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## **The Film Adaptation of *Slumdog Millionaire* With Respect to Unique Portrayal of Characters and Their Indianness; Rendering Pre-eminence to the Process of Creativity in Cinematic Adaptation**

**Dr. Priyanka Pasari**  
D. Litt Research Scholar,  
Devi Ahilya University,  
Indore (M.P).

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is based on the creative adaptation of the novel Q&A by Vikas Swarup – the Indian writer and diplomat . *Slumdog Millionaire* is a British film that became a sleeper hit winning eight out of the ten Academy Awards it was nominated for in 2009. Further it went on to bag seven more BAFTA awards, four Golden Globe awards and five Critics' Choice awards.

The film adaptation of the novel however has a lot of creative changes made from the very beginning. The story of the movie revolve not around the deliberate adventures of the hero but his circumstantial happenings of his life, which if given a choice, he wouldn't have opted.

Just like the book, the movie also couldn't be untouched from criticism though much of it was unexpected for a film winning so many awards. Danny Boyle along with screenplay writer Simon Beaufoy took the story from the book of Swarup, which would have been very fascinating for the west but was just an ordinary story of any Indian Bollywood film – a story of two brothers, born out of the same hell, one turning into a hero and the other one a villain. The background was selected to be a girl from brothel, rape, murder, false conviction, corruption, and ultimately emerge the failed villain and triumphant hero from all that mess.

Howbeit, what catches one's attention as a viewer of the film is the fine craft of cinematography that takes you from one scene to the other, from the present to the past and back again; and the music that strikes the some better chords than the narrative does in the novel and keeps one spellbound by A. R. Rahman. The acknowledgement of

musical score of *Slumdog Millionaire* in the Academy Awards was in itself a significant achievement and platform for the Indian film industry and in a way the acceptance and award for Indian music was a celebration of the Indian cinema too.

**Keywords: Q & A, Slumdog-millionaire, Adaptation, Swarup, Ram, Jamal, Salim,Latika, Movie, Novel, Film.**

*Slumdog Millionaire* a British film and a creative adaptation of the novel “*Q&A*” by Vikas Swarup – the Indian writer and diplomat – became a sleeper hit winning eight out of the ten Academy Awards it was nominated for in 2009. Further it went on to bag seven more BAFTA awards, four Golden Globe awards and five Critics' Choice awards. The copy of the original novel reads a compliment from the *Observer* “As colossal, vibrant, and chaotic as India itself...Not to be missed” (Swarup).

The novel opens with a first person narrative of account of the protagonist where a scene of his arrest in Dharavi – the slum of Mumbai is described by him. There is an utter objectivity of description in the words and tone of the protagonist which makes the reader feel both strange and pity for him. Rather than being shaken by his arrest, he and the people of his area, seem to be least bothered by it as if it was written. “When your whole existence is ‘illegal’, when you live on the brink of penury in an urban wasteland where you jostle for every inch of space and have to queue even for a shit, arrest has a certain inevitability about it” (Swarup 12).

The name of the protagonist, just like his tone, still intrigues the reader’s further as it is an amalgamation of three religions, likely to be incompatible in practicality – Ram Mohammad Thomas. The name which is revealed in the Prologue of the book is in itself a prologue to the theme of the entire story, the story of a life lived at all the edges of experience that is not to be found in common, of personality that isn’t expected to be the ordinary. It does set the expectation of the reader to read through the life story of this very unusual protagonist and in actuality as well, “This lively picaresque novel has an original telling premise...painted with remarkable lightness and wit” (Swarup1).

Based out of the Indian version of ‘Who Wants To Be a Millionaire?’ and named as ‘Who Will Win a Billion?’ the story revolves around the show in which the protagonist is about to win a billion rupees and is held under doubt of the credibility of his candidature as he hasn’t ever gone to school nor have had any chance of formal education in life. The person from the slums of Mumbai, working as a waiter in a bar, seems to have no claim over his candidature of winning the game. “It epitomizes all that life is for the common man in India, for whom even an honest victory is uncommon, almost met with ridicule and disbelief” (Swarup2).

