative and comedic elements.

While *Slumdog*'s filmmakers produce an Orientalist rendering of *Q&A*, they add only another layer onto the culturally-skewed content present in the film's source text. In Chapter Two, I situate Vikas Swarup and other similar novels within the critical discourse of the Indian English novel, arguing that these novels employ formal strategies that only work to further marginalize their poor and marginalized protagonists. I show how contemporary concerns within the genre about accurately representing social realities stem from the origins amidst the moment of decolonization in Indian. I argue that the critical voices seeking to reorient the genre's formerly-pervasive concerns for how Indian English novels embody "Indianness" toward a focus on how those novels ethically depict social realities, like poverty, are the critical voices articulating the most relevant representational concerns in the genre's discourse on novels like *Q&A*.

Finally, I perform an analysis of *Slumdog* as a production, tracing its cinematic lineage as a Western and non-Western film. I provide a history of the development of non-Western cinema specific to the Indian subcontinent, discussing the complex relationship between Indian people, filmmakers, and society to Western and non-Western cinemas. I argue that the critical discourse connected to *Slumdog* does not properly appreciate the Indian film industry's century-long, global dominance of film production, falsely conflating the newness of India's "economic miracle" with an interpreted "newness" of Bollywood's large size. This interpretive misstep along with a lack of appreciation for that conflicted relationship between Indian filmmakers, audiences, and society and those two global cinemas is one that works to make Bollywood and Hollywood appear much more different, historically separate, and incompatible than their histories actually suggest. Finally, the media discourse that perpetuates this idea of difference does a disservice to two industries with actual compatibility whose respective cultures are overdue for cultural

collaboration of the artistic sort that a film like *Slumdog* suggests, but does not achieve.

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### Introduction: Slumdog at the Oscars

January, 2009. The film with the second largest number of nominations for the 81<sup>st</sup> Academy Awards is *Slumdog Millionaire*, but the news seems only to shock *Slumdog's* cast and crew. From its late November limited release date, *Slumdog* enjoyed a generous helping of critical acclaim. From *Time Magazine*: “this is a buoyant hymn to life, and a movie to celebrate” (“Full of Life”). From *Rolling Stone*: “What I feel for this movie isn't just admiration, it's mad love” (“Slumdog Millionaire”). From the British *Telegraph*: “Danny Boyle's latest film *Slumdog Millionaire* is a wonderful tribute to Mumbai and its people” (“Review”). In their original reviews of the film, most critics – detractors and fans alike – were willing to bet that movie's “silverware glint of awards can't be far away” (“Slumdog Millionaire,” *Guardian*).

The *Slumdog* story: a young boy from “Asia's biggest slum” (Swarup 2) in Mumbai plays as a contestant on India's *Who Will Win a Billion*, but when he's suspected of cheating, police interrogators force him to explain how he correctly answered each question on the game show. These explanations cue a retrospective view of Jamal's brutal childhood: his mother was murdered by Hindu rioters, which forced him into a bond for survival with his brother Salim and another orphaned girl, Latika. Jamal's love for Latika drives his ambitions throughout the entire film. He loses her when the three children attempt to flee an abusive man's manipulative grip, later finds her hopelessly entangled in a forced relationship and vows to win her back by serendipitously catching her eye by appearing on the hyper-popular game show, *Who Will Win a Billion*. In the end, Jamal wins the game show prize and the girl of his dreams, and the film is capped off with a Bollywood style musical number set on a Mumbai train platform.

Lead actor Dev Patel was amazed by *Slumdog's* 10 Oscar nominations announced in late January. “For *Slumdog Millionaire* to be included in the nominations for the Oscars is a huge

honour. When we first began working on the film I don't think any of us ever imagined that we might end up attending the Oscars ceremony as a result" ("Nominations," *Guardian*). As *Slumdog* won all four of its nominated categories at the Golden Globes, the January film awards that serve as strong predictors for Oscar success, screenwriter Simon Beaufoy also expressed amazement with *Slumdog's* critical reception: "We really weren't expecting to be here in America at all at one time" ("Top Dog," *San Francisco Gate*).

*Slumdog* was an international production: adapted, filmed and edited by a largely British crew, a film whose financing and distribution were in the hands of British and American companies and whose actors and musical directors were largely Indian. Patel and Beaufoy speak to that internationalism. Beaufoy, a British writer whose work includes such British box office successes as *The Full Monty*, adapted the screenplay from a novel by Indian author and diplomat Vikas Swarup. Patel's family is of Indian Hindu descent, but Patel himself was born in Britain; the majority of his fellow cast members are Indian and have previously worked within India's film industry, often referred to as Bollywood ("Dev Patel," *Telegraph*).<sup>1</sup> *Slumdog's* production-level hybridity was packaged together to produce a "feel-good, rags-to-riches" story set in one of the world's most dynamic, rapidly-globalizing cities by the stylish director Danny Boyle: a racing, inspiring, colorful film that insists love conquers all, even poverty ("Indians don't feel good," *Los Angeles Times*). For many around the world, this uplifting story told through a hybrid cultural idiom, using the tools and artistic vision of Indians and the Westerners alike, was just the kind of project that deserved the affirmation of what has become the highest pronouncement of film quality in the industry, the reception of an Oscar.

The movie didn't just make it to the Oscars. It won eight out of ten categories for which it

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<sup>1</sup> A detailed discussion of Bollywood in the larger historical context of Indian national cinema will be found in a subsequent chapter.

was nominated, including the most coveted category of them all: Best Picture. On the night of February 22 2009, Hollywood was abuzz with *Slumdog* in a style akin to the final triumph of the film's protagonist, Jamal, as he answers correctly the game show's million dollar question to the erupting cheers of all Mumbai.

It was the music that seemed at the heart of film's achievements. A.R. Rahman, the famed Indian film composer, took home the Oscars for both Best Original Song and Best Original Score, making him only the fourth Indian to win an Academy Award (“Indian Joy,” *BBC News*). His acceptance speech was emotional, affirming the parallel between the hope that love inspires in *Slumdog*'s fictional world and the hope that love inspired in his own life: “all the people from Mumbai and the essence of the film, which is about optimism and the power of hope and our lives... All my life I’ve had a choice of hate and love. I chose love and I’m here” (“Indian Joy,” *BBC News*). After receiving word of his nominations for *Slumdog*, Rahman had no illusions about the significance an Academy Award would hold for his career: he's been wanting to work with an orchestra, for example, a possibility open to him by working in Hollywood, which would become all the more likely if he were to be honored on Oscar night.

It seemed that the Academy was indeed opening the Western film industry's doors wide open to Rahman. Invited to perform *Slumdog*'s two Best Song nominees in medley style with the third nominee, *Wall-E*'s “Down to Earth” as sung by John Legend, Rahman took the stage first to begin with “O Saya,” backed by a colorful Bollywood dance troupe. But as Rahman ended the “O Saya” piece, Legend picked up with “Down to Earth” while the Bollywood dancers remained onstage: The title track from the American film *Wall-E* was being performed together by an American musician and Indian dancers. The filmic and cultural harmonizing continued as Legend remained onstage after finishing his solo time for “Down to Earth”, combining his voice

with the re-emerging Rahman who lead into the final song of the medley, *Slumdog's* “Jai Ho.” Rahman's Bollywood music with its Hindi lyrics not only outshone any Western competitors in the Best Song Category – for films produced in 2008, only the music of *Slumdog* and *Wall-E* received nominations – it was the principle form of music presented for the Oscar program, sandwiching its *Wall-E* competitor to a mere 65 seconds of solo performance time. Indeed, “Down to Earth” composer Peter Gabriel declined the invitation to perform -- he didn't feel his song's 65 second time allotment was adequate (“John Legend,” *Mahalo*).

That Bollywood music was so thoroughly spotlighted by the Academy by way of *Slumdog's* musical fare was no insignificant acknowledgement of Indian cinematic legitimacy writ large. As Mihir Bose discusses in *Bollywood: A History*, perhaps one of the starkest differences between the products of Bollywood and Hollywood lies in the relationships between narrative and music in their films (32). A typical Bollywood film employs musical numbers heavily, and these moments need not hold any relation to the film's plot; in fact, they may be completely tangential (Bose 32). A second major distinction of Bollywood film lies again in its musicality: sequences are shot on location without audio, which will be later recorded in a studio and dubbed into the film (31). Music and musical norms unique to Bollywood film, then, mark the site of the starkest differences it holds with Western film: for the Academy Awards to celebrate such music means to celebrate Indian cinema itself, and thus in some way to celebrate what it means to be Indian, for the Indian cinema is so ingrained in the development of Indian culture in a post-independence world.

Yet for a film adapted from a book by an Indian novelist whose story is set in the city of Mumbai, a film enacted by a near-exclusively Indian cast and created by an almost exclusively Indian musical crew, the faces of those Academy Award winners were largely British; indeed, the

only Indians to win awards for the film were those involved musically. Furthermore, when director Danny Boyle stammered an acceptance speech for his Best Director Oscar, he admitted to a significant slight to that part of the production: “I forgot a guy. The guy who choreographed the dance at the end of the film. He's called Longiness. And I forgot him off the credits. And I only found out about it two weeks ago. I'm an idiot and I apologize from the bottom of my heart, Longiness” (“Acceptance Speech,” *Bollywood.com*). It was to Boyle's credit to name this mistake aloud in his award acceptance speech, but it was a real moment of embarrassment: though Indian author Salman Rushdie called *Slumdog's* final dance sequence “second-rate” (“A Fine Pickle,” *Guardian*), to overlook crediting the choreographer of the only Bollywood dance sequence in the film - and therefore the most visible nod to Bollywood in the film - was a bad oversight for an artistic project celebrating its culturally collaborative nature.

Indeed, not all critics felt positively about *Slumdog's* forthcoming trip to the Oscars; among both the film's detractors and fans alike there were many critics who remained skeptical that Oscar success ought to be necessary for any Indian film. The Bollywood industry and its global audiences are larger than Hollywood's – why should Indian films grovel for Hollywood recognition when their own industry has proven itself to be just as powerful, culturally influential, technically sophisticated, and autonomous as anything produced in the West? Certainly, no Western filmmaker holds his/her breath in anticipation of recognition by any South Asian cinema awards ceremony.

As if in fulfillment of these critics' skepticism, *Slumdog's* Bollywood team received some subtle slights at the Oscars. The schedule for awards presenters slated *Slumdog's* lead actress, Frieda Pinto, to break the envelope for Best Foreign Language Film. Whether intentional or no, the alignment of Pinto with the only Oscar category specific to foreign films could be read as a

move to equate Pinto and her Indian colleagues in *Slumdog* with foreignness, with otherness. Pinto herself represented a further distinction: neither she nor any of her fellow cast members received a nomination for an Oscar acting category, making *Slumdog* one of a rare number of films in Oscar history to be awarded Best Picture yet lack any nominations for its acting (“The Oscars,” *AMC Filmsite*). Indeed, the acting category is perhaps the most nationalistic category at what is, in fact, an expressly international awards ceremony: 70% of past winners for Oscar acting awards were Americans, yet the Academy's earliest rules state that “No national... distinctions are to be considered” (Levy 81).

The desirability of the Academy Awards is problematic: while global filmmakers must reckon with a truly conservative institution, the Academy's longevity as the oldest film award in the world has inevitably endowed its pronouncements of global film quality with a much-coveted prestige that translates into upotential for career advancement (Levy 23). The Academy's conservatism stems from its membership conditions, which allows members to remain on board through their lifetime (Levy 23). This means that there is at least one generation difference between Academy members and their award nominees, and two generations between members and average filmgoers (Levy 23). The Academy, then, is less likely to recognize, for example, young, innovative filmmakers; it is an American-based institution that has long held biases about what constitutes quality art in the industry. So even though India's national cinema is as old as America's, even though the worldwide consumption of Indian cinema has long surpassed that of Hollywood's, Indian cinema and its aesthetics have not as long stood on equal cultural footing with Hollywood film in the eyes of the Academy (Armes 108). Indeed, it has taken nearly a century for the Academy to recognize Bollywood productions, and it has not necessarily acquiesced in wholly egalitarian terms. By the time the Academy thought to nod in the direction

of legendary Indian director Satyajit Ray, he could only accept the Honorary Award from his death bed. More importantly, Academy members made the case for Ray's recognition in terms of his exceptionalism within an underdeveloped film industry:

Isn't it curious that the newest, the most modern of the arts, has found one of its deepest, most fluent expressions in the work of an artist like Ray, who must make his seem less films--many have been masterpieces--in a chaotic and volatile corner of one of the world's oldest cultures, amidst the most stringent shortages of today's advanced movie-making material and equipment? (“Critics on Ray,” *Satyajitray.org*)<sup>2</sup>

These comments were made in 1991, but the language of technical deficiency as conflated with civilizational difference is one that hints of an imperial rhetoric. It is clear that at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Hollywood's foremost keepers of film culture were still interpreting Indian cinema as an elementary one: overarching assumptions about India as a developing nation influenced Hollywood filmmakers to assume an equally underdeveloped quality in film production possibilities.

I rehearse *Slumdog*'s presence at the 2009 Academy Awards in order to illustrate in microcosm the complexities connected to the creation and reception of hybrid cultural products, and particularly in *Slumdog*'s case, the creation and reception of a cultural product whose hybridity positions it within Indian and Western literary and cinematic landscapes. The film's complex, hybrid status increases the necessity of treating *Slumdog* with a critical and analytical eye. It is tempting to interpret film as a cultural unit that can speak for itself and needs no further elaboration. Film's association with entertainment value and the presumption that its viewers make a limited commitment in order to experience it (two or three hours at most) can make film

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<sup>2</sup> The Academy often bestows an Honorary Award for persons whose achievement does not fit into the Oscar's predetermined categories – in Ray's case, the award was bestowed in recognition of his career in totality.

appear to be a fleeting and perhaps even dispensable mode of cultural production and consumption. As if reflecting that sense of film's seemingly easy consumption, the critical and media discourses connected to films often feel hasty or underdeveloped; they insufficiently account for the wider critical and cultural landscapes of which all cultural products, including film, are a part. It is not within the scope of this thesis to discuss the broader subject of film's reception as a cultural product, but it is my intention to do so in the terms specific to *Slumdog*.

The media analysis connected to *Slumdog* has been fragmented yet suggestively rich. In many cases, media sources offer readings of *Slumdog* as if the film could speak for itself as a single, isolated text. Where some critics draw upon the cultural discourses and histories in order to make more in-depth readings of *Slumdog*, they often do so only in sparse bits and suggestive pieces. Because of the complexity of *Slumdog*'s hybrid nature and its status as an adaptation, the kind of voices that comment on this film include experts in film theory, film production, literary theory, literary authorship, postcolonial theory, social and cultural history, and studies of global poverty and development. Discourse participants juggle diverse and complex concepts: globalization, global culture, representational politics, transnational media, international co-production, Indian English novels, Bollywood. And beyond these participants' diverse ranges of expertise, beyond the diverse range of abstract concepts juggled among them, this discourse has accrued a multiplicity of participants who are disparate in national and cultural origin, coming from India, Britain, the United States, and beyond. This fragmented yet suggestively rich discourse connected to *Slumdog*, then, deserves to be more fully fleshed out, more completely harmonized in order to create a more coherent set of analytical platforms from which to interpret the film.

I have identified the most salient, recurring, and thought-provoking modes in which

*Slumdog* has been discussed by these discourse participants, and my chapters reflect those emphases. In Chapter One, I read *Slumdog*'s story and formal elements as a text, supplying an additional mode of reading that has lacked within critical reviews of *Slumdog*: analyzing the film as an adaptation of its source text, *Q&A*. This form of analysis is particularly strategic because it allows us to forego reliance on the professed intentions of *Slumdog*'s filmmakers – we don't have to accept Danny Boyle's statement about why he staged scenes as he did, but can interpret *Slumdog*'s scenes with respect to their presence, absence, or difference in *Q&A*. I therefore interpret *Slumdog*'s adaptational choices from its source text by offering close readings of its scene construction, character dynamics, and formal techniques. I argue that *Slumdog* inserts additional scenes, manipulates character and character dynamics, and employs formal methods that work to strip away the ideological landscape present in Swarup's source novel. Those changes from text to film also transform the specifically Indian cultural subject matter of that source novel into negative and comedic elements. I argue that these adaptational choices should be understood through a postcolonial theoretical framework, employing Edward Said's concept of the West and Western cultural forces as culturally domineering and manipulative with respect to Eastern culture and artistic products (Desai and Nair 75). I do not, however, want to argue that Swarup is a hero of realism while Boyle is the presumptuous Westerner who turns an Indian novel's content into stylishly convenient fantasy. While some critics have indeed blamed *Slumdog*'s British filmmakers as the singular force behind *Slumdog*'s problematic representations, such an argument ignores Swarup's own intentions and literary influences as a contemporary Indian novelist in English.

In Chapter Two, I interpret the film's representational problems as parallel to and influenced by problems of representational authenticity in other contemporary fictional

mediums, particularly Indian English novels. I position *Slumdog* and its source text as examples of fictional forms struggling to represent the real, and more particularly, as examples of fictional forms embroiled in debate about how to represent Indian culture and India's poor. To provide a broader historical and literary perspective for thinking about these issues, I elucidate a critical history of the Indian English novel, which has been concerned with these representational problems since its formative moments (Riemenschneider 2). I offer close readings of *The White Tiger*, a novel strikingly similar to *Q&A*, which both exhibit formal characteristics -- avoidance of specificity, employment of stereotypes, contrivance of chaotic and anarchical tones, and use of first-person narration -- that limit an effective, coherent representation of their poor protagonists. I will argue that, as we see in *Slumdog Millionaire*, the problematic formal choices of these fictions can only work to further marginalize the already-marginalized voices of the real social stratum represented by their protagonists.