The plot of the novel written by Swarup is a very complex one and does not follow the chronological order but wades through reminisces of Ram Mohammad Thomas’ life in the order of the questions asked to him at the quiz show. The more interesting it gets on the level of the story, the more complicated it becomes to link and imagine his life in a straight line. But Swarup’s style is the ultimate weapon of his victory as the chaos that is present in Ram’s life is penned in the same chaotic way that doesn’t let the mind of the reader rest.

In the beginning of the novel the plot alternates with the happenings of his life but even that alternate arrangement is missing after a few chapters. We cannot say for sure where the lost link would recollect itself in the series of the events to follow but for sure follow through the journey of the protagonist’s life.

However, according to Salman Rushdie the plot of the novel is, “a patently ridiculous conceit, the kind of fantasy writing that gives fantasy writing a bad name” (Dougal). Rushdie further added to say the plot and the story line have unbearable impossibilities being piled up one after the other. He asserts that the story actually breached the rule of expected minimum plausibility that has to be there in at least a novel which is so closely based on reality. But somehow as Swarup wasn’t writing a documentary and what he was writing belonged to the genre of fiction, Swarup could dismiss the compulsion of having to adhere to reality and the make most use of the vehicle he chose to establish his character.

The interrogators in the prologue of the novel seem to be confused themselves as well. In a way even they are neither sure of Ram's cheating, nor of the way they should adopt to make him accept his crime. Starting from the general interrogation, to quizzing him and exploring the option of buying him, the third degree torture is something that adds to the uncertainty in the life and minds of Indians portrayed in the movie. They try every way to make Ram sign the statement that they want but all in vain for the savior of Ram, the lawyer Smita Shah enters and rescues him from the trap he was about to fall into.

Equal to the surprise of the policemen is Ram's surprise for he never approached anyone for a lawyer nor could he afford to have one on his side. But as objectively as Ram sees life, he agrees to accept the help from the God sent woman and after a bit of doubts and hesitation he is willing to open up to her. In this way, the prologue sets the stage for a telling story that Ram narrates to his lawyer and as the question is about the truthfulness of his answers, the narration happens in the order of the questions asked to him in the show itself, all sounding very believable as in a fantasy story.

The chapters in the novel title with the amount for the question asked in the game show and the gist of the story related with it. The first chapter also reveals the best friend of the protagonist Salim and his big time reverence for his most beloved hero Armaan Ali.

From the very first chapter itself Swarup has stressed on the one element that is inevitably effecting all of our lives, including the protagonist's and his friend's too, which is the impact of films on the psyche of children and adults and the role of it in mending and bending their view of life and how they see the world. The description of the film that Ram and Salim go to watch together further add to the futility of the scripts our cinema in which everything is just predictable and same. The hero is the ideal man and the heroine the ideal woman, which unlike real life happens only in fantasy. No man, how hard he tries, can meet the benchmark set by our heroes and no woman in practicality can look that alluring as does a heroine of the films, and this reasons and adds to the reason of the amount of reverence given to it. People and children as well watch movies to enjoy the projection life as it ought to be than life as it is.

The first of the questions is also about a movie star and put right in context of India. Now there isn't much of a story about it in the movie but there is quite a chunk in the novel. However, the element of reverence for film stars is something that is portrayed in the most stunning ways in the movie. The unbearable plight of Jamal locked in a public toilet, unable to meet his favorite film star and the method he adopts to secure his way to meet him – falling into a pit of human excreta is a scene of the movie that does invoke mixed feelings in the viewer altogether and at times it was also considered to be absolutely unnecessary by certain critics. Pity, scorn, contempt, for the poor and their helplessness for the limited measures of pleasure they have in their life and the extent to which they go in order to achieve it in the story is something unforeseen, and unexpected in the weirdest dreams of a middle class and above human being.

When we start comparing the questions of the movie with the questions of the novel we find a hint of some similarity but the answers to questions of the novel seem like the singular experiences of Ram's life as he saw, observed and learnt from others and the answers of the movie are based on the adventures and experiences of the trio of Jamal, Salim and Latika.