While *Slumdog*'s critics have often considered both its cinematic and literary influences interchangeably as they make analyses of its representational problems, literature and cinema are in fact two discrete and significantly unique forms of cultural production, and as such, ought to be considered separately in an analysis of *Slumdog*. I use the third chapter of this thesis, then, to contextualize *Slumdog* as an international production influenced by both Western and non-Western cinema. I offer a history of the development of non-Western cinema specific to the Indian subcontinent and compare how Indian people, filmmakers, and society relate to Western and non-Western cinemas. I argue that the critical discourse connected to *Slumdog* does not properly appreciate the Indian film industry's century-long, global dominance of film production (Armes 108); it falsely conflates the newness of India's "economic miracle" with an interpreted "newness" of Bollywood's large size. This interpretive misstep in combination with a lack of

appreciation for the conflicted relationships that Indian filmmakers, audiences, and society have with those two global cinemas makes Bollywood and Hollywood appear much more different, historically separate, and incompatible than their histories actually suggest. Finally, the media discourse that perpetuates this idea of difference does a disservice to two compatible industries whose respective cultures are overdue for cultural collaboration of the artistic sort that a film like *Slumdog* suggests, but does not fully achieve.

Filmmakers who create adaptations from literary texts will first act as readers. Like any reader, they encounter a fictional world that is necessarily incomplete; they supply form to the spaces where narrative is limited or silent. Consider the first person narrator of a literary text: a single, pervasive voice transmitting a sequence of events that will likely animate multiple characters, but will do so from a distant, external vantage point. This is a severely psychologically and perceptually limited experience of plot. How can it be translated into a cinematic form (Stam 14)? Because filmmakers work with auditory and visual frames focused upon spaces in time, techniques used to communicate a limited perspectives might include changing the way light is cast on objects, shooting in extreme close-up, or restricting the sounds focused upon in the filmed environment. Already from this short list it is obvious that cinema can't truly replicate first-person narration throughout an entire film: who could sit through extreme close-ups shot one after another, accompanied by two full hours of voice-over narration? When the first-person storytelling mode enters the corporeal, the reader-turned-movie-goer is struck by just how loud and all-over is that narrator's imagined world – we could only tolerate it for short spurts of time. Filmmakers must make decisions about what they will do with those great spaces of time when the storytelling mode is not and cannot be a near-literal translation of its literary counterpart. At its most basic formal level, then, film can only get so close to recreating the text it is trying to adapt.

The language I've begun to use implies that filmic adaptation should be construed by its fidelity to a source text, an implication that begs some scrutiny. Film theorist Robert Stam proposes a long list of unique arguments for why critics are predisposed to privileging literature over moving images: an assumption that older arts are superior arts; “the valorization of the verbal, typical of cultures rooted in the sacred word of 'religions of the book'” (5); even a kind of

class prejudice that interprets film as a more easily digestible cultural experience, one that demands a more limited commitment than that required to read, say, a three hundred page novel (6). “Too much of the discourse,” Stam argues, “has focused on the rather subjective question of the quality of adaptations, rather than on the more interesting issues of (1) the theoretical status of adaptation, and (2) the analytical interest of adaptations” (4). The theoretical status of adaptation was transformed by the developments of the structuralists and poststructuralists, who developed theories “in the 1960s and 70s that argued for an approach to scrutinizing all signifying practices as shared sign systems productive of 'texts' worthy of the same scrutiny as literary texts” (8). Because both the written word and cinematic image are forms for signifying, structuralist semiotics work to level the hierarchy that would position one form over the other. “Speaking more generally, the move away from the 'work' to more diffuse notions like 'textuality'... and 'the literary' facilitates a retracing of boundaries which allows for more inclusive categories, within which adaptation becomes simply another 'zone' on a larger and more variegated map” (9). Filmic adaptation, then, inhabits a space within a larger landscape of signifying practices; it must be understood as a text within a complex textual world, not as part of a simple binary relationship with a single and original work of literature.

Stam offers us a conceptual framework for approaching such a complex adaptation as *Slumdog Millionaire*. Both international as a production (both crew and acting teams hailed from Western and Indian film centers) and cross-national as a project of filmic adaptation (British director Danny Boyle adapted a novel by Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup), *Slumdog* offers an opportunity to understand contemporary ideas and imaginings about India from a Western vantage point. In fact, *Slumdog* opens up to us a unique and clear platform for observing such a cultural interaction directly because of its status as adaptation. Stam discusses how filmic

adaptations can provide such fresh readings of a novel's content:

Adaptation... is a work of reaccentuation, whereby a source work is reinterpreted through new grids and discourses. Each grid, in revealing aspects of the source text in question, also reveals something about the ambient discourses in the moment of reaccentuation. By revealing prisms and grids and discourses through which the novel has been reimagined, adaptations grant a kind of objective materiality to the discourses themselves, giving them visible, audible, and perceptible form. (45)

Swarup's *Q&A* tells a story about a slum dweller from Mumbai. Three years later, *Slumdog* filmmakers produced a "visible, audible, and perceptible" interpretation using Swarup's story as its foundation. In doing so, to use Stam's rhetoric, *Slumdog* has forced our attention toward the discourses that *Q&A* either directly or indirectly concerns itself with: poverty; race; neocolonialism; religion and religious conflict; and with India at large as imagined on myriad levels and from both domestic and Western perspectives – Indian people, economies, urbanity, society, and its place in a globalizing world. By adapting Swarup's story, then, *Slumdog* has laid bare and made corporeal certain ways of thinking about and imagining these discourses.

For all Stam's theoretical productivity on filmic adaptation in the abstract, his meditations are noticeably limited in terms of adaptation as a cross-national project and the kinds of ideological reworkings resultant through that unique adaptation process; both of these subjects are pertinent, of course, to the *Slumdog* project. Stam outlines the directions in which filmmakers can reorient their source text's ideology:

Many of the changes between novelistic source and film adaptation have to do with ideology and social discourses. The question becomes whether an adaptation pushes the novel to the "right", by naturalizing and justifying social hierarchies based on class, race,

sexuality, gender, region, and national belonging, or to the “left” by interrogating or leveling hierarchies in an egalitarian manner. There are also “uneven developments” in this respect... Film adaptations often “correct” or “improve on” their source texts, and from many different and even contradictory directions. (43)

To illustrate, Stam offers the example of *The Color Purple* (1985) as an adapted text. The “rebellious and independent” Shug of the text is rendered filmically as a less bisexual character who reconciles with her father at the film’s end – Shug and her father do not reconcile in the text (43). These choices nudge “the film in a more patriarchal direction” (43). In the case of *The Color Purple*, then, we find filmmakers lifting out discourses of gendered power and reworking them toward a more conservative tone. Stam proposes here only a few and well-defined directions adaptations can project a source text ideologically: to the right, to the left, or contradictorily, and for the adaptation of *The Color Purple*, Stam illustrates that push to the right.

Stam's simple categories for ideological reworkings – left, right, or contradictory – seem to best apply to adaptations made by filmmakers whose cultural identities and familiarity are close to both the source material and the film's anticipated audience. Using the example of *The Color Purple* to illustrate this relationship, it is clear that its story's cultural import is an American one; it is an American novel about a uniquely African American experience. In this regard, its ideological underpinnings speak most directly and most immediately to American national identities. Filmmakers “mainstreaming” (Stam 43) the radical elements of this story will principally concern themselves, then, with the anticipated response or expectations of an American audience. More, the filmic adaptation of *The Color Purple* is produced by filmmakers whose own position with respect to those American identities is a close one; we can assume that they have some degree of familiarity with the particular American experience of slavery, the

struggle for black equality, and women's rights. In this case, then, the process of discerning and manipulating ideologically-edgy content from a film's source text may not necessarily render a more ideologically simplistic *product* – the film – but that *process* of discernment will be a different one, more cognizant as it is of the cultural attachments of the constituencies it will be engaging.

Danny Boyle's cast and crew are in a significantly different position for adapting Vikas Swarup's *Q&A* than those adapting *The Color Purple*. Swarup's story alone deals with religiously, linguistically, nationally and socio-economically diverse characters. Beyond that diverse story, the *Slumdog* film was produced by an international directing, acting, and artistic team. Finally, the film itself was marketed to international audiences. The discourses connected to the *Slumdog* story and project are much more culturally amorphous and expansive when viewed against the example offered by *The Color Purple*: we cannot so easily define or limit the cultural identities embodied in Swarup's story, nor those identities that the film will be expected to address or directly speak to. This particular filmic adaptation, then, participates in and reworks a complex of ideologies whose result cannot be so simply understood as left or right, as progressive or conservative: there are simply too many variables at work to locate them on a sliding political scale.

Structural and poststructural theories are important to consider in an analysis that interprets both a film and a novel as possessing the same kind of signifying significance, but no matter how level the abstract playing field may be for all textual signifiers, it is necessary to keep in mind the different treatments directed to filmic adaptations' source texts with respect to their literary status. Because *The Color Purple* holds a literarily canonical position (it won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction a year after publication), the strength of its authority in the adaptation process

will likely demand a greater degree if not a specific kind of fidelity (“Alice Walker,” *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). If filmmakers were to recklessly reach into and toss about the contents of a critically-acclaimed text within the first year it touched book shelves across the country, their work would not be taken seriously. Stam may argue that critics should move away from demanding fidelity to a source text, but the reality on the artistic ground is that critics - and perhaps, even audiences - will often demand that filmic adaptations respect something like the “essence” or “intentions” of a source text, particularly when that text is loaded with the somber cultural weight that comes with critical prestige.

*Slumdog* filmmakers were not dealing with an internationally well-recognized or canonical literary work. Vikas Swarup's novel appears only to have crept into bestseller lists in the beginning of March 2009, just following its success at the 2009 Academy Awards held in late February (“Reap Oscar Rewards,” *Guardian*). It did not receive a prestigious literary prize. Swarup's own insistence that his novel was influenced by category fiction - thrillers and mysteries - certainly did nothing to monumentalize the artistic sanctity of his text for its own sake. As such, filmmakers were in a better position to more freely manipulate the text for screen, and to ideologically re-orient its thematics with respect to the multiple and international audiences they envisioned.

*Slumdog* offers a unique case study for theorists of film adaptation. For our purposes, the theoretical foundations offered by scholars like Stam will only provide one way of approaching a broader reading of the project within a larger cultural framework, one that is concerned – at its most abstract – with questions of representation specific to class, race, and national origin as they are portrayed in transnational media, and the ways in which such media are received by international audiences, scholars, readers, and other participants in this discourse (Gentz and

Kramer 1). Indeed, *Slumdog* as a text wades in an environment of surrounding and influencing texts, one that is informed by the experience of British colonialism and neocolonialism. This historic influence continues to shape the way India represents itself to the West and how the West has attempted to represent India.

More fully developing that postcolonial perspective into theory, Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1971) forced cultural producers to think about the ways authorial position shapes represented subject matter (Desai and Nair 79). Writers, filmmakers, critics and audiences now must think about what it means for a middle class British author to represent poor Muslims in turn-of-the-century India. The author is no pure interpreter of knowledge, but an individual in a specific cultural context who holds a specific position of power, an individual who possesses overt intentionality and autonomy as well as unconsciously-held, culturally- and historically-propagated ideas about cultural “others”. Said speaks of this power dynamic as it exists between the global East and West, the precise dynamic at work in the *Slumdog* project:

For it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer. (79)

The publication of Said's *Orientalism* marked a foundational moment in theorizing

postcolonialisms: he illuminated for a world of academics, in no uncertain terms, that Orientalism – a “style of thought” founded upon a dichotomous distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident” that is both “ontological and epistemological” (72) - “can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (73). Said insisted that to talk about the East from a Western vantage point was to inevitably play a part in and carry the influence of a centuries-long form of domination. For Said, Orientalism is an intellectual and emotional platform from which the West to defines itself by contrast; as such, this “style of thought” has been historically and continues to be insidious in Western material and imaginative culture.

The *Slumdog* project, like all collaborative or transnational projects involving Western and non-Western participants, is an extraordinarily complex and immediately problematic artistic and cultural undertaking. Said's arguments illuminate the insidious power relations at work in cultural authorship, and the *Slumdog* project attempts to perform an authorship that represents Indian subject matter operate through a collaboration between Western and Eastern partners. While the novel *Q&A* may not be implicated in specifically East/West representational problematics, in both the case of *Q&A* and its filmic adaptation, the artistic creators at least hold class, cultural, and/or racial positions distant from that of characters they attempt to depict.<sup>3</sup> In the case of both *Q&A* and its filmic counterpart, the primary authors of each work have no claim to lived experience in the slums of Mumbai: their position vis-a-vis the subject matter they represent is indeed distant, and as such, those authors had to make methodological decisions

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<sup>3</sup> The question of a Western readership and its implications for constructing Indian fiction in English will be treated in greater detail in a chapter two.

about how to gain knowledge that would serve them in fictionally portraying an experience about which their personal knowledge is expressly limited.

Because of that distance between the representer and the represented, the methodological decisions each author made to fill in their knowledge gaps were directly related to broader artistic decisions about the realism or imaginativeness of their work. For *Slumdog*, those artistic decisions are not clearly settled; it is unclear whether the film intends in some way to operate as a romance, a comedy, or a documentary. Indeed, the critical conversation about *Slumdog* debated whether or not such genre distinctions matter: should a film depicting poverty be expected to provide some jolt of realism in its presentation? How should these jolts be constructed, and can they indeed be meaningful for audiences? These are just a very few subsets deriving from a larger question about how artists choose to locate their created, fictional worlds with respect to the real world upon which they base their ideas, scenarios, and inspiration.

Said's arguments I've treated here are reminders for the importance of examining the position of an author with respect to their created work, yet it is also important to consider the position of the anticipated audiences with respect to that work. Based upon the varying cultural background that informs their judgment, international audiences will interpret and react differently to a film's formal elements or to the specific lived experience that inspires the story world. For even the most well-researched and self-aware filmmakers dedicated to producing a culturally egalitarian collaboration among international participants, international productions face the serious problem of addressing vastly different and culturally diverse movie goers. Whether one rigidly aims for verisimilitude or shrugs off such a goal in favor of communicating an emotive experience, if you produce a film for both Indian and British audiences, you will be dealing with many divergent ideas about what constitutes representational authenticity. It is no

surprise, then, that *Slumdog* has generated an at-times intensely heated discourse: it speaks to different constituencies that have different expectations about how fiction ought to be represented in film.<sup>4</sup>

Surprisingly, however, few bloggers, journalists, film critics, or scholars have yet opted for a simple method for thinking about the film as a text: aligning *Slumdog* with its source literature, *Q&A*, in an attempt to hold these fictional works accountable for the racially-, culturally-, and class- specific signifiers they nevertheless carry despite authorial claims to an artistic license that, they in some degree claim, excuses their works from operating on a factually-authentic or documentary level. Indeed, it seems the discourse around *Slumdog* has been too choked by questions about what the film is trying to say about India, about poverty, or about life in Mumbai. It has been marked by an absence of some attempt to trace the ways the film speaks to and plays off of the expectations and latent assumptions of its diverse viewership, a diversity that allows filmmakers to dodge accountability for its decision making processes. Filmmakers are able to say: we decided to include this scene because it conforms to Indian aesthetic sensibilities; we decided to change this character dynamic in order to make it more clear to Western viewers. The possibilities of picking and choosing which cultural traditions and/or genre-related expectations to speak to creates an easy legitimacy for artistic decisions that may not be ethically legitimate on their own terms. By better understanding the way *Slumdog* was produced from the foundation laid by *Q&A*, we will better understand the ethical legitimacy of filmmakers decisions on their own terms, tracing how filmmakers chose to render for a broader, global public Swarup's rags-to-riches story about a boy who comes from Mumbai's slums.

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<sup>4</sup> A fuller discussion of those audience expectations specific to India will be treated in Chapter Three.

From its opening moments, it is clear that Danny Boyle's film is carefully, thrillingly stylized. The viewer is jostled between three anachronistic scenes, which are spliced together in rapid montage: the set of India's *Who Will Win a Billion* where eighteen year-old Jamal Malik “from Asia's biggest slum” (Swarup 2) begins to play as a contestant, starting the sequence of question-and-answer that provides both the format of the game show and, broken into segments, will provide the backbone of the film's narrative arc; the Mumbai police station to which Jamal was hauled for interrogation on suspicion of cheating; and an as-yet-ambiguous scene where hands let fall hundreds of bills into a dark bathtub below. The pacing is rapid. Viewers learn quickly that they must not only keep up with anachronistic plot scrambling served by way of montages, flash-backs and flash-forwards, but also, they must transition from hearing characters speaking English to characters speaking Hindi, which necessitates unpredictable, intermittent English-subtitle reading. Beyond the rapidity, Boyle impresses viewers with his artistry. These three scenes presented in the film's opening moments involve layers of sound bridging and other subtle audio manipulation, while fade-to-black flashes of steamy yellow rooms (the police interrogation room) and ambiguous, nearly-abstract props (the bills falling into the tub) impress upon viewers that these filmmakers have aesthetic ambitions, and that their grip on that aesthetic vision is a strong one.

By the time viewers are thrust back in time, then, to follow the route by which Jamal came to know the answer to question number one on *Who Will Win a Billion*, they have been trained to catch whatever may be thrown onto the screen. And, literally, the first image introducing us to the childhood life of the boy Jamal is a child running directly toward the camera, swinging his arm upward in a throwing motion; we learn seconds later that Jamal is playing a game of cricket on an empty airline runway with a group of children from Dharavi, a

slum of Mumbai and Jamal's home.

This image is a loaded one. The throwing motion works as an embodied expression of what seems to be the filmmakers' intentions – viewers must catch the culturally-unfamiliar, sometimes-uncomfortable and rapid pitches to be thrown throughout the film. But more, this image also functions as a presentation of the film's title: the child who runs toward the camera is wearing a tank top with the screen printed words “Slumdog Millionaire” across his chest. As he runs, the boy's motion is sped up to exaggerate the stillness of the freeze frame that immediately follows. That frozen image captures the boy as his arm reaches its full upward height in mid-swing, allowing viewers to see in full the title words on his shirt. In the initial seconds that the boy runs toward the camera, the image is out of focus; in the final second, just before the boy's sprint is frozen into a still image that fills the screen, the image is snapped into focus. During that fleeting second of visual clarity when the image is in focus, the viewer is forced to make sense of this creative approach to title presentation. Why did filmmakers choose to insert the film's title into the very space and time of the story world? Why does is a character “wearing” that title, and who is he?

The in-focus, frozen image that lingers briefly onscreen fits only the child's torso in the frame; his face is not visible. His only distinguishing features are the thinness of his body and the brownness of his skin. The viewer has no idea if this child is Jamal's young self, and we come to find out that it is indeed not. This an important moment for Jamal's specific character: the moment when the narrative transitions from the primary plot of the adult Jamal's life to the subplot of his childhood. But the viewer makes that transition through the image of an unidentified, faceless child – not by way of Jamal. Furthermore, Jamal was the only person to be referred to as a “slumdog” in the preceding scenes, so the viewer has been trained to associate

Jamal with that specific referent. By choosing another, unidentified and faceless child to embody that term by way of presenting the film's title on his t-shirt, the term becomes muddied, non-specific, and mercurial. The move to equate both Jamal and a faceless, brown-skinned boy with "slumdog" seems to deny Jamal's character the specificity and primacy he deserves as the protagonist of this story, and expands the association of the term to refer to brownness in the abstract.

This is not only a careless move, but it seems to function within the larger dynamics of confusion at work in the film. The ambiguity of this child's identity not only works to associate brownness in general with the term "slumdog," but it also works to expand the frame of reference for the specific fictional story the film is about to tell. Because filmmakers chose to dress an unknown boy in a t-shirt that displays the title of the film, "Slumdog Millionaire", filmmakers seem to suggest that the specific story of "Slumdog Millionaire" may be or should be applicable to others besides Jamal; the film begins, then, with the suggestion that this is not just Jamal Malik's story. Indeed, this small act works to distance the viewer from the film's protagonist, and forces them to search for clarity throughout the rest of the film, questioning: Is this the fictional story of Jamal Malik, a slum-dweller from Mumbai, or is this a fictional story about the slums of Mumbai?

The viewer's search for clarification is only complicated further as the film continues, often signalling a documentary style and rendering equivocal the purely fictional nature of the film. One of these documentary moments is of particular interest when evaluated together with the title presentation sequence and the faceless, onrushing boy: when the child Latika takes revenge on Jamal's increasingly controlling brother, Salim. After a day of begging in the streets of Mumbai, an activity overseen with militaristic gusto by Salim, Latika stuffs a wad of hot

chillies under Salim's blanket and onto his groin. Soon, he awakens in shock and rushes out into an open washroom, naked and screaming, spraying his groin with a stream of cold water to ease the pain. Meanwhile, we are presented with images of this scene shot from multiple directions and utilizing multiple filming techniques. One of these directions/techniques focuses the frame upon the gathered crowd of laughing children who have come to witness the spectacle of the screaming, naked Salim. This shot is filmed from a fixed, steady position and on an angle looking up slightly from below, which works to exaggerate the height of the throng of prankster children – using this up-from-below angle is a conventional formula for indicating triumph over an enemy. Another direction from which this scene is shot, however, is looking on at Salim directly from the position of the gathered crowd. From here, the camera seems to become another member of the crowd, fighting for a good view of Salim in his compromised state. The camera jostles unsteadily at the level of the children's eyesight; the frame flickers at the edges, broken into on the left and right side by the blur of extreme close-ups made by the bodies in the crowd.

Because the documentary style convinces viewers that the camera man is simply and innocently doing its job, responding to the demands of the naturally-unfolding, quickly-changing events in the real world, the fact that the camera's impulse toward capturing the real is one that wants to look more closely at a boy's naked body is a detail that becomes obscured. While jostling for a better view of Salim, the focus of the frame drops suddenly from his upper torso to zoom in for a split second on Salim's groin area, where his hand rapidly splashes water where there had been “chillies on his willy”. Precisely because the camera is acting like a member of the crowd, which in this scene is made up of innocently giggling children, the film viewer might be allowed to forget that they're getting close-ups of a little boy rubbing his hands on his genitals.

This image is made innocent because it is being witnessed in the same way that innocent children are witnessing it. And because this scene is shot from two directions and through two styles – one whose premeditated, steady angle connotes calculated art and the other creating the impression that events in the real world are being captured – it grows even harder to interpret the appropriateness of this scene. With multiple points of view granting us these images of Salim's humiliation, the accountability for their production is blurred and all-but lost.

While the possibility for reading multiple or conflicting intentions in a given film sequence is not necessarily problematic in itself, *Slumdog's* penchant for doing so in the context of politically-, racially- or culturally- specific subject matter can indeed become problematic. In several moments, *Slumdog* allows viewers to witness the nude or humiliatingly-exposed bodies of the children of Dharavi – poor children, children with brown skin, children whose otherness stirs a voyeuristic instinct that demands to see fully and completely that which is culturally exotic from spectator's point of view. The “chillies on his willy” scene illustrates this voyeuristic impulse that demands to see the other: indeed, it is striking just how aggressively the camera observes the details of Salim's naked body. The frame is filled first with a shot of his bare backside and buttocks, and next focuses on his bent upper torso; in both shots, it is clear that Salim is frantically spraying his groin with cold water to counter the burn from the chillies. Such images could have ended here: the nature of the prank pulled on Salim has been made very clear for viewers. Yet the camera does not stop. It pushes further: the focus jolts shakily downward to frame Salim's thigh area in profile, such that we see in greater close-up the shaking motion of his hands over his groin.

This sequence is not found in the novel *Q&A*: It was a wholly unnecessary and contrived fictional event, and its insertion by filmmakers betrays their belief that viewers needed an

additional entertainment or explanatory element that was unprovided in textual source material. Another, similarly contrived scenario that wasn't present in the novel is a sequence in which the protagonist, Jamal, is forced to jump into a pit of human waste so that he might catch a glimpse of his film hero, Amitabh Bachchan; in the shot immediately following, viewers see him dripping in feces. After Jamal breaks his way through the crowd and gets Bachchan's autograph, the camera quickly follows up on Jamal's physical condition by capturing his bath time, where we see his fully-visible and bare body obscured only by low lighting and a few soap suds. In the next scene, the camera captures Jamal wearing only his underwear, running through the streets to track down his traitorous brother who has sold his prized autograph. The Jamal here is a seven-year-old boy, and the Salim of the former sequence can't be much older than nine (Beaufoy 7). These inserted scenes betray the *Slumdog* camera's repeated, excessive interest in capturing images of the bare and humiliated bodies of Dharavi's children despite norms that frown upon media images of nude children, which tend to stir acute anxieties about pedophilia and child pornography. In *Slumdog*, however, the camera seems to go wherever the excitement arises, without apparent regard for such typical anxieties.

In moments like these when the camera seems empowered to grant any images that captures its interest, Danny Boyle's British camera crew acts in some way as the Western gaze that demands an opening through a closed door, an empowered gaze that will travel where it pleases, a voyeur whose privilege allows them a curiosity trip to the exotic, remote place peopled by others. Indeed, it is precisely because Boyle's camera is a combination of listless, uninhibited, and powerfully mobile that it takes on all the characteristics of the voyeur. Yet this same uninhibited listlessness could be understood as genre ambivalence: Boyle's audience receives a mixed-up stream of images that signals the comedic, the romantic, the dramatic, and the

documentary. Without standards holding Boyle's filming to genre-specific norms, any kind of image filmed in any style can be justified. This not only all-but eliminates the possibility of holding filmmakers accountable for their representational choices, but it also challenges the interpretive job of viewers. Genre cues can provide scaffolding for interpreting a film's content and images. Without them, viewers have to fall back on their own points of reference for interpreting the film's subject matter. When audiences possess little prior knowledge of a film's subject matter, when they possess few of their own interpretive reference points, the film may not be best translating the information that lies at the heart of the film's fiction. In sum, *Slumdog*'s listless voyeurism that defies genre categorization can be a strategy for both dodging filmmaker accountability and for limiting the coherence of the ideas that viewers can take away from the film's content.

Many film adaptations will make changes to the characters, plot and setting of its source novel, but *Slumdog* makes several and very visible changes. We learn straightaway that the book's protagonist underwent a name change from Ram Mohammad Thomas to Jamal Malik<sup>5</sup>. Why the need for a change at the level of such seemingly arbitrary detail? The book's iteration of the name, a mish-mash of religiously significant names (Hindu, Muslim, and Christian), is substituted in the film for one less culturally colorful, and instead, one that hints only faintly of a Muslim background.

The film also refigures much of the motivations for and character dynamics of the book's opening sequence – Jamal's arrest and interrogation in a Mumbai police station on suspicion of cheating on the gameshow *Who Will Win a Billion?* In *Q&A*, Jamal's first-person narrator makes clear that the “elders in Dharavi” warned him against appearing on the game show, which would

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<sup>5</sup> Throughout this analysis, I have chosen for the sake of clarity to use the name Jamal to refer to this protagonist in both his filmic and literary iterations.

mean “crossing the dividing line that separates the rich from the poor” (Swarup 2). Jamal wanted to make this game show appearance, then, to prove his worthiness as a human being, to celebrate one moment when a restaurant owner would not call him a “rabid dog” but, instead, smile at him with respect (3). *Slumdog* creates a new motive for Jamal's game show appearance: he hopes to catch the attention of the lost girl he loves, knowing that she watches the program. The change in motivation distances the character from an interest in proving himself to an oppressive society and moves him closer to a basic emotive interest: love for a girl. Jamal's motivation is depoliticized and culturally decontextualized: any movie goer, American or Indian, can relate to falling in love, but not all can relate to the oppressive, infuriating conditions of poverty in Mumbai as they're described by *Q&A*'s narrator.

Filmmakers worked to further simplify the social commentary of Swarup's opening scenes by reworking character dynamics in the police interrogation. In *Q&A*, the representative of the media company that holds rights to the game show and the show's producer are the people interested in accusing Jamal of cheating on the program. These men realize that Jamal's huge win on one of the show's early episodes would mean financial ruin for them, since they haven't yet seen the returns on their investment that would provide the cash for Jamal's prize. It is imperative for them to prove that Jamal cheated, and therefore, won't be allowed to claim his prize. They seek out Mumbai's Commissioner of Police for the purpose. The commissioner is told that Jamal answered all twelve game show questions correctly, winning one billion rupees, yet the commissioner must be pressured in order to be convinced to act as the producers desire:

“Okay. If you say he won a billion, he won a billion. So what's the problem?”

....“I want your help to prove that Thomas cheated on the show. That he couldn't have known the answers to all twelve questions without an accomplice. Just think. He's never

been to school. He's never even read a newspaper. There's no way he could have won the top prize.”

“Well... I'm not so sure.” The commissioner scratches his head. “There have been cases of boys from poor backgrounds turning out to be geniuses later in life. Wasn't Einstein himself a high school dropout?” (7)

First, it is noteworthy that the commissioner is not initially convinced of the white American producer's suspicions – he does not equate Jamal's position as a slum dweller with an incapacity to answer questions on a game show. The narrator here illuminates a cultural difference between the two: while the American is quick to equate India's poor with stupidity, the commissioner, being familiar with the people of Mumbai, perhaps recognizes that Jamal's Dharavi home is not a place for the unintelligent and destitute, but also has its own thriving economy and tight-knit community. Moreover, when the producers press the issue further, the commissioner remains unconvinced. This time, he makes an interesting rhetorical move, using Albert Einstein, the epitome of the great Western intellectual in the modern era, as an example of a poor man who nonetheless displayed brilliance. The commissioner highlights here a second nuance of cultural difference between him and the accusing producers: the producers' notion that what applies to the West in terms of intellectual and economic possibility – that the poor can display intelligence – does not necessarily apply to non-Western places like India. Here, then, Jamal's narration is sensitive to the way in which Westerners are looking at India, and the way in which the Indian authority in the room – the commissioner – challenges those Western ideas.

That Jamal is indeed sensitive to tensions between Westerners and Easterners, between brown-skinned and the white-skinned people, between rich and poor, is made obvious in many moments throughout this opening scene. Jamal notes that the producer wears “a suit and tie in

this stifling heat,” which, he says, “only a white man” would do (4). This “white man dabs his forehead with a handkerchief,” looking at Jamal “as though [he is] a new species of monkey” (4). And Jamal feels a similar gaze upon him from the producer's partner, media representative Billy Nanda, who declares that Jamal could not possibly be able to speak to them in English: “How could you expect him to speak English? He's just some dumb waiter in some godforesaken restaurant for Chrissake!” (5) Jamal's total experience in this scene, then, is one painfully sensitive to a cultural difference that is, in some cases, also racialized. He not only uses the term “white man” to refer to the American producer, and he interprets that white man's gaze upon him as one who looks upon “a new species of monkey.” Language of biological difference between racial groups is not a subtle form of racism – it speaks to an age of scientific racism, when Western anthropologists and biologists attempted to establish racial hierarchies based on phenotype. Racial dynamics in *Q&A*'s opening scene are overt, even heavy-handed. The narrator wants the reader to interpret this scene as rich, powerful and white Westerners causing a big fuss with Indian authorities, in whose city they thought they could make a buck by banking on the intellectual ineptitude of a poor, brown-skinned boy from Mumbai's slums.

*Q&A*'s sensitivity to neocolonial dynamics, racial prejudice, and socioeconomic power are sensitivities completely reworked for *Slumdog*. The filmic interrogation scene is driven by a different force.<sup>6</sup> The show's host, Prem Kumar, feeds Jamal an answer to a tough question when the two meet in the bathroom during commercial break. Jamal opts for a different answer – the correct one. When the show ends, Prem Kumar angrily escorts Jamal out the back door and into the hands of police officers, believing that Jamal must have certainly cheated. Here, the Mumbai police are not depicted as reluctant, skeptical accomplices in Jamal's interrogation, as they are in

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<sup>6</sup>Due to narrative anachronism, the viewer only learns who accused Jamal of cheating at the very end of the film.

Swarup's narrative. *Slumdog* characterizes this scene with Indians alone: they suspect Jamal of cheating, not rich, white Americans. This change in character dynamics casts Indian authority instead of white Americans as the abusers, as the men responsible for brutally torturing Jamal for an entire night (*Q&A* suggested only a brief rough-up).

Perhaps the most striking work of revision made upon *Q&A* for the *Slumdog* script is the insertion of a Hindu-instigated riot. Presumably, filmmakers drew upon specific historic instances of Hindu/Muslim rioting that indeed have broken out in Mumbai in the past decade (Mehta 40). Like the scenes where the camera voyeuristically fought for glimpses Dharavi's children in nude, humiliated positions, this Hindu riot sequence was also completely contrived for the film; in this case, it was added to the film in order to serve the plot on two levels. First, the scenario allowed filmmakers to create a different explanation for how Jamal became an orphan, substituting the book's explanation of ambiguous mother abandonment for his Muslim mother's death at the hands of a Hindu mob. Second, filmmakers created a new question for the game show that asks about the Hindu god Ram's accouterment, a detail Jamal learned, filmmakers show viewers, on the day of the Hindu riot. We find out that Jamal learned about the details of the god Ram's image by seeing a girl dressed in his likeness as Hindu rioters descended on Dharavi: she stood at the end of an alley, painted blue and holding a bow and arrow. Sure enough, Jamal learned from this girl the answer to the game show question: that the Hindu god Ram traditionally carries a bow and arrow. But this is a truly bizarre image for filmmakers to contrive: what would lead filmmakers to invent a game show question whose answer could only be found in the strange image of a child dressed up and painted in Ram's likeness, posing motionless but with an unsettled facial expression in the midst of a murderous riot? Are we meant to interpret the presence of this image as fantastical, surreal – the product of a traumatized

boy's frantic mind? Given that there are no other formal cues to suggest we interpret this as an imagined image (a blurred focus of the camera, for example), the viewer is given few tools for discerning how this image is meant to signify.

The game show question used in the book that most closely approximates this filmic substitute is one about the letters on Christ's cross at his crucifixion. In this book version of the question, we learn that Jamal picked up on the "INRI" detail during his time spent under the care of a Christian priest – this caretaker is also discarded by *Slumdog* filmmakers. Why, then, was it necessary to substitute the book's game show question about one religious tradition for a question about a different religious tradition; to ascribe to the story's protagonist an affinity for a religious tradition he does not embody in the source material (naming him the Muslim "Jamal"); and finally, to interject a subplot of religious persecution against the religious tradition (Islam) for which Jamal, in the book, has no affinity? This is a rather complex plot shift, but it can be understood within a larger trend in the film that narrows cultural signifiers and dynamics, forcing them to operate in more simplistic, reduced terms. The result is the near-total removal of white Westerners from the equation of power they hold in *Q&A*, while Indians and Indian Hindus are left alone in the film to play the bad guys; the result produced in *Slumdog* is a basically culturally homogenous story whose lack of ideological entanglements allows a more-purely emotive element about success against the economic odds to rise strongly to and commandeer the film's surface.