Latika as a character is only present in the movie and not in the novel. The closest character to Latika of the movie that of Nita but whom Ram meets at the very later stages of his life, whereas Latika is a part of their childhood and all of what they have been through in their life.

The second question of the quiz strikes open the very delicate thread of Ram's life, his birth place, his abandonment by his mother and his adoption at the church of St. Mary's by father Timothy. Swarup's use of Ram's stream of consciousness throughout the novel is masterful and he excels at planting the seeds of it in the first few questions of the show and so pages of the novel as well. Ram thinks of his mother as "A tall and graceful young woman, wearing a white sari.....Her long black hair blows across her face, obscuring her features" (Swarup 49). The history behind his name, the communal pressures evident through it all point towards the telltale truth of Indian societies where even a gesture of help in which Father Timothy adopts Ram and calls him Thomas is seen as a conspiracy to convert him in Christianity, finally giving the child a name that echoes

the voice of all religions ‘Ram’ for the Hindus, ‘Mohammad’ for the Muslim and ‘Thomas’ for the Christians.

There is but a striking similarity in the first two chapters of the novel about the homosexuality. Both the hero Armaan Ali, of whom Salim is a big fan of, and Father Timothy’s son Ian and Father John of the story are portrayed to be homosexual. The first chapter revealing the story of Armaan Ali is titled as ‘Death of a Hero’ and the second chapter ends with the death of Father Timothy and Father John after a brutal fight over the issue of homosexuality.

The second question of the game show in the novel and the third in the movie, both are based upon religion, not revering to it but rather repentant on its existence. When in the movie Jamal is asked about the weapon which Lord Ram holds in his right hand he replies saying, “I wake up every morning wishing I didn’t know the answer to that question. If it wasn’t for Ram and Allah I would still have mother” (*Slumdog Millionaire*). Similarly the question based on religion in the novel is about the word inscribed on the cross, which lead Ram to recall the violent and unpleasant bloodshed that took away from him his most precious guardian Father Timothy.

The story in the novel moves on with a distinct element of novel only, the introduction of Gudia and the chawl life of Mumbai. This passiveness of neighbors to what is happening inside the malodorous and insanely claustrophobic rooms of the chawl resonates with the passiveness of the general public and policemen when communal violence wreaks havoc in the Dharavi area of Mumbai where Jamal lives. It is here that the kind of impassivity of poor class Indians and their helplessness to be so is portrayed both in the novel and the movie. It is in Ram’s first person narrative that we get a taste of it in the novel, “We Indians have this sublime ability to see the pain and misery around us, and yet remain unaffected by it” (Swarup 84).

But it is also in the same chapter that Ram’s sensitivity for Gudia’s suffering and exploitation by her father surfaces and it also reveals that which splits Salim and Ram apart. Salim is much worried about his own life and the problems in it and doesn’t want to intrude into someone else’s life, even if that might be to help the other person, leading

to invite more problems. Howbeit, the Salim portrayed in the novel is not cunning and vicious but we see these traits in the Salim of the movie when he sells the photograph autographed by Amitabh Bachchan which is actually earned by Jamal, when he refuses to let Latika join Jamal and him, or when he intentionally leaves Latika's hand when helping her runaway from Maman and his gang. However, by the end of the movie it's Salim's change of heart and mind that let's Latika flee and find her freedom, but otherwise throughout the movie, he exemplifies the negative culmination of his circumstances and is somewhat villainous in his acts.

The novel moves on to unveil the horrific reality of juvenile homes in India and further to expose the heinous crimes behind child labour and beggary. Ram's voice telling about how children watched movies even in the juvenile homes and what feelings it invoked in them is in itself an example of the difference between different sections of society that we live in. Ram in the novel says,

These films are about a fantasy world. A world in which kids have mothers and fathers, and birthdays. A world in which they live in huge houses and drive in huge cars and get huge presents. We saw this fantasy world but we never got carried away by it. We knew we could never have a life like Amitabh Bachchan's or Shahrukh Khan's. The most we could aspire was to become one of those who held power over us.....The Juvenile Home diminished us in our own eyes (Swarup 92).