This cultural narrowing and reconfiguration is more subtly evident in extensively-altered family and interpersonal dynamics. Filmmakers imagined a family bond between Jamal and Salim, who are best friends in *Q&A*; they reimagined the character of Jamal's mother to be a disciplinary and stern force in her son's life, where in *Q&A* Jamal's mother remains a distant

mystery, having inexplicably abandoned him as a baby. But beyond basic relationship changes, the film discards the literary Jamal's rational temperament and values: in *Q&A*, Jamal takes a level-headed position against his friend Salim's film obsession, while in *Slumdog*, Jamal himself is obsessed with stardom. And when the film's Jamal secures the much-coveted signature of Bollywood mega star Amitabh Bachchan, his brother Salim is the one who steals the signature and sells it for cash. Between the film's imagining of Jamal's disciplinarian mother and the imagined cruelty of Jamal's brother, it's clear that *Slumdog* reworks the family life Jamal had in *Q&A* into a constellation of unreliable relationships. Filmmakers create a Jamal who cannot even depend upon the security of family bonds to help him through the challenges of a life lived in poverty: Jamal becomes completely alone in a dog-eat-dog world where corruption and hardship seep even into the realm of family.

Amitabh Bachchan's role in *Slumdog* with respect to Jamal reveals another part of the film where filmmakers seem to negativize the specifically Indian content alluded to or present in *Q&A*: in this case with Bachchan, that negativism is represented as comical. In one scene, the Bollywood megastar alights on Dharavi in his private helicopter, and an ecstatic Jamal decides that, in order to get close to the scene, he will jump into a pool of human excrement and escape the outhouse he's been locked into. To illustrate Jamal's emboldening love for Amitabh, the camera zooms in on a photo of the star that Jamal pulls from his pocket; this triggers a brief sequence of old Bollywood films featuring Amitabh, which is presented as a kind of Amitabh sampler for viewers who may be unfamiliar with him. In 1999, Amitabh Bachchan “was voted the greatest star of stage and screen of the millennium, ahead of Sir Laurence Olivier and Sir Alec Guinness” in a BBC Online Poll (“Film Legend,” *BBC News*); he was known for creating a new mode of role playing for Bollywood actors, which was called the “angry young man” in

contrast to the romantic norms that had preceded him (“Film Legend,” *BBC News*). Yet his career is represented comically in this sequence in *Slumdog*, with the images used to depict his previous roles including one where he inexplicably thrusts a mannequin's severed leg through the air; one where he makes a dramatic leap across the screen in slow motion; one where he cocks his head at an awkward angle and bursts into song. Amitabh's long and critically-acclaimed career is represented through the juxtaposition of these cinematic moments that seem selected particularly for their awkwardness, and whose decontextualized, rapidly-edited presentation in *Slumdog* only furthers their operation on a humorous level. This scene, then, embodies a doubly problematic refiguration of textual source material. Jamal is represented as desperately obsessed with a film star when, in *Q&A*, he disdains such forms of obsession. Further, Amitabh Bacchan's acting career is depicted as comical, laughable, even perhaps trivial – a condescending and innacuate representation that comes across as a jab at non-Western acting styles. In both cases, *Slumdog* filmmakers have moved to equate Indian characters, Jamal and Amitach Bachchan, as more irrational or trivial than either their original fictional representation or their actual acting career would suggest.

If we think that *Slumdog* is a success because it is a heart-warming romance whose non-traditional settings benefit Western movie goers, whose film tastes might only rarely allow them a glimpse of non-Western culture; if we say that it is successful in part because those white Westerners can connect and sympathize with Indian characters through a kind of story that is universally understood by humanity; if we say those things, than it must also be acknowledged that *Slumdog* achieved such a simple, universal love story at the cost of stripping away the source text's ideological and cultural environment. That is to say, the *Slumdog* version of Swarup's story is set in India, but it is an India peopled only by Indians who had problems with

only fellow Indians because of their corruption, because they abused their positions of power, because they randomly and wildly attacked fellow Indians for unexplained religious reasons; it is an India peopled by family members who doled out discipline and fomented distrust; it is an India peopled by Indians who are obsessed with trivial, comical actors. If the generalized element of the *Slumdog* story lies in its universal love story as embodied by the good guys, Jamal and Latika, the bad guys and the comical elements of the story speak with the greatest degree of specificity – that which is uniquely Indian and Hindu.

## Chapter Two: The Literary Landscape

This thesis has used *Slumdog Millionaire*, a text rich in cultural hybridities and marketed

to international audiences, in order to consider how culturally distant people learn about one another through fiction. In chapter one, I began to find ethically disappointing answers to that question through closely reading *Slumdog's* representational strategies. Its adaptation of Vikas Swarup's source text reorients interpersonal and inter-cultural dynamics to render Indian content negative and comedic. The lens of the *Slumdog* camera acts in many scenes as a voyeur that demands to view the full extent of the action within its settings and the humiliation of its characters, no matter where that action or humiliation leads its prospective spectators. The mixed genre signals that it creates – styling itself as a documentary, styling itself as a romance or comedy – allows *Slumdog* filmmakers to avoid accountability in problematic moments within the film by attributing the decisions they made to the standards permitted by any one of the film's copious formal styles. Through their Orientalist impulse, *Slumdog's* Western filmmakers only contributed another layer of skewed cultural content to the film's already-representationally skewed source text, Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*.

This second chapter extends examination of the *Slumdog* project's representational ethics by focusing on its literary source, *Q&A*, which is itself among a number of contemporary Indian English novels that receive criticism for their depictions of poverty. Novels like *Q&A* and Aravind Adiga's strikingly similar *The White Tiger* employ stereotypes in order to build characterizations of their poor protagonists' lived experience – blunt, vague, binary abstractions about difference or otherness that trigger pre-formed notions and emotions within readers. These novels also cultivate a chaotic, anarchical tone through first-person narration from the perspective of their poor protagonists. While the intimacy of the first-person style can convey the assumed desperation of the poor, this easy intimacy and erratic tone preclude deeper characterizations that would produce a fuller, more nuanced understanding of the protagonists'

social reality. In *Q&A* and *The White Tiger*, the use of stereotypes, first-person narration, and a chaotic tone reflect an authorial laziness: it suggests that middle class authors who are socioeconomically distant from the subject of their fictions, the Indian poor, who need not burden themselves with the research or experiences necessary for accurately depicting social realities in fiction.

The failure of novels like *The White Tiger* to offer a more complete, coherent depiction of Indian poverty informed by some detailed information or experience became an even more important concern when I learned two things in my research. First, novels like *The White Tiger* are being recommended through media and educational sources as a great literary option for learning about Indians and poverty in the developing world, and novels like *Q&A* and *The White Tiger* have or will be the subject of filmic adaptations, which will bring their representations to more and global audiences. Second, numerous non-fictional, English language representations of these poor, marginalized subjects are readily available in the form of Dalit autobiographies, which deliver the emotional import that seems to appeal to *The White Tiger* readers and depict nuanced, detailed, specific experiences that can stimulate readers' desire for deeper learning about this subject matter.

Narendra Jadhav's *Untouchables* – a contemporary example of Dalit literature, or the “literature of the oppressed” as described by literary scholar Guy Poitevin – is a book whose brief examination accentuates the important difference it maintains against fictions like *The White Tiger* (“Dalit Narratives,” *Centre for Cooperative Research in Social Sciences*)<sup>7</sup>. This work is based upon the non-fictional history of Jadhav's own family's rise out of poverty that began

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<sup>7</sup>See “Dalit Autobiographical Narratives: Figures of Subaltern Consciousness, Assertion and Identity” for a more extensive discussion of dalit autobiographies.

with his parents' ambitions; the novel is told from the alternating and multi-generational perspectives of Jadhav's mother, father, Jadhav himself, and, briefly, Jadhav's daughter. A single detail present in both Jadhav and Adiga's works offers a perfect illustration of their different representational strategies: the use of a metaphor that casts the city as a place of light, which in both narratives broadly signifies the city as a place of hope, a place where one can see all opportunities and create from them an autonomous life. Adiga ambiguously defines such a city/light metaphor and arranges it into a blunt binary, pitting the capital "L" term "Lightness" to categorize the city against a capital "D" term that categorizes rural poverty, the "Darkness." Jadhav employs the lightness metaphor more subtly, associates it with more specific referents, and does not arrange it a binary relationship. The metaphor is used from the perspective of Jadhav's father, Damu, as he enters the city of Mumbai for the first time, signalling his escape from the duties and stigma of the untouchable as normalized by his village:

The Mumbai of my dreams was woven with the pictures I had seen as a child on  
 Tulsirambaba's magic lantern. It had tall buildings, wide roads with speeding cars,  
 and trains that snaked along. Now here I was, in 1919, going to Mumbai as a twelve-  
 year-old. What did I feel – fear, anxiety? I was worried about the future and its  
 uncertainty. The reason I was happy to go to Mumbai, Sonu, was that I was actually  
 going to travel by train. I could not contain my excitement. You know, the first time I  
 had seen a train, I had screamed, "The mountain is coming at us!" (Jadhav 109)

Jadhav suggests the same association of cities with luminosity – for Damu, Mumbai is luminous and full of imaginative possibility like the pictures he had seen in "Tulsirambaba's magic lantern" -- but this luminosity is articulated not in terms of an abstract, capital "L" lightness as a categorizational term. Jadhav also does not imply that poor, rural life ought necessarily to be

rendered as totally negative, the equal and opposite category of this new, hopeful city life: instead, for Damu, these dreams of Mumbai are informed by the joyful experience he remembers from the village, the images from Tulsirambaba's lantern. Lightness comes to Damu's life through a causal, dynamic relationship between village and city. This sophisticated construction reflects Jadhav's detailed knowledge of his father's experience: when any human being deeply understands the experience of another, their story becomes animated through the idiom of process, of growth, of subtle change; when that knowledge of human experience is limited, its story may only find expression through rigid, underdeveloped binary categories such as Adiga's Darkness/Lightness, which will provide a source of ready-made associations. These differences in representational strategies – nuance versus binaries, specificity versus ambiguity – stem from the difference between their authors' depth of understanding and experience with their subject matter, and this marks a crucial difference in the effectiveness of the Indian poor's depiction in Indian non-fictions like Dalit autobiographies and in Indian English novels like *The White Tiger* and *Q&A*.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss critical concerns about representing Indian cultural identities as they were articulated historically and contemporarily within the Indian English novel. This discussion will show how those concerns have been historically conflated with finding a search for fictional modes through which Indianness can find its most authentic expression (Reimenschneider 2), but in the wake of globalization and increasing cross-cultural influence, some critics have sought to eliminate categorizational worries about national cultural authenticity, asserting instead that the content of the Indian English novel may be and should be culturally wide-ranging (“Cult,” *Boston Review*). The intervention of these latter critics highlight a more urgent ethical problem that exists at the level of universal literary concerns, like social

realism, as they apply to the depiction of Indians' lived experiences. In the case of novels like *The White Tiger* and *Q&A*, which drew critical energies by virtue of their wide global attention – prestigious book awards and successful filmic adaptations – the particular kind of subject matter that faces concerns for social realism is Indian poverty, and the particular problems with their realism finds expression in formal elements like the avoidance of specificity, employment of stereotypes, contrivance of chaotic and anarchical tones, and the use of first-person narration.

Vikas Swarup did not write the story of a poor young man in an effort to put forward a “social critique” (“Luckiest Novelist,” *Guardian*). He spoke with *The Guardian* about the novel's creation and motivations after the release of *Slumdog* in 2009: "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" (“Luckiest Novelist,” *Guardian*). Despite the apparent interest Swarup's protagonist takes in articulating basic cultural, socio-economic and racial dynamics, as I discussed in the previous chapter, Swarup does not see his novel as a social commentary, nor as dependent upon factually accurate representations. In other words, Swarup was not interested in creating a well-researched novel: his goal was to communicate a certain plot, which could be dressed up in whatever bits and pieces of information might be handy.

Swarup distances himself from Indian writers like Arundhati Roy, whose work took a sharp turn from writing internationally-heralded, beloved fiction to a kind of writer activism in the wake of India's burgeoning nuclear program. “She had,” the *Independent* explains in a 2009 interview with the author, “...to write about the apocalyptic folly of a government that found displays of nuclear-fuelled nationalism more of a priority than educating its 400 million illiterate

inhabitants” (“Feral Howl”). Her goal as a writer, then, shifted toward directly addressing the lived experience of contemporary social problems and inequities in India. Not surprisingly, Roy voiced strong criticism of *Slumdog*: it de-contextualizes poverty, she said, and it drugs those millions in poverty with “impossible hope” that life can be turned around by pure luck, like winning a game show prize: “...what can I say other than that it is a wonderful illustration of the old adage, ‘there’s a lot of money in poverty’” (“Arundhati Roy,” *Pulse*). Roy did not see in *Slumdog* simply a captivating plot strung with interesting detail, as Swarup interpreted his work, but she saw in the filmic adaptation a failure to represent lived social realities and create a fiction that works actively and constructively to address them. Roy's criticism of *Slumdog* is not about its failure to represent the “real India”, nor does she try to say that India is impossible to understand for outsiders. But the question of verisimilitude specific to the representation of Indian national or socioeconomic cultures is one that has long punctured so many debates within the Indian English novel.

The concern for maintaining and authentically representing “Indianness” in Indian English novels stems from India's unique political history and from the unique cultural position straddled by the genre itself. Indeed, the Indian English novel's origins are deeply political, and the genre developed in connection to the movement for Indian independence from the British Empire. The earliest Indian English novels, then, were a part of the discourse about Indian nationhood and Indian national identity, which continues to show up in contemporary novels in various forms.

In the Indian branch of the Indo-Anglian novel's discourse, an emphasis on the political in terms of nation and national identity that has 'characterizaed both the period of anticolonial struggle and of post-independent India. Anglo-Indian, Indo-Anglian,

Indo- English or Indian English literature- to name the terms variously applied to a specific cultural practice of the nation - thus participates in quite a common discourse of the 20th century that is motivated by the need to counter Western aspirations of hegemonic control over a colonized country and mass media-promoted transnational cultural tendencies: processes that threaten to level or even erase cultural difference and identity. (Riemenschneider 2)

The Indian English novel, Riemenschneider argues, is a part of a larger non-Western discourse that seeks to retain and maintain a sense of cultural authenticity in the wake of an interpreted Western cultural hegemony. This is an interest informed in some way by the experience of colonialism; the colonized seeks to rebuild from the colonizer's manipulative and destructive effect upon indigenous culture. Because of the urgency of that political-cultural impulse, most early Indian English novels, those produced around the 1920s and 30s, took a great interest in depicting the social and political conditions of Indians' lived experience through realist modes of portrayal (Riemenschneider 4).

The Indian English novel is a literary genre that, like other English literatures developed in a postcolonial context, has been marked by critical disagreement over the legitimacy of its very existence (Achebe 91). Because English is a linguistic medium that addresses a broad readership of both Indians and Westerners, writers of the Indian English novel have long wrestled over the degree to which their work concerns itself with a Western readership and the attempt to authentically represent Indian culture, socio-economic and political conditions for that readership. The very association with the English language as the language of the British colonizer was itself problematic for many early writers of the genre, a problem of cultural suitability compounded by the fact that India itself was and continues to be a majority Hindi

speaking country (“English literature,” *Independent*). And beyond the use of the English language in an Indian context, the suitability of the novel form itself was questioned by some critics.

As the 20<sup>th</sup> Century moved forward, globalization allowed large numbers of people to move more freely around the globe, a trend that continues to make relevant discourses about how artists and thinkers maintain their national culture in postcolonial contexts: Larger numbers of middle class Indians and Indian writers either currently or have had the experience of living abroad in English-speaking countries, a condition that's made some Indian English literary critics call into question the very “Indianness” of some of the genre's writers. Some critics, however, like Indian English author Vikram Chandra, finds such a logic both debilitating and irrelevant. He published his arguments in his essay “The Cult of Authenticity” in which he interpreted an excessive fixation of Indian writers on how their work functions within Western contexts (*Boston Review*). He opens with a recreation of a reading he did with two other Indian authors in New Delhi for the British Council, where a barrage of audience questions fielded to the authors picked mercilessly at each of their works, in each one interpreting a hyper-consciousness of a Western readership. They asked *The Idea of India* author Sunil Khilnani: If you are addressing an Indian audience, why describe the preparation of a common Indian dish (bhelpuri) in so much detail? “Was that an emigrant’s nostalgia, or was it written for the Westerners who don’t know what bhelpuri is?” (“Cult,” *Boston Review*) Chandra, too, found himself in a defensive position from the same criticism. From his *Love and Longing in Bombay*, story titles like ‘Dharma’, ‘Artha’ and ‘Kama’ (Sanskrit meaning Duty, Gain, Desire) came under fire: “Since ordinary people don’t think about such things as dharma, or use that kind of language,” the audience member said, “the titles couldn’t have arisen from the stories but were tagged on to signal

Indianness in a Western context” (“Cult,” *Boston Review*). Chandra reveals intense frustration with such critical trends.

I noticed the constant hum of this rhetoric, this anxiety about the anxiety of Indianness, this notion of a real reality that was being distorted by “Third World cosmopolitans”, this fear of an all-devouring and all-distorting West. I heard it in conversations, in critical texts, in reviews. And Indians who wrote in English were the one of the prime locations for this rhetoric to test itself, to make its declarations of power and belonging, to announce its possession of certain territories and its right to delineate lines of control.

(“Cult,” *Boston Review*)

Chandra – after addressing in detail each of these anxieties that spring from representing to an the all-distorting West – insists that modern India is indeed a cosmopolitan place, a froth of culturally diverse signals, and he urges its writers to embrace that familiar India unselfconsciously in their English fiction: “Whatever you do felicitously will be Indian. It cannot be otherwise. If Bholenath speaks to you, put him in your painting, or your story. The inevitable fact that some reader in New Jersey will find Bholenath’s tiger skin and matted hair "exotic" is wholly irrelevant” (“Cult,” *Boston Review*). Writers with an Indian background, Chandra argues, will always, unavoidably convey an Indian perspective that can't be critically denied.

Chandra's intervention reclaims the autonomy of Indian English writers' cultural identity and in some ways rendered moot the anxiety about authentic Indianness as expressed in Indian English fiction, but the life of such critical concerns did not end with the publication of *The Cult of Authenticity*. When Aravind Adiga took the Booker Prize in 2008 for *The White Tiger*, a story about a poor man from rural India who transforms his life toward success, the debate in Indian English fiction about the suitability of representational strategies was resuscitated in both the

terms of national cultural authenticity and the depiction of Indian poor. As with *Q&A*, some critics found *The White Tiger* problematic because of the author's distance from his poor protagonist and because novelist seemed to express ambivalence toward that distance. Adiga is a solidly middle class man representing the consciousness of a rural Indian servant. Critics asked: does he do the job effectively? Can he, without some serious research effort?

*The White Tiger* discourse fleshed out the significant difference between concerns for maintaining “Indianness” in literature and concerns for maintaining literary realism, which, in *The White Tiger*'s case, was specific to its representation of an oppressed protagonist. Writing for *The Hindu*, Amitava Kumar frowns on Adiga's depiction of rural poverty, believing that Chandra's claims do not necessarily apply to the problems of authenticity he finds at work in *The White Tiger*: “Unlike Chandra, I don’t think there is freedom at hand from the entire question of authenticity, largely because there is no escape from the yearning for the real” (“The White Tiger”). Kumar is here emphasizing an abstract concern for how artists create a coherent fictional world, one that makes logical sense – his is a question of how writers square realism with the imaginative nature of fiction. Kumar reminds us that representation is a universal artistic concern that transcends national boundaries, a concern that plagues not only Indian writers of English fiction, but any artist working in any medium or genre. In terms of offering a theory of composition, Chandra's criticism seems not so much to dwell in these abstract realms but, instead, offers a series of practical mini-histories to argue that cross-cultural influence is not a polluting phenomenon in an Indian national cultural context.

Chandra and Kumar come to different conclusions because of the difference between the kinds of representational concerns that informs their argumentation. Chandra is thinking about depictions of India and Indian culture, while Kumar is thinking about depictions of India's poor,

and in *The White Tiger*, India's rural poor. This seems to suggest that while critics of Indian English fiction may find national cultural authenticity less relevant and potentially constraining for cosmopolitan Indians, critics are also urging that artistic works be accountable to certain universal standards of literary value. This duality of critical concern has a place in a long critical history of the Indian English novel: this genre has often found itself needing to be both “Indian enough” and “literary enough” (Reimenschneider 2). In 1977 S.C. Harrex identified this first task for Indian English novelists, which stemmed from the specific cultural condition of the Indian writer addressing a “cultural dualism”, which “provides a creative challenge both to the writers who are attempting to communicate simultaneously with India and the West, and to their readers and critics” (qtd. in Reimenschneider 2). This speaks to the particular concern of representing Indian national culture to global audiences, a concern addressed by authors like Vikram Chandra, but K.S. Ramamurti in 1987 also reflected on the secondary task of Indian English novelists to also “assess a novel as a novel in terms of criteria applicable to all novels, whether Indian or European, and in terms of universal literary values. Then it has to direct an aesthetic responsiveness to and critical appreciation of its Indianness” (qtd. in Reimenschneider 3). This is the same kind of concern articulated by Kumar, who calls attention to the universal interest in literary realism that all readers, he argues, will bring to any text (Reimenschneider 6). Recent conversations about *The White Tiger* and *Q&A* only resuscitate long-standing critical concerns in this genre about how Indian English authors represent “Indianness” and the genre's secondary task of being assessed in universal literary terms.

Even though it is clear that the genre's critics have long been articulating concerns about the genre's dual tasks, there is a difference that is informing the contemporary critical discourse within the genre, a difference that stems from some significant developments in the form for the

Indian English novel that began in the 1970s. It was at this point the genre became shaped less by the direct experience of independence and colonialism, which had produced a political/realist impulse in the genre's early novels, and began instead to be shaped by new social and political conditions in the post-independence context (Reimenschneider 5) In her study *The New Indian Novel in English*, Viney Kirpal attributes to the 1970s “a gestation period for the shaping of the new Indian sensibility' during economically and politically 'most turbulent years in Indian history” (qtd. in Riemenschneider 5). These politically turbulent years refer to the leadership of Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India who, in the wake of fierce political opposition in 1975, “...proclaimed a state of national emergency, 'suspending' all rights, including habeas corpus, clamping a lid on the press, placing armored units on special alert, and grounding air flights over Delhi” (Wolpert 397). The most explicit product of this literary gestation period was the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (Reimenschneider 20). Rushdie's novel was published in the immediate moments before the Gandhi emergency, and put forth a new formula for what the Indian English novel could be: fantastical and imaginative; it did not need to carry on the realist tradition of the first modern writers of the genre writing in the midst of the independence movement.

By the late 1980s this New Indian English novel was developing under two major influences: Rushdie's example, which had shaken off 1930s realism; and the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which Riemenschneider calls “instrumental to the emergence of the postcolonial discourse” (Riemenschneider 20) and whose analytical framework would eventually be applied to the Indian English novel discourse. The gestation period of the turbulent 1970s followed by these two influential publications provided the fuel for a novel with new kinds of characteristics, which Kirpal describes:

there is a lack of the staidness, solemnity and self-consciousness that once characterized the Indian novel. They are uninhibited and cosmopolitan in their reach. Unlike the earlier novels, they are neither idealistic [...] nor are they sentimental. There is a great determination to break with shibboleths and to experiment with new forms and themes. Politics - national and international - is their most important theme, and the displaced, marginal modern day man their favourite protagonist. The novels express the deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfettered (sic!) by restraints who virtually screams to be heard. (qtd. in Reimenschneider 27)

Kirpal goes on to qualify these novels as marked by “anarchy, disarray, dizzy dislocation,” (qtd. in Reimenschneider 27) and asserts that these novels reflect “as never before the theme of the mixed Indian tradition. The controlling temper of the period is synthesis, polymorphism where all religions, all communal groups including the minorities have an important place” (qtd. in Reimenschneider 27). In *Q&A*, this attempt toward a synthesis where everyone has “an important place” is evident even in the simple gesture of its protagonist's name: Ram Mohammad Thomas, a synthesis of naming traditions from Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. Contemporary novelists, then, operate under both older influences stemming out of a colonial experience as well as more recent political and social influences: the development of postcolonial theory, the publication of new kinds of Indian English novels, and the experience of post-independence India.

I will next perform a close reading of *The White Tiger*, which will allow me to more clearly illustrate the kinds of formal choices that challenge representational accuracy. In Adiga's case, the stylistic influence of the New novel seems to have affected an accountability problem, whereby the dizzying, dislocated, and anarchical characteristics of the New novel in some ways

undermine the representational integrity, coherence, and clarity of his fiction. While the anarchical tone established in the novel allows its protagonist to initiate a captivating, no-holds-barred social commentary on race issues, that very anarchical tone only obscures the accuracy of the language Balram uses to talk about rural poverty. The novel's obscured representational work on the level of class signifiers limits the total success of the novel's ideological ambitions, which seeks to illuminate the conditions of the poor in the developing world. I made a similar argument in Chapter One, where I identified *Slumdog's* skewing effect on the ideological landscape present in *Q&A*, an effect produced by certain formal tendencies such as genre ambivalence, editing and plot choices. Each of these works, then – *Slumdog*, *Q&A*, and *The White Tiger* -- have been praised for the simple act of making poor Indians the subject of their fiction, a success measured by what some critics have noted to be a deficiency of such representations in mainstream film and Indian English fiction, yet so too have they been criticized for their failure to plausibly depict oppressed protagonists in a way that is believable and ethical for their global readers.

Adiga's *The White Tiger*, as it is discussed in many critical conversations, seems to be regarded as possessing the literary merit and socially-conscious seriousness that is only half-heartedly expressed in *Q&A*. A blurb from a *USA Today* reviewer gushes on the cover of book's American edition: "One of the most powerful books I've read in decades. No hyperbole. This debut novel hit me like a kick to the head – the same effect Richard Wright's *Native Son* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* had" (qtd. in Adiga). While it is not within the scope of this chapter to more fully discuss the legitimacy of such a comparison between Adiga and Ellison's work, perhaps one major similarity between these two novels that this reviewer has in mind is the similar voice and psychology of the first-person narrators in Adiga and Ellison's novels. In *The White Tiger*, Balram Halwai is a rickshaw driver's son who becomes an entrepreneur, and his

first-person perspective told within the time frame of seven nights offers a narrow, intensive perspective of this single man's ideas about oppression; its a retrospective of self, an autobiography of Balram's impoverished and servatile past and the new, successful present he created for himself at great cost. This emotionally intense retrospective from the position of the now-liberated yet formerly-oppressed protagonist is the same kind of form mobilized to tell the story of the *Invisible Man*.

While fictional character perspective is limited in Adiga's novel, it achieves a globally-minded subtext with a keen interest in the affairs of the developing world. The text of the novel is addressed from Balram to “His Excellency Wen Jiabao” in lieu of the visit he is soon to pay to India; this is related through a series of formal letters to the Chinese Premier. From the lines that describe the addressed and the addressee at the outset of chapter one, it's clear that this novel is concerned with relations between the world's great and rising world economies. Balram writes to the desk of “His Excellency Wen Jiabao”, who is located in Beijing, “Capital of the Freedom-loving Nation of China”; this coming “From the Desk of: 'The White Tiger' / A Thinking Man / And an Entrepreneur / Living in the world's center of Technology and Outsourcing / Electronics City Phase 1 (just off Hosur Main Road) / Bangalore, India” (Adiga 1). *The White Tiger* is in some significant way a social commentary about developing nations and the condition of the people in those nations, and even more particularly, in terms of the relationship between India and China as the prospective leaders of the developing world. Balram's text invites a dialogue between these two nations about their particular development challenges. Balram offers counsel to the Chinese Premier as an entrepreneur living in the world's largest democracy (Adiga 3), but the relationship Balram cultivates with his Chinese reader is a brotherly one, even one of praise: “Only three nations have never let themselves be ruled by foreigners: China, Afghanistan, and

Abyssinia. These are the only three nations I admire” (Adiga 3). Even if China's people live under a harsh regime intolerant of dissidents, even if its industries are not marked by the quick, inventive pulse so increasingly characteristic of modern India, it is at least a place that has maintained its cultural autonomy.

Balram's social commentary about the shared path of India and China who together have faced centuries of Western hegemony is one expressed in explicitly racial terms: skin color. Throughout the narrative, Balram identifies the Chinese as yellow-skinned, and he does not shy away from using the term “white man.” Taking in the jumble of conversation in Bangalore, the “world's center of Technology and Outsourcing,” Balram imagines a new world order of race: “White men will be finished within my lifetime. There are blacks and reds too, but I have no idea what they're up to – the radio never talks about them. My humble prediction: in twenty years' time, it will be just us yellow men and brown men at the top of the pyramid, and we'll rule the whole world” (Adiga 262). These proclamations engage the reader about race and globalization in a manner that denies euphemism. Balram's racialized language brings to the surface the concerns and interests of developing nations like India and China, long marginalized by the world's former great economies like Britain and the United States. The narrative format itself precludes the white man from this discourse: indeed, Balram is talking exclusively through letter form to the Chinese Premier. This is a creative and powerful tool for the Indian English novel to explicitly disclaim interest in catering to Western audiences and Western expectations: the Westerner is not named as a participant in Balram's racial dialogue. India is talking exclusively to China – not to a wider world, and certainly not to a Western world. This is a significant and creative rhetorical technique for a genre that has struggled outright with questions of representing India for a Western audience.

The blunt and creative rhetorical tools that Balram uses to critique Western cultural hegemony are not as effective when mobilized for a discourse about poverty. The most heavily-used term used to signify class in the novel is “the Darkness”, which at its abstract is used to represent poor and rural India. It is first used when the narrator is describing a poster circulated by police after Balram murders his master. “The suspect comes from the village of Laxmangarh, in the...” The narrator interjects: “Like all good Bangalore stories, mine begins far away from Bangalore. You see, I am in the Light now, but I was born and raised in Darkness” (Adiga 11). Using Bangalore as a reference point, he positions the Darkness as that which is “far away” from the city, in the realm of India's villages; in contrast, Bangalore is identified as the Light. At this point, the narrator is ambiguous about why they conflate geographically specific term with a term that denotes something qualitative, emotional, and psychological – a term loaded with valuation:

I am talking of a place in India, at least a third of the country, a fertile place, full of rice fields and wheat fields and ponds in the middle of those fields choked with lotuses and water lilies, and water buffaloes wading through the ponds and chewing on the lotuses and lilies. Those who live in this place call it the Darkness. Please understand, Your excellency, that India is two countries in one: an India of Light and an India of Darkness. The ocean brings light to my country. Every place on the map of India near the ocean is well off. But the river brings darkness to India – the black river. (Adiga 11-12)

This description is an attempt for definition, but it effectively defines nothing. We get first a list of qualities attributive to the Darkness: it's fertile, full of fields, crops and animals. Suddenly, however, after listing qualities that range from the benign to the picturesque, the narrator tells us that the place described is called the Darkness, presenting a strange and unsatisfactory

incongruence. We read on only to become more puzzled: the Darkness is the Darkness because India is divided into a Darkness and a Lightness. This circular logic is further mangled into incoherence when the narrator tells us that the ocean brings the light to India's Lightness and the river brings the dark to its Darkness. We can only make distant guesses toward the narrator's attempted meaning – does the ocean connect India to a wider world, which is a progressive and liberating force, whereas the river represents cultural stagnation and counter-productive navel gazing? But because this ocean/river dichotomy concludes the first discussion of a larger Dark/Light dichotomy in India, the reader is left to keep the concept in mind only, seeking for suggestions embedded in the narrative. After this introduction to the Light/Dark idea, we have been left with no concrete sense of what it means – we have only a list of conceptually loose and distant suggestions to fire further associations as the narrative moves forward.

In this passage, the narrator fails to logically or meaningfully represent his subject matter for a reader, and that problem will only continue throughout the narrative. Because this Lightness/Darkness acts as the major signifying tools to address poverty-related problems in this novel, the muddled incoherence of these terms will present no small problem. “The Darkness” is used as short hand, a key word echoed through the mouths of many characters in the novel – it is not restricted to Balram. It is used when Balram is addressed by his masters: “I squatted in a corner of the railway carriage. 'Balram, you're not in the Darkness any longer.' 'Yes sir.' 'There is a law in Delhi.' 'Yes, sir'” (Adiga 119). Balram's master doesn't want him squatting in public, and makes his point clear by reminding Balram that he now lives in the city, where norms for social engagement are different than those in the Darkness. In this exchange, the reader is again only reminded that the Darkness is a contrast to the city: village life is more sloppy, unwatched and bad habits allowed to develop in those conditions have to be adapted for a scrutinized life in the

city.

The “Darkness” is not clearly defined early on in the novel, and because it is used as a simple shorthand for poor and rural India throughout the rest of the novel, the reader learns only to associate poor and rural India with the negativity of the “darkness” qualifier. Although Balram and his master Mr. Ashok come from the same rural village, Mr. Ashok does not add for the reader any further significant information for understanding what poor and rural India is: he uses the “Darkness” qualifier in a way that only further muddies its signifying potential. “Have a heart, Pinky. He was seeing his family. You know how close they are to their families in the Darkness” (Adiga 76). Ashok uses the term again when Balram begins to drive: “So Balram here touched his eye as a mark of respect. The villagers are so religious in the Darkness” (Adiga 77). Though both Mr. Ashok and Balram come from the same geographical place – and place is the term through which the Darkness has been most clearly defined - here Ashok sets himself at some distance from the term. He rationalizes for his wife that Balram is close to his family because families in the Darkness are close to one another; there is no sense that Ashok is also ascribing the norms of the Darkness to his own familial relations. If the Darkness is not necessarily representative of a specific place in its social and psychological entirety, it must, then, selectively represent elements within that place: because the wealthy, empowered Ashok excludes himself from its definitions while including the poor servant Balram, it is implied that this selectivity is associated with class. This passage forces the reader to consider the Darkness as a place more limited than rural India proper – a further qualification to the definition the reader is left with in the book's opening pages.