This reality about juvenile homes is something which according to some critics is also true of the slums where Ram and Salim grow up. The critical questions raised about the film then also encompass and question about the ability of someone like Ram and Salim to maintain that positive spirit and the will to help others. The whirl of negative circumstances portrayed in Ram's life are actually huge enough for someone to lose his humaneness altogether and this is the factor that robs the novel off its realistic theme.

However, the movie doesn't bring the juvenile homes into play, it lets the poor and homeless children to be portrayed as easy victims of gangs like those of Maman. The screen adaptation also shows Jamal and Salim as brothers and landing in all of the



miseries together. They fall prey to Maman's gang together with Latika and both of them manage to but get out of it. However, in novel's story the Juvenile Home is the place where Salim and Ram meet for the first time, becoming friends forever. The Salim of the Juvenile home is one who is shattered by the communal violence outbreak at his city and is having horrible dreams about his dying mother. Ram even saves him once from the illicit intentions of one Mr. Gupta from the juvenile home. The portrayal of Salim in the novel is quite opposite of how Salim of the movie is. In the movie, it is Salim who is Jamal's elder brother, who is much courageous than him and who saves Jamal from the gang of Maman and his men.

This vast difference in the portrayal of Salim in the movie and the novel owes its claim to the fact that reading through the pages of a novel which has a very daedal plot, the reader can but believe in the transformation of a character from childhood to adulthood in a way which it is shown. But to cater to the dramatic interests and the chronological limitations that a movie has, Salim is portrayed as that one negative shade which, amidst the same conditions as that of Jamal and Latika, takes a different course in life and ultimately ends in suicide and repentance.

The story then moves on to Ram and Salim's escape from Maman's gang off to film actress Neelima Kumari's life. This is also one of the stories specific only to the novel. The film has no mention of the Jamal working for an actress or the Australian family ever. Rather in the film the duo escape straight to Agra and start working as tourist guides and in turn robbing people off their assets in some way or the other.

One more aspect is that the novel always mentions Ram as the most genuine hero possible – he works honestly only as a guide in Agra, he manages to maintain his honesty amongst all the theft at the Australian house and he manages to build all of his savings out of his truthful labor that he does everywhere. But the movie portrays him as that realistic hero who even if he doesn't like, has to do some things just for survival's sake. This is somewhere where the movie becomes more realistically appealing and convincing than the novel.

Post Salim and Ram's escape from the Maman Gang the novel revolves around experiences of Ram working at the house of the Tragedy Queen Neelima Kumari. Neelima Kumari's life and her loneliness is the only episode which somehow symbolizes the dearth in the lives of the rich as well. She is a renowned actress in her late 40s not willing to give up. She torments herself by being locked inside her house and lives a life lesser known. She allows her secret lover to beat her and treat her badly because he is the only person she has left in her life. It also parallels with the story of Gudia in the chawl whose mother is treated in the same animal way by her father. In a way it also throws light on the suffering and misery of women irrespective of the class they belong to.

The life of Ram with the Australian family, is where the insensitivity of the upper class towards the defenseless lower class people is evident through small incidents taking place in the household. The difference between the rich and poor is vocally evident through their lifestyles and the kind of pursuits they undertake for pleasure and happiness. The frailty of the upper class people and the honesty of the lower class poses a question on the psyche of the reader and if he belongs to the upper or middle class, he himself starts questioning his attitude towards the people working at his very household. It is about the difference in the perception of life and its endeavors that Swarup paints through these experiences of Ram.

Ram's journey in the train post working with the Australian family symbolizes his very sentence in the novel, "Train journeys are all about possibilities" (Swarup 190). He starts off from Delhi with a decent saving in his hands, which he earned from the Australians, set to pursue a life of his dreams, but all in vain. He ends up losing everything earned till that point of time just in his effort to save someone Ram just had an acquaintance with. But it reveals the goodness seeded deep inside Ram's nature inspite of all the hardships he has been through and also the fact that beyond a certain limit bullying someone is not possible as fear loses its effect beyond a certain limit of torture. And this is what is exemplified in the preface of the novel as well. The objectivity of Ram's tone and his unattached attitude towards everything that happens in his life is a result of all that he has gone through in his past years. He is ready to take every spit of hatred and actually that is only the thing he expects from others. The hero stays the hero because

even in his expectations of hatred from others he never loses to grant each and every inch of kindness that he can offer.