The problem with the way ideas about “the Darkness” expand and contract in their specificity at various moments in the narrative is a problem compounded because of the subject

matter conflated with the term: the subject of poverty and class. It is not good form to get logically and representationally lazy or sloppy when making a social commentary on a subject – and this is key – that the novel *also makes a claim to treat with seriousness*. This conflict of interest – claiming representational seriousness on a subject that is not represented seriously – immediately forces a reader to consider: is this novel's narrator reliable? The reader already must struggle with ascertaining Balram's reliability on another level: he is a murderer, taking his master's life in one final act to secure his freedom. Any novel animated by the mind of a first-person narrator whose actions are socially deviant will be a novel predisposed toward questions about narrator reliability. In sum, then, *The White Tiger* presents us with an irresolvable interpretative conundrum: the narrative is predisposed toward unreliability because of the nature of the narrator, while a crucial subtext of the narrative, a discourse set in the realm of the real and treating social and class-specific problems in the developing world, has been so unconvincingly represented to the point that we cannot discern its reliability. The reader, then, is searching for reliability on two fronts – the fictional as animated by its murderous narrator – and its unreliably represented subtext that makes claims about a real and external world. Put simply, there are too many forms for uncertainty in this novel, and there is no plank from which to stand and make sense of it.

Internationally resonant issues of race in the developing world are inextricably connected with class positions and issues of poverty. While Adiga's novel creatively engages the reader in a discourse about race, it fails to flesh out and coherently define the signifiers it uses connection to poor and rural India. Ironically, the same narrative techniques that position the character Balram to boldly name the cultural hegemony of the West are those that preclude the satisfactory naming of terms related to poverty. These techniques are indeed those identified by Kirpal in *The New*

*Indian English Novel*: “anarchy, disarray, dizzy dislocation,” which Kirpal signalled a departure from the genre's works associated with the early realist novels influenced by the Indian independence movement. It is worthwhile to repeat Kirpal's summary of this difference in the New novels:

“there is a lack of the staidness, solemnity and self-consciousness that once characterized the Indian novel. They are uninhibited and cosmopolitan in their reach. Unlike the earlier novels, they are neither idealistic [...] nor are they sentimental. There is a great determination to break with shibboleths and to experiment with new forms and themes. Politics - national and international - is their most important theme, and the displaced, marginal modern day man their favourite protagonist. The novels express the deep urge of the protagonist to speak out, unfettered (sic!) by restraints who virtually screams to be heard.” (qtd. in Reimenschneider 27)

In *The White Tiger*, these characteristics are obvious: its global political concerns voiced by the marginalized protagonist “who virtually screams to be heard”; Balram's cosmopolitanism in his dialogue with China and his prophecy of a new brotherhood among developing nations like China and India; and we see that Balram's very lack of self-consciousness in tandem with the anarchical tone he develops allows him to transcend the cultural hegemony of Western power. But it is the very same anarchy that forces his narrative toward “dizzying dislocation” when it applies itself to class-specific signifiers, such as the “Darkness”: in this case, the anarchical tone that governs *The White Tiger's* parallel social commentary permits the muddying of a concept connected to conditions of poverty. The failure of Adiga as the author to coherently represent Balram's condition as a man from a poor and rural place is a failure that may be concealed by the overall anarchical, dizzying tone of the novel, but it nevertheless exists and functions

problematically within the novel.

I've discussed in detail the micro-level representational strategies of Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*, but it is also important to note its macro-level form for fleshing out the story of its protagonist: it is at this macro level that *The White Tiger* most closely resembles Vikas Swarup's *Q&A*. Both Swarup and Adiga's stories are lead by Indian protagonists who are young, male, and desperately poor, and who encounter seemingly endless challenges and setbacks on their paths to self-deliverance. The trajectories of each protagonist's story is also similar: both are enterprising young men who rise from the poverty in which they were born, lifting themselves toward new levels of seemingly unimaginable material success, breaking the strict socio-economic barriers of a country whose history is informed by a caste system. Both protagonists narrate their stories from the first person and address an audience for their narrative in the form of a specific fictional character within the story world: in *The White Tiger*, that character/audience is Wen Jiabao, the Chinese Premier; in *Q&A*, that character/audience is Smita Shah, a lawyer who takes on Jamal's case. Finally, present in both novels is a strong avoidance of specificity: while both writers name the locations where primary action takes place, such as the city of Mumbai or the city of Bangalore, such specificity often begins and ends with reference to place at the level of the city or region. Atmospheric details are limited. Each novel is animated primarily by the narration of events in the plot, which are reflected upon internally and retrospectively by the first person narrators.

Even without considering the representational problematics evident in *The White Tiger*'s muddied class signifiers, as I did in a close reading of the text, these macro level elements alone, which are present in both *The White Tiger* and *Q&A*, are potentially problematic for the reader who seeks an clear, complete and direct depiction of these marginalized protagonists. Because

some perspective of conditions external to these narrators is denied by first person narration, the reader never able to compare the situation of the protagonist with other, more fully-fleshed out characters; this limited perspective makes consumption of the fictional world not only less ethically conflicted and therefore less challenging for a reader to consume, but it also does not force the author to imagine multiple perspectives on a given fictional scenario. Because these novels avoid specificity as a general narrative rule, the reader is only given vague notions of how to make sense of a story that is in fact based upon a rich, dynamic, and complex reality. Because these protagonists are so individualistic and self-interested, they work to align conditions of poverty with personal isolation, a skewing of the typical lived experience of the poor who so often depend upon and embrace the support of community and family (Jadhav). Because the destiny of both protagonists is to actually escape their poverty, the reader is allowed to walk away from the novel absolved from a sense that a social problem still exists in the real world: because Balram and Jamal are able to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, the reader is left with too strong a sense that the problem of global poverty can be solved by individuals in poverty alone. In sum, each of these macro-level narrative choices in *The White Tiger* and *Q&A* are enough to obscure accurate portrayals of poverty in the developing world.

Some critics even question whether or not Adiga and Swarup, as well-educated, middle-class men, have a place writing novels about the poor, particularly if their novels do not display the results of extensive research on the subject. The day after *The White Tiger* won the 2008 Man Booker Prize, *The Guardian* interviewed author Aravind Adiga to gain perspective on why there seemed to be “roars of anger” sounding from India in response to novel, which depicts the country as a chaotic, rigidly hierarchical society where the poor live in an oppression that can hardly be overcome, thanks to a sense of duty ingrained over thousands of years of religious

indoctrination. Interviewer Stuart Jeffries cuts right to the burning question that has animated the subtext of the novel's criticism in India and, indeed, the question animating my own analysis of fictions like *The White Tiger*: "How do you get the nerve," Jeffries asked Adiga, "to write a novel about the experiences of the Indian poor? After all, you're an enviably bright young thing, a middle-class, Madras-born, Oxford-educated ex-*Time* magazine correspondent? How would you understand what your central character, the downtrodden, uneducated son of a rickshaw puller turned amoral entrepreneur and killer, is going through?" ("Roars of Anger")

The question seemed to upset Adiga, who answered quite simply: "I don't think a novelist should just write about his own experiences. Yes, I am the son of a doctor, yes, I had a rigorous formal education, but for me the challenge of a novelist is to write about people who aren't anything like me" ("Roars of Anger"). For the journalist in Adiga, this may be a fair response: It is part of a journalistic ethic to seek out marginalized, hidden, obscured, or remote stories and to find ways to illuminate them to a wider world. The proximity of the journalist's own personal experience to the kinds of human experiences he may be expected to illuminate is typically considered arbitrary. As in scientific disciplines, where the astronomer's distant relationship with the ancient galaxies she observes from light years away on earth is a distance accepted as a matter of course, so too does professional journalism connote a similar expectation that distance between representer and represented is arbitrary *precisely* because of the expectation that the investigator will approach the investigated subject matter through a meticulous, scientific program or code. If journalism is to be understood in this its most scientific sense, *The White Tiger* is far from journalistic.

Novels like *The White Tiger* do not operate only as 200 pages of bound text: they take on another and equally problematic life when they enter the realm of media discourses, where

discourse participants can make limitedly-informed claims about the nature of these texts, use discrete concepts synonymously, and fuzzily employ literary or social histories to ground their claims. Steven Dubner's blog entry on *The White Tiger* offers a good example of these misnomers and inaccuracies. Dubner uses the blog entry in part to suggest three books to his readers who have an interest in learning about modern India: Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*, Nandan Nilekani's *Imagining India*, and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* – the former two are works of non-fiction, but the latter of which, he implies, is the “absolute must-read” (“Aravind Adiga,” *The New York Times*). After mentioning the book's Booker Prize Win, Dubner quotes Amrit Dhillon's reaction to the award results in the *Telegraph*, who called it a “new departure in India by [its portrayal of] the emotions, sorrows, and aspirations of the hitherto invisible poor” (qtd. in “Aravind Adiga,” *The New York Times*). Dubner's response to Dhillon: “This portrayal has, not surprisingly, caused an uproar among Indians — as, more recently, *Slumdog Millionaire* did” (“Aravind Adiga,” *The New York Times*). First, Dhillon gives the impression that portrayals of the poor were “hitherto invisible,” a statement that is at best an inaccurate generalization that ignores the history of the medium or genre to which it only implicitly refers: portrayals of the poor in Indian literature, or perhaps more specifically, the Indian novel in English. Second, Dubner's response to Dhillon layers inaccuracy upon inaccuracy: “this portrayal” that has unsurprisingly caused an uproar among Indians refers to the portrayal identified by Dhillon: quite simply, the “portrayal... of the hitherto invisible poor”. The logic of this statement, then, makes the reader imagine that Indians were in an uproar over the novel simply because the hitherto invisible poor were portrayed in fiction. That is to say, it speaks for the critical response of Indians to Adiga's novel and qualifies it as one angered by the very idea that the country's poor were given voice.

This small blog entry from the *New York Times*, then, illustrates the complicated process by which this discourse is interpreted and articulated by its participants. Key phrases and concepts are enunciated, but without respect to the history of the concepts to which they refer; large generalizations lack specificity in terms of the artistic mediums or genres to which they refer; within an American newspaper, Dhillon attempts to speak for Indian discourse participants, and does so poorly. This attempt to speak for critical global voices is all the more problematic because those voices are often so far removed from reaching the casual Western reader on their own terms; even if American readers may be interested in getting a fuller, more direct perspective of Indian critics, they may be prevented by their own uncertainty of locating authoritative foreign media outlets, or they may assume that language barriers will prevent further research. No matter the logic we can imagine running through the mind of the curious, casual reader, the point I'm trying to make here is that once the representation of Indian discourse participants within Western media sources is made unclear, such an inaccuracy is unlikely to be corrected by some spontaneous, original research effort of the casual Western reader.

This analysis of the *New York Times* blog entry, however, is not employed in order to wholly negate the seriousness of claims made by those implicitly and explicitly referenced therein. Whether Dhillon's comments are factually correct or no, they draw upon a larger body of criticism that is unsatisfied with the relationship between the world of high culture and the lived experience of the billion and more people who live in poverty, or more particularly, criticism that is unsatisfied with the position that national literatures in English in the developing world – such as India – have taken with respect to imagining in fiction the lived experience of their countrymen and women. If Dhillon considered *The White Tiger* a welcome addition to a body of cultural work in India that too rarely lends perspective to the poor, Amardeep Singh, an Associate

Professor of English at Lehigh University, took the opposite opinion toward the same basic concern:

I haven't been able to shake the sense that *The White Tiger*, despite its topicality and its readability, is somehow fundamentally fake. I almost hesitate to bother saying it, because it's quite common for Indian authors to be accused of composing narratives about India's poor primarily for non-poor, non-Indian readers.

It's a ubiquitous complaint – almost a critical cliché – but still true. (“Didn't Like White Tiger,” *Amardeep Singh*)

Where Dhillon sees a welcome addition of the poor to representational work and media sources in India more generally, Singh is speaking with respect to the Indian novel in English specifically, and with this perspective he sees in *The White Tiger* yet another novel among many in the genre that capitalize on the distance and difference between poor Indians represented as fictional subjects and the non-Indian who will consume that subject matter.

For those like Singh, Stuart Jeffries with *The Guardian*, and Chandrabhas Choudhury with *Foreign Policy* – critics who position *The White Tiger* with respect to the fictional novel or the Indian novel in English – such critics tend to note with a certain surprise that *The White Tiger* beat out its competitors for the Booker shortlist. After Jeffries asked Adiga “how [he got] the nerve” to write about the poor, he noted that “several books” on the shortlist were “written by people very much like their central characters (Philip Hensher, for example, writing about South Yorkshire suburbanites during the miners' strike, or Linda Grant writing about a London writer exploring her Jewish heritage)” (“Roars of Anger,” *Guardian*). While Jeffries allows that the avoidance of navel-gazing could be interpreted as refreshing, he seems to remain skeptical that Adiga might nonetheless “come across as a literary tourist ventriloquising others' suffering and

stealing their miserable stories to fulfil his literary ambitions” (“Roars of Anger,” *Guardian*). Singh is surprised that Adiga beat out the likes of India's Salman Rushdie and the Sri Lankan born Michelle de Kretser for its shortlist nomination.

I have provided this history of Indian English literature particularly as it concerns the representation of India's poor and examined contemporary media discourses connected to New Indian English novels in order to make several arguments. First, that the genre has since its beginnings been rife with concerns about Indian authenticity and the degree to which realist or imaginative techniques are suitable for maintaining that authenticity, and that novels like *Q&A* and *The White Tiger* have not generated an entirely new critical conversation. They have, however, made more acute the ways in which the characteristics of the New Indian English novel become problematic when mobilized in fictional representations of India's poor: their dizzying and dislocating narratives incoherently render their subject matter, an effect that further marginalizes voices that are already marginalized. This problem is accentuated by the distance between the representing author and their represented subjects, particularly because authors like Swarup and Adiga have neglected to perform any extensive research before taking on this subject matter. These authors rely heavily, instead, upon distantly-formed ideas of poverty in order to inform their fictions. Finally, these loosely-, dizzyingly- rendered stories like those of *The White Tiger* and *Q&A* become increasingly problematic beyond the immediate reach of their reception among readers: they are finding their way into the hands of filmmakers who transform those stories into images that global audiences will see and learn from. At a moment when the Western world is increasingly interested in learning about India, which Vikas Swarup himself recognizes to be “the flavor of the season,” which the West recognizes to be a “country of 9% growth and enormous variety”: indeed, “[p]eople want to see what makes India tick” (“No Hit in India,”

*Time*), cultural consumers ought to do their learning from sources that more carefully represent an India of wealth and poverty alike.

### Chapter Three: The Cinematic Landscape

The question of how culturally distant people meet and understand one another through fictional representations is not only a question that operates at the level of formal textual construction. I've considered that formal element in chapter one, where I performed close

readings to argue that *Slumdog* the film created a story of universal love and success at the expense of the specifically Indian content of the source text, a element that was translated into the film in almost exclusively comedic and negative terms. In the second chapter, I contextualized the source text, *Q&A*, in the literary landscape of the Indian English Novel, arguing that while Vikas Swarup's novel contains a greater degree of specifically Indian social commentary than does its adaptation in *Slumdog*, the dizzying dislocation of its representational work renders incoherent and further marginalizes the already marginalized subjects it depicts in fiction, India's poor. In this third chapter, I will create a framework for understanding and imagining hybrid cultural productions made by Western and Indian cinemas.

I have argued that though determining national cultural authenticity is indeed a question that continues to be relevant in a postcolonial world where power structures continue to inform relationships between Western and non-Western nations and people, I have also argued that the nature of globalization means that national cultures are constantly influencing and bleeding into one another, a condition that challenges a satisfactory analysis of cultural products in terms of national cultural “authenticity.” I've argued that this mode of analysis is perhaps less relevant than another kind of representational concern illuminated by the *Slumdog* discourse: the concern for how marginalized voices are represented in fiction. While I considered that concern in depth in Chapter Two as it was evident in the New Indian English novel, I will switch focus for Chapter Three because my research indicated to me that concerns for how Indianness is expressed and embodied by *Slumdog* as a cinematic production is a concern that continues to be a central among discourse participants. In this analysis of *Slumdog* as a cinematic production, then, I will follow and address the concern expressed by *Slumdog's* critics: how does an Indian-Western collaboration like *Slumdog* signal Indian cinematic authenticity, if at all? In offering a

history of the relationship between Western and non-Western filmmakers and movie goers, I will address critical claims that compare Indian and Western box office numbers to support arguments about whether or not *Slumdog* reflects a uniquely Indian cinematic style. With this history, I will demonstrate that the fluctuation of cinematic criteria associated with an Indian national cultural authenticity as well as long-varying ideas of what constitutes valuable cinema among Indian movie goers together present a challenge to identifying Indian national cultural authenticity in productions like *Slumdog*.

In Chapter Two, I capitalized on the particular way that a novel embodies culture in order to make the argument that authors must be more appreciative of cultural difference and distance when it indeed does exist between themselves and their subject matter, and that they must subsequently honor such difference through creating thoroughly-research, accurate portrayals of marginalized characters in fiction. The novel's uniqueness is located in its mode of production: its creation by a singular author. This condition of artistic production better permits a critic to make claims about distance and difference between the identity of that one author and their fictional subject: the identity of a single author is much easier to understand.

In this third chapter, I will be dealing with film, and it is crucial to consider that films embody and signal culture differently than do novels. To appreciate this difference, I need only list what it takes to create films versus novels. Films are made by large teams of people, a condition which makes it far less critically tenable to make claims about a total identity or identities as embodied by filmmakers, film producers, actors, creative directors, and the whole mess of people involved in film creation. Because of the necessarily large scale of its production (someone's got to hold the camera, someone's got to be in front of it, etc.), film invites collaboration, which from its earliest days has been performed on an international level (Bose

106). The economics of film production, distribution and exhibition demand far greater amounts of venture capital than does a novel for its production. Film communicates through an audio and visual element, while the novel communicates strictly through text, and because of this heavy visual element film will attract a different and arguably more vast audience, where literacy and linguistic barriers may be subordinated by the enjoyment of universally intelligible images. Conversely, the novel is confined to an audience of literate readers fluent in the language in which it is written or translated.

These differences mean that film employs a different kind of authorship and transmits content in a different mode than does the novel – hence, signals culture differently. It is important to note, however, that film production's amorphous, collaborative nature does not preclude its ethical accountability and its responsibility to the subject on whom the camera's lens is turned. All artistic projects must be held accountable for the way they treat and represent their content, yet this accountability problem is different from concerns about how artistic projects authentically embody culture *as a production*. In some ways, this is a difference of scale – content-level responsibility as the micro element, and production-level authenticity as the macro element – yet it is nonetheless important in establishing analytical categories. The *Slumdog* discourse has, in many cases, blurred this crucial distinction, and in this final chapter I will turn to clarifying the way *Slumdog* signals culture, and specifically “Indianness,” particularly as a cinematic production.

Though *Slumdog* received praise from critics worldwide, both Indian and Western critics were quick to point out that the film wasn't doing nearly so well with audiences in India that it had been with American and British audiences. In *Time Magazine's* “*Slumdog Millionaire*, an Oscar Favorite, Is No Hit in India”, Madhur Singh pointed out that “a day after *Slumdog*

*Millionaire* was nominated for ten Academy Awards, the movie filled just 25% of the seats for its debut in theaters across India... while Indian critics have largely embraced the movie, audiences are not flocking to the film.” While Fox Searchlight, the company that produced *Slumdog*, chose to interpret the numbers more relatively, noting that *Slumdog*'s weekend take of \$2.2 million made it the third largest take of any U.S. film ever released in India (“No Hit in India,” *Time*). *Slumdog* critics used its box office receipts across the globe in order to make claims about its cultural signals: more success at the British box office than at India's meant that *Slumdog* was perhaps not “Indian enough.”

Beyond the box office, some critics claimed that *Slumdog* was not made in the Bollywood style that interests most Indian movie goers. While most major media sources simply contented themselves with making suggestions about *Slumdog*'s Indian cinematic influences, *CNN*'s international news branch tossed the tip-toeing and made the claim that “*Slumdog* is a far cry from the lavish movie musicals made by Bollywood, which releases nearly 1,000 films annually. And it's not authentically Indian -- it was directed by Briton Danny Boyle, and the leading actor, Dev Patel, was born and raised in England” (“Bollywood Coming to Hollywood,” *CNN*). While *CNN* claimed that *Slumdog* did not have enough typically Indian cinematic elements to appeal to Indian audiences, some Indian critics claimed that this small taste of Indian cinematic elements was the reason for the film's Western success. Bollywood's mega star Amitabh Bachchan was one of the most forthright among Bollywood voices in criticising this aspect of *Slumdog*'s production: "It's just that the [*Slumdog Millionaire*] idea, authored by an Indian and conceived and cinematically put together by a westerner, gets creative globe recognition. The other would perhaps not" (“Rubbishes *Slumdog Millionaire*,” *Guardian*). Bachchan argues that while a Westerner can make a successful film about India with small

touches of Bollywood stylings, an Indian person telling the same story in the full Bollywood idiom would not have been nearly so successful.

Understanding that the typical Western movie goer who came away from a *Slumdog* viewing looking for analytical tools to make sense of *Slumdog's* mixed cultural signals, many media sources have attempted to provide for their readers some context for understanding *Slumdog's* cultural affinities, inspirations and aspirations. Western media sources repeatedly asked their readers to think about the wider cinematic landscape associated with *Slumdog*; in a few words, in a line, paragraph or fully story, journalists have in many cases tried to stem the emotional tide of those film critics who saw in *Slumdog* the first of a new kind of film or mode for storytelling. *Vanity Fair* does American movie goers a great service, providing a viewing guide for those curious about just where a film like *Slumdog* originated. Amitava Kumar introduces this list simply and luminously: “*Slumdog Millionaire* has a pedigree. Its director, Danny Boyle, says there are at least three Bollywood films that inspired him directly. Those films were themselves influenced by a long family tree that stretches back to the last days of the nineteenth century” (“Bollywood Ancestors,” *Vanity Fair*).

Kumar played historian in a straightforward and brief way, but the pedigree he begins to provide for moviegoers is incomplete. Indeed, he alludes to a “longer family tree” whose elucidation does not appear to be within the short scope of his allotted space on the trendy pages of *Vanity Fair*. We see small hints of this longer and broader pedigree left in fragments across the web by journalists, bloggers and film critics. I argue that that longer and broader pedigree begins with the development of cinema in “the last days of the nineteenth century” and the growth of Western and non-Western cinema. The “only significant cinema” to come out of the latter would be the Indian national cinema that led to the Bollywood cinema with which we are most familiar

today, and that has informed *Slumdog's* production.

Film scholar Roy Armes posits that cinema is not indigenous to all places across the globe. In his foundational study on *Third World Film Making and the West*, Armes makes the claim that because the inception and development of cinema was accompanied by a particularly capitalist profit motive – that is to say, a Western economic mode – cinema is instead indigenous only to “a limited number of Western countries at a particular recent point in their historical development,” and consequently, “for all third world countries, film is an imported form of communication” (35). Cinema, then, is not like oral communication, which is “universal, and its forms are indigenous, having grown out of specific cultures in which they are rooted historically” (35). Armes emphasizes the commodity nature of cinema, whose purchase and sale “has defined the structure of the film industry” (37). Implicit here is Armes's assumption that the capitalist, commodity-centric economic mode is a particularly Western one, and that because the film industry developed as a capitalistic, commodity-centered industry, it is a communication form indigenous to the West.

Armes's arguments allow us to understand historic power relations within the global film industry as they existed between Western and non-Western players. Armes argues that the traditional location of power in the structure of the global film industry (comprised of production, distribution, and exhibition) is settled firmly in distribution. He calls film distribution a “purely financial organization” that receives the cession of film rights by producers and whose exhibitors are dependent upon it for a steady flow of films. U.S. distribution companies, which made up the bulk of global distributors, have had “no interest in fostering the development of rival film production industries anywhere in the third world” (Armes 37). With the power of distribution so tightly held in American hands, it was difficult for third world governments to

develop their own indigenous cinemas even by nationalizing the industry.

The dominance of American cinema on a global scale can be explained both by the way it carved an economic niche for placing its cinematic product before global movie goers and by the nature of that product itself. Cinema's capitalist competitiveness marked even its earliest years: “within months of its invention, the cinema was using the whole world as a location for filming and as a source of box office revenue” (Armes 36). The simple competitiveness of the industry as it was embodied in its French origins would give way to the Hollywood studio system that, in the post war years, created a vertically-integrated monopoly system for its films. Says Armes of the process:

The effect of such successive redefinitions of film and reorganizations of production and distribution practices has been to keep Western film interests always a step ahead of potential Third World competitors. By the time some non-Western producers had mastered the basic artisanal technology of film, Hollywood had attained levels of industrially organized production with which no other country could hope to compete.

(36)

Even when the development of film with synchronized dialogue changed market conditions, allowing filmmakers to fashion audio in their native languages and thereby theoretically drum up more linguistically-specific and local viewership, Hollywood films maintained their world dominance purely because of their accessibility. No Hollywood films, says Victor Perkins, employed “a form so radically new as to require a substantial readjustment of the spectator's attitude... Where particular knowledge is required then it is part of the common knowledge of the common man. The spectator does not have to work for his pleasure” (qtd. in Armes 38). From the 1920s through the 1950s, that formulaic filmic product dominated the world market (Armes

37). Hollywood's reliance upon easy formulas for film content and its ability to tap into the foreign markets it had effortlessly acquired in the early years of cinema would be challenged in the 1960s with the advent of television, a new communication medium that put pressure upon Hollywood's dominance in the vertically integrated entertainment marketplace it had created (Armes 49). With television as a competitor, Hollywood recognized a new urgency for maintaining its global film dominance: by this time, half of its revenues came from abroad. "Once indifferent to the needs of audiences outside the United States," Hollywood had to begin exploiting foreign markets "with a new thoroughness" (Armes 49). Hollywood would need to fight to maintain international influence.

By 1896, cinema had reached India only months after its first showings in Paris (Armes 105). Regardless of the near-simultaneity of film's arrival in India and the West, by the 1920s, Indian cinema yielded fascinating and conflicting statistics: during that decade, it was still importing 85 percent of its films, yet when the Indian Cinematograph committee produced its indispensable report on the era, they discovered that Indian film production was actually numerically exceeding that in Britain (Armes 108). The British Raj was still in power, however, so this out-of-proportion influence of British culture is not inexplicable. The important point to note here is that India had quickly developed a film industry that in its earliest days was outproducing its Western competitors; with contemporary eyes on India's explosive economic growth in recent decades, the size of the Bollywood industry today is often implicitly or explicitly conflated with that new phenomenon of incredible growth, when in fact India has been ahead of the Western industry by sheer numbers for nearly a century (Armes 107). Considering the difficulties posed to the development of non-Western cinemas in the monopolistic and Western dominated global film industry, as Armes's research reveals, the significance of Indian national

cinema's development as “the only important cinema to emerge in a colonized country” (Armes 44) becomes all the more stark. Recognizing India's unique position as a center of influence in the seemingly bipolar landscape of global cinema better illuminates the significance of the Bollywood industry as it exists today as well as the relations of power at work in a project like *Slumdog*, where both of those bipolar giants came together to create a film.

Two key developments in India's economy and in the global film industry permitted India to more fully clinch its own domestic markets for film, accruing an ever-wider indigenous following for the cinematic productivity it had demonstrated and would continue to demonstrate for another century. India moved toward an economic self-sufficiency in consumer goods on the eve of its independence: by the 1940s “some 60 percent of the market [was] held by Indian firms’... banks came to hold over 80 percent of deposits, and Indian firms controlled ‘around 60 percent of the import/export trade’” (Armes 110). Beyond pure economic self-sufficiency, India gained its political independence relatively early for a British possession; in 1935, it had secured dominion status within the empire (Armes 110). Finally, the advent of sound as a cinematic component opened the door to making films in indigenous languages, a development that would theoretically permit films to become more linguistically and thus more regionally specific (Armes 110). For India, this mid-Century movement toward domestic economic self-sufficiency was paralleled by a movement toward self-sufficiency in its own film market. By 1951, in the wake of the country's independence from Britain, a second report on India's film industry was already concluding that the influence of foreign films was on the wane (Armes 110). India's Film Enquiry Committee reported a “changeover of a large number of cinemas from foreign pictures to Indian pictures... in the circumstances, the exhibition of foreign films is not very significant as far as competition with the Indian industry is concerned” (qtd. in Armes 110).

Securing influence in its own domestic markets was only the first step toward fully mounting the influence of Indian films among Indians themselves. When the British Raj saw an increasing need for employees to operate its expansive colonial administration, it tapped into the indigenous population, and in so doing created a class of English-speaking, Western-educated elites that would subsequently differ in literacy, education, cultural tastes, and class position with respect to the much larger Indian population. It was these English speaking, “Anglicized elites” (Bose 52) who developed stronger tastes for Western cinema, while the larger populous developed a stronger affinity for the Indian cinema that reflected their regional interests, cultures, and languages. Satyajit Ray, one of India's greatest directors, noted how he was encouraged to “shun Indian films” as a boy: “cinemas showing Indian films, such as Albion, were dark and seedy. One pinched one's nose as one hurried past the toilet in the lobby into the auditorium and sat on hard, creaky, wooden seats. The films they showed, we were told by our elders, were not suitable for us” (qtd. in Bose 52). Ray illuminates how interpreted differences of class and values were associated with each of these cinemas, interpretations that were reinforced by the community. In his study of Bollywood history, Mihir Bose calls this interpreted distinction an “apartheid,” one that “did not cease until the 1980s, when with import of foreign films restricted, the swanky cinema houses of Bombay, Calcutta and other cities, started showing Hindi films (Bose 52) The apartheid was completely eliminated only in the 1990s when Hindi films were relabelled Bollywood and started becoming acceptable in the West” (Bose 53). For just under a century, then, there existed no clear consensus among Indian movie goers about what style or form of cinema they preferred, nor about whether Western or Indian cinema best spoke to their own sense of self and cultural identity. This history illustrates how tenuous is any attempt to correlate Indian audience tastes with a national cultural authenticity or legitimacy, an attempt that

has characterized much of the *Slumdog* discourse.

Beyond the attempt to gauge the Indianness of a film by interpreting a generalized Indian audience reception is the attempt to gauge cultural authenticity through interpreting the Indianness of the film's fictional world, or through interpreting the degree to which a film employs a particularly Indian cinematic style; this latter attempt has been evident in the *Slumdog* discourse through evaluations of just how much the film embodies a “Bollywood” style. In terms of formal elements of the created film – as opposed to the mechanics of its production – those elements that most significantly mark the uniqueness of Bollywood films are musical numbers and genre mixing. Indian director Shyam Benegal clearly sums up this double uniqueness:

The West broke up everything: they said, this is drama; they said, this is comedy; they said, this is tragedy. Our films mix everything in one. The same has everything in it, much like our food, because otherwise we don't feel satisfied. It must have everything. That's traditional. Popular cinema follows that tradition. For Indian films, for their very sustenance, songs were very important. But that is because for any kind of Indian entertainment, particularly community entertainment, songs are important. In any Indian performance before a large number of people, theatrical performance of film or whatever, music and song are essential components. But songs in an Indian film does not make it a musical. A Western musical actually takes a story forward. In Indian films songs may sometimes interrupt, sometimes they are part of the story. It's variable, but the whole thing is that they are interludes. They are not musicals in the Western sense. Not at all. This is why it is a different tradition of cinema compared to the Western tradition. They make the audience

cry, they make the audience laugh, they make the audience enjoy the song, make their feet tap to the dances; all those kinds of things and all in one movie. (qtd. in Bose 32)

Bollywood films, Benegal claims, in some ways create the content of the film with the movie goer directly in mind, creating a relationship through which the audience's needs are catered to and its participation (overtly emotional, physical) inspired – the musical numbers are the site at which that relationship is most fully expressed. Benegal illustrates how crucial musical numbers are as a quintessential element of Indian films, and not surprisingly, it is the near total lack of such an element in *Slumdog Millionaire* that has prompted many critics to challenge the film's claim to Indianness.

The kind of entertainment Benegal discusses as quintessentially Indian has not always, however, provided the criterion that would determine the Indianness of a film; just as the Indian English novel wrestles with determining what Indian cultural authenticity looks like in the novel form, so too have there been different ideas about what makes for authentically Indian content in film. Speaking in 1979 at a symposium on cinema in developing countries, the Indian actor Utpal Dutt denounces the content of commercial Indian cinema: “An Indian hero in a blonde wig and the latest Bond Street clothes making love to a heroine who seems to have shopped for clothes in New York last week – that's their conception of Indianness! ...He dresses as no Indian dresses, he floats on a cloud....only by being intensely and wholly regional can one be truly Indian” (qtd. in Armes 67). Indian commercial cinema at this moment in history – rife as it was with the lavish musical entertainment that today marks the defining characteristic of Bollywood films, as noted by Benegal – were nevertheless regarded by critics like Dutt as unrealistic, as offering a fictional world that was too far removed from a place- or regionally- specific India. The films offered a

fictional world where content signified falsely: props and costumes signalled Western culture, not Indian culture.

Yet what was the alternative to this commercial cinema in India at the moment Dutt addressed the international symposium? Films like those of the critically-acclaimed Satyajit Ray, whose own childhood was filled with repulsion for films produced in India, and who recalls the influence of his elders who pushed him instead toward Western films (Bose 52). This Western style of filmmaking was evident throughout Ray's career, as Ray himself describes: "I am fully aware now, thanks to my Western critics, of the Western traits in my films. They have so often been brought to my notice that I can actually name them: irony, understatement, humour, open endings, the use of leitmotifs, a fluid camera and so on" ( qtd. In Armes 230). The criterion for interpreting formal cinematic elements as quintessentially Indian, indeed, the criterion for interpreting a film as an Indian film, have been in flux in a way that was similar to Indian audience's perceptions of the film styles that spoke most strongly to their sense of cultural identity.

In providing this history of Indian cinema, I mean to invert two misconceptions within the discourse on *Slumdog Millionaire*. One of the major debates about *Slumdog* as a production has been articulated in terms of its Indianness, the degree to which it can legitimately make a claim to embodying a uniquely Indian cinema. This debate is often hinged upon the evidence that a lower total number of Indians cared to see *Slumdog* in theaters compared to that number of Brits or Americans, as well as the claim that the film itself does not operate substantially in an Indian cinematic style. I have argued that the cultural specificity of Indian cinema has been in flux over the course of the last century, and so too have the tastes of Indian audiences been in flux during that time. To make the claim that *Slumdog* is not "Indian enough" is a difficult claim

to make, and accordingly, perhaps it is not such a useful one.

Secondly, the *Slumdog* discourse – and other tangential media coverage of Bollywood – has often made much of the newness of Bollywood's explosive growth, conflating it with the India's “economic miracle” of recent decades, characterized by “rapid gains in productivity growth and GDP” since the 1970s as IT giant Nandan Nilekani describes in *Imagining India* (49). Reports have shown that Indian cinema has, instead, outproduced its Western competitors for the past century in sheer number of films: Bollywood is not the result of a strange and brand-new growth miracle, but is part of an Indian film industry that has long possessed an enormous productive and influential capacity. The tendency of critics to characterize Bollywood and its contemporary co-productions or other international productions as newly dominant on the world scene creates a false foundation for understanding productions like *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film created by Western and Indian entities. Projects like *Slumdog Millionaire* ought to be understood instead as the work of the two great centers that have dominated global filmmaking in the past century, whose industries have long been extraordinarily productive in their own terms, in their own economic and regional contexts. The impression created by many media sources where Indian cinema is the new strong kid on the block is not the proper, deserved impression: that from a historical and economic vantage point, Indian and Western filmmakers ought to be very compatible, that they ought to be able to create international films on equal footing.

Indeed, the *Slumdog*/Bollywood discourse as it appears in Western media creates a false impression even of the stylistic and production-based differences between these two cinemas. Even Mihir Bose in his history of Bollywood makes much of the differences between Hollywood and Bollywood, citing audio recording, script usage, and the previously mentioned interest in song and dance: Bollywood films record audio only after the scene has been shot, and this audio

track will be coordinated later with the visual element; Bollywood films do not shoot from scripts, but directors instead convince actors to sign onto projects by orally animating the film's story for them; again, song and dance sequences are Bollywood formula for interludes that may or may not advance the film's narrative. Stark as some of these production-based differences may seem, these two film industries shared many similarities in the earliest days of cinema. In that early period, Bollywood films did indeed shoot from scripts (Bose 31). They were formally very similar to Hollywood films, particularly because it was not until the invention of sound for film that created the distinctive musical differences between Hollywood and Bollywood (Bose 31). Moreover, Bollywood and Hollywood cast, crew, and production companies collaborated to produce international productions as early as the 1940s – that is to say, Bollywood and Hollywood entities have been similar enough to produce collaborative projects in the past as well as the present (Bose 106).

At the very moment films like *Slumdog Millionaire* bring Western and Indian cultures in close contact, the implicit or explicit ideas about Indian and Western cinema and economies in contemporary media discourses have worked to push them apart, to accentuate their differences – a particularly problematic trend for Indian/Western relations, which from the Western perspective has been marked most heavily in the last century by distrust and fear. Journalist Harold Isaacs performed a unique study in 1958 which he called “a rather intensive inquiry into some American ideas and impressions of China and India, and particularly of Chinese and Indians as people. A great deal that has turned up in this exploration of minds is new, or at least newly seen; some of it is bound to be pleasantly or unpleasantly controversial” (Isaacs 11). Isaacs, a journalist who had spent much of his career covering Asia, Isaacs interviewed scholars, fellow journalists, business leaders, religious and education leaders and other “American leadership types” (Isaacs

13), and indeed he some unpleasantly controversial results: these “leadership types”, who Isaacs selected precisely for their familiarity or expertise with Asia, nonetheless revealed dark, negative associations with India and China. A large number of interviewees characterized these countries repeatedly as places filled with “poverty, misery, disease, hunger, famine, ignorance... In the present panel, 129 individuals said they feel that Asia has become a source of future danger for the United States; only 16 that it has not” (Isaacs 54-55). This intense distrust, these ideas of India as filled with misery, poverty and chaos, were expressed in 1958 even by American leaders familiar with India, and today we remain to see these very same images recycled in films and cinematic discourse like that surrounding *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Isaacs' study raises the stakes of cultural production and its discourses as it exists on an international scale, particularly between regions like the Indian Subcontinent and the West. It reminds us that films matter, that cultural production is not about creating art for art's sake but instead has the capacity for affecting public perception of those people and places that might otherwise remain dim and negatively associated “[s]cratches on [their] [m]inds” (Isaacs). Cinema is one of the most important sites for cultural ambassadors to rework those public perceptions, and in the case of the United States and India, cinema also happens to be one site that embodies many of our greatest similarities. Hollywood and Bollywood are the largest film industries in the world; they garner similar intensities of audience loyalty across the world; they have a history of international collaboration even at times when their respective publics expressed serious distrust of each other. Further, simply the nature of the cinematic mode as demanding economic exchange and the exchange of stories, fictions, the raw forms of culture – these two points of exchange are key in building international relations. Films like *Slumdog Millionaire* offer the opportunity for such building in the abstract, bringing together Bollywood and Hollywood

industries. Yet their failure to act as coherent representations that would provide the materials for cultural exchange in combination with the failure of the media discourses to properly contextualize the possibilities for Bollywood/Hollywood productivity work to cast *Slumdog Millionaire* as a tantalizing promise of what could be future cultural productivity between these two regions, but one that remains, in so many ways, to be fully realized.

#### Conclusion: Globalization and *Slumdog* as Global Storytelling

"The term globalization is marked by a fundamental ambiguity. On the one hand, it holds out hope for the creation of new communities and unforeseen solidarities; on the other hand, it appears merely to euphemize corporatization and imperial expansion... Does globalization

presage a new openness to the previously foreign and the out of reach, or is it rather (and paradoxically) just the opposite: a veiled way of alluding to the Americanization of foreignness in a world dominated by U.S. power following the fall of the Soviet Union?" (qtd. In Krishnaswamy 39)

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What I have so far offered in this thesis is a set of frameworks for thinking about how a single film represents and embodies cultural reality. I've stretched out and gazed upon its formal parts; tracked down its relevance within a parallel literary discourse; and run a finger from its contemporary creation all the way back to the early moments of film production on the Indian subcontinent. Within each of these analytical categories, I brought to the surface and accentuated, added to, or reinterpreted *Slumdog's* primary negative criticisms. In sum, then, my methodology focused upon understanding how a single work signifies its content through following the major claims of its detractors.

With the closing moments of this project's commentary, I want to take an inverse approach. This project was not orchestrated only to better think about how a single film appropriates reality and subsumes it as fictional content, but to think of a single film itself as a cultural product that speaks to and is subsumed by the larger, broader reality of globalization. Furthermore, after understanding more thoroughly *Slumdog's* failings and shortcomings, I hoped that I might be able to offer an answer to the question: Just what does a film like *Slumdog* have to teach us? Toward what positive horizons might it point fiction, cinema, or global culture? In most cases where *Slumdog* has been lauded for its newness, importance, or transformative significance, its success has been conflated with the project's embodiment or expression of

globalization. I want to consider now just what globalization is as a concept and a phenomenon, and what kind of relationship *Slumdog* has with it.

Globalization, a condition that reconstitutes the arrangement of the world's people, cultures and economies into a single, open social space, seems in many ways to be so forcefully benevolent, so forcefully good (qtd. in Krishnaswamy 39). But this simplicity is premised upon thinking about globalization as an exclusively social phenomenon with a social motivation and with social effects. I opened this conclusion with the words of globalization theorist Timothy Brennan in order to complicate such simplicity. His formulation – globalization as positive when emphasized socially (the “hope... for new communities”) and globalization as negative when emphasized politically/economically component (“corporatization and imperial expansion”) – illustrates that the ethical or productive valuation of globalizaion is dependent upon the site at which it is emphasized: socially, politically and/or economically. Further, positive and negative valuations are not statically pinned to each of those latter categories, but like all valuations, they are applied as variously as the interpreters who consider them. Indeed, theorists illuminate the “various guises” in which globalization makes its “promises”: the political promise of global citizenship; the primary action by transnational corporations; an American ideology that thoughtlessly and wildly searches for novelty; a U.S. global hegemony that denies hybridity; and finally, the assertion that globalization is not a phenomenon actually at work (qtd. In Krishnaswamy 41-42).

The analysis of *Slumdog* I've offered in this thesis allows this film to be interpreted as contradictorily expressive of these globalization “promises.” The conclusions I reached in both Chapter One and Two suggest that the implicit ideologies of *Slumdog* and similar fictions challenge the viability of a global political condition whereby a trans-national citizenship could

be achieved in egalitarian or democratic terms: Chapter One affirms a theory that persistent Western cultural hegemony severely challenges the possibility of creating egalitarian, hybrid cultural projects, in whose place we find instead the skewed cultural content associated with non-Western partner; Chapter Two comes to a very similar conclusion, as it highlights the ethical problems of popularly visible and critically acclaimed novels like *Q&A* and *The White Tiger*, which employ formal techniques that obscure the accurate, informed representation of already marginalized, poor protagonists. Perhaps Chapter Three holds out the greatest possibility for *Slumdog*'s hint toward achieving something like global citizenship: I sought, in part, to correct a media discourse that over-accentuated the difference and incompatibility of Hollywood and Bollywood, both of whose filmic productive capacity and global market share have rendered these two industries as equally influential and artistically sophisticated, a condition that encourages more collaboration between them.

In some unfortunate way, I think that even Chapter Three's promising conclusion does not necessarily promise to affect the global ideological conditions necessary for imagining such global citizenship. While filmmakers like Canadian independent producer Roger Frappier echo a call to international co-production like I myself posit, the language he uses to talk about that promise of cultural hybridity is the kind that actually subverts the socially-interested and purely-benevolent impulses he appears to summon. Frappier addresses his colleagues in a "Strategic Partners" keynote sponsored by the Atlantic Film Festival Association, an organization that seeks to foster international co-productions in Canada:

As an independent producer, last year's runaway success of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle's Mumbai-set drama, is a source of joy and inspiration for me. This turning-point film made with a 15-million-dollar budget raked in receipts of three

hundred and sixty-two million dollars worldwide, and it won a multitude of prizes around the globe, ending up, of course, with the final apotheosis: eight Oscars, including one for Best Picture. But this film is telling us something else: the world is getting smaller, cultures are changing one another and the audience's concerns are evolving. Nowadays, to state that we are living in the era of globalization and instant communication on a planetary level is simply saying something that everybody knows. ("Big-Context Cinema," *Atlantic Film*).

What is so striking about Frappier's expression of this feeling of *Slumdog's* transformativeness is that he associates it with both sides of globalization: its economic and cultural/social elements; the economic element seems to take on a kind of exploitative tone. The economic element is the first thing that he addresses in this keynote speech, lauding *Slumdog* as every financial backer's dream investment: it was a project that took \$15 million dollars, "raked in receipts," and took the greatest film award, an Oscar for Best Picture. He even tells us the exact figure for *Slumdog's* harvest: \$362 million, 24 times its investment. Of course, Frappier is speaking from the particular position of a producer, the business man who risks his capital in an industry where taking a loss is more common than taking earnings. This calculus offers a reminder that films like *Slumdog* are not just dealing in culture, but also, the making of money.

When I used Armes' research on third world cinema to demonstrate how easily Hollywood initially acquired foreign markets, and how in the 1960s the development of television forced Hollywood to compete for those formerly easy markets, I did not fully elaborate what the future would hold for Western cinema after that historical moment. That future is complex, but one major change in the industry came with the rise of independent cinema. This is the part of Hollywood's future is pertinent to *Slumdog*, a film produced by Fox

Searchlight, an independent studio. If, then, we interpret independent cinema as one of Hollywood's methods for re-inventing itself and maintaining relevance against the threat of a new competitor in the global entertainment industry, *Slumdog* is in some way a part of that counter thrust: a product offered by an industry, a cultural form packaged by a business that must continue to fight for its share of foreign markets.

When we consider that *Slumdog* as both a capitalist product that has an interest in “raking in receipts” and also a part of an institutionalized film industry that produces a formulaic product, another perspective emerges of *Slumdog* that casts its cinematic productive element as exploitative, undermining the seeming benevolence of its platform for cultural dialoguing. Indeed, independent cinema's ostensible idiosyncrasy was institutionalized in the 1990s (Levy 501). Emmanuel Levy, who performed the first comprehensive research on the subject, breaks down the formula: “Ideally, an indie is a fresh, low-budget movie with a gritty style and offbeat subject matter that express the filmmaker’s personal vision. The expectation is for an idiosyncratic mindset” (Levy 2). To sum up this institutionalization process, Levy notes: “Indies now form an industry that runs not so much against Hollywood as parallel to Hollywood” (501). That is to say, the “grittiness” of the independents is not dissent, rebellion, or radicalism, but a kind of normalized quirkiness.

Roger Frappier's interest in cultivating independent cinema's formulaic “grittiness” in order to rake in receipts is a kind of interest that precludes the socially-hopeful element of globalization wherein “unforeseen solidarities” are created across national boundaries. Instead, his formulation reveals an impulse in independent filmmakers, like *Slumdog*'s, who seem to offer the Western film industry's most viable outlet for bridging those cultural divides; monetarily-hungry and formulaic cultural content pitched as “gritty” and “culturally diverse” can be

understood in some way to be just another capitalist and exploitative vehicle. Again, Brennan is useful for imagining the negative ethics of this capitalist orientation of globalization:

What we are seeing today under the banner of globalization repeats a process, with some changes, that we saw over two centuries ago with the emergence of national markets... Many commentators, Amin argues, have falsely associated capitalism with 'development' and 'the market,' whereas it is actually hostile to both. It thrives, rather, in the zero-sum contest of mobile finance drifting around the globe in search of investment, victimized by its own victorious monopolization, hungering for new worlds to conquer. The underlying logic linking globalization theory and postcolonial studies has, in at least one respect, a perverse cast. The mutual hostility of both to the nation form... is projected as an irrepressible ultramodernism. In turn, this ultramodernism in its contemporary variant is given an almost aesthetic accent in which mobility as an ontological condition is portrayed as the exciting play of an infinite self-fashioning. The cast is 'perverse' because in accordance with such a logic one is forced contemptuously to revile, even while resonating with, a specific and conjunctural national-statist project (that of the United States) that in a vigorously broadcast system of images and slogans embraces the same hybridity, modernity, and mobility of globalization theory. Like that theory, it depicts the world as having moved *past* colonialism and imperialism." (49)

Brennan deftly illuminates how “globalization” is in so many ways just another word for “imperialism.” This subtly synonymous relationship finds expression in the valorization of mobility and “an infinite self-fashioning”: it is Americanism that values mobility, it is the capitalist “contest of mobile finance drifting around the globe in search of investment” that values mobility; and the conflation of an ostensibly hopeful, benevolent globalization with such

mobility links it irrevocably with that exploitative capitalism, which, Brennan argues, is hostile to socially harmonized, international citizenship.

Even beyond, then, the problems *Slumdog* bears in terms of the non-egalitarian nature of its hybridity, even beyond the failure of *Slumdog* to ethically express its international, global partnership, is the question of whether or not globalization itself even exists or holds realistic promises for “the creation of new communities.” Indeed, it is possible that *Slumdog* can only teach us that globalization – in the positive, cultural terms its fans have imagined – may be far from such an internationally productive iteration.

Yet it is perhaps the categorizational nature of my thesis’ methodology that artificially precludes a fuller understanding of *Slumdog*’s relationship to or expression of globalization. I’ve broken down not only the *Slumdog* discourse into discrete, categorizational parts, but in so doing, have also fragmented the total import of those categories: its content, the literary landscape surrounding its source text, and its cinematic lineage as a production. For example, *Slumdog*’s unique and most potentially-transformative contribution to a mode of global story telling may be its choice of portraying a poor, ordinary, Indian and Muslim boy in his own cultural context while restraining from politicizing that content; this content-based element only takes on its significance as a film, a merging of my two analytical perspectives. Indeed, *Slumdog* allows movie goers around the world to see this ordinary person -- who otherwise might trigger in viewers a sense of his apparent difference or otherness -- simply fall in love and succeed in life. This mode for telling a story employs class-, race-, and culturally- specific content in a manner that is only suggestive and not topical, that is only on the narrative surface and not active. Affirming diverse cultural signifiers by bringing them into the realm of story yet keeping a check against their encroachment of the story’s total meaning is an idiom for story telling that

in some ways reflects the ordinary, daily experience of human relations: one that is filled with the implication and signals of cultural difference and diversity, but one that operates largely upon the impulse of vague emotions. Indeed, this reflection of daily experience may better allow the average movie goer to connect to cultural, racial and socioeconomic issues on their own terms, reflecting their own personal experience with how they come in contact with those issues on a daily basis. Further, *Slumdog*'s unique "global ordinariness" can be said to mark a new phase in the reception of international filmic productions: Emmanuel Levy notes that the Academy has long displayed a bias toward biopictures, "films inspired by actual events and/or real life personalities," when it considers awarding foreign films with an Oscar (Levy 102). *Slumdog* is no story of a great, historically significant man or woman, and still it managed to be a story that one of the world's oldest cultural institutions in the United States applauded.

I have spent the vast majority of this thesis thinking about how *Slumdog* and similar fictions fail to achieve egalitarian, hybrid cultural productions or egalitarian and representationally distant cultural productions, and of course, those problems continue to be forceful and unignorable from the perspective at which they are analyzed: from the position of the poor, whose lived experiences are not accurately reflected in fictions about the poor; from the position of the Indian boy whose layered, nuanced cultural identity is narrowed into terms that are more convenient for the authors of his depiction. But there is another perspective from which we should not neglect to imagine a relationship with *Slumdog*'s representation of Indians and the Indian poor: the middle class spectator, the Westerner, or any other person whose cultural, racial, or socioeconomic position to *Slumdog*'s content may be distant. While this spectator should not be entertained at the expense of another's marginalization, oppression, or suppression, perhaps this condition of inaccuracy can serve as a lesson for new idioms of global story telling that

*Slumdog*, in some minor way, stimulates. *Slumdog*'s positive possibilities for affecting the kind of "unforeseen solidarities" imagined by Brennan seem most productive in the simple acknowledgement it invites viewers to both share and build from: that the incomplete transfer of ideas, personal identities, and histories continues to be a fact of lived experience in a culturally- and informationally- rich yet nevertheless -- despite the unfulfilled promises of globalization -- far-flung world.

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