His life is all about connecting the dots from lessons that he had learnt and it is when he realizes having shot the gangster in the train, that also for the sake of protecting others, does he recall Colonel Taylor's words "CYTLYT, Confuse Your Trail, Lose Your Trail" (Swarup 190). So, rather than going to where he is headed that is Mumbai, he lands in Agra where another story of his life begins.

However from this point on till the end of the novel the stories that we hear from Ram Mohammad Thomas and the ones we hear from Jamal Malik are totally different. This is the turning point in the movie where the movie remains tied only to the further story of its three musketeers – Jamal, Salim and Latika and the novel takes altogether a huge flight of the experiences of Ram Mohammad Thomas which in itself cover a plethora of emotions, feelings and experiences. It goes deeper into humanely issues of the ordinary –the people of the chawl, the people journeying in the train, the outhouse tenants of Swapna Devi's castle; and the elite's life – the life and story of Neelima Kumari, Swapna Devi, and the Australian family. It looks like the victory of humanity where like Hemingway puts, the hero is "But man is not made for defeat....A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (Hemingway 38).

The movie rather turns out more to be a story of struggle of Jamal to get back to the love of his life Latika, the transformation of Salim and the freedom of both Jamal and Latika. It is the unbelievable triumph of love over the difficulties that luck brings to them. It's the unbelievable unfold of fortune in the hands of fortitude.

The story of Ram's life in Agra is the pivot point in the novel. Though he remains poor by the end of the story as well, it is the one in which he finds both true friends and true love in the characters of Shankar and Nita. Landed into Agra with not even a single penny in his hand, Ram wanders through the city reaching one of its most enchanting places, The Taj Mahal. A quick learner that he is, he easily learns about the history of Taj Mahal listening to the other guides and himself becomes a guide in the place managing to earn his food. His urge to find a roof over his head takes him to the Swapna Palace where

he starts living in the outhouse with others including Lajwanti, Shankar, Shyam and the university students. Just like the stories of the servants at the Australian family's home are the stories of the people living in the outhouse of Swapna Palace.

The lifestyle of Swapna Devi contradicts all in all with the lifestyle of the people living in the outhouse. Shankar's abandonment by Swapna Devi and his slow death on being bitten by a dog, Lajwanti's worries about her sister's marriage leading to ultimate robbery by her in Swapna Devi's palace, and Shyam's futile efforts to protect his son from dying out of illness all point to the same suffering which creates the dichotomies between out societies.

However, Ram's life seems to be one of the better ones in the outhouses and it is here that he manages to earn some savings which he happily lends others at times of need. He is much content and happy with his life in Agra until he meets the love of his life Nita.

Nita's life throws light on another sect of the society we live in, where prostitutes are treated like animals rather humans, no laws are made to protect them and there is no way out for their escape. Ram meets Nita when he is on a tour of the city with a bunch of his customers who sponsor his visit to her brothel. His consecutive meetings with Nita finally let him decide to buy her freedom of which he is incapable in any which way he plans.

Nonetheless, Swapna Devi's cold passivity over her abandoned son Shankar's death leads Ram to commit a cold blooded crime first time ever in his life. He steals the money from Swapna Devi's castle and goes to buy Nita's freedom but all his efforts fail when he realizes the pitiable condition in which Nita is at the hospital post brutally beaten and treated by one of her clients.

This episode also throws light on the fact that as money could not buy the happiness which Ram was looking for in his life, he donates it to a writhing and crying father in the hospital who is unable to manage money for his dying son. Money in itself doesn't serve any value and purpose for Ram. But interestingly still it is in the same

chapter that he plans to move to Mumbai to take part in the game show ‘Who Will Win a Billion?’

It is when Ram returns to Mumbai does he find his job as a waiter and also coincidentally meets Salim his lost friend who, in order to become a film star, has actually started working with a bookie and hitman. Ram starts picking the threads from his past life in order to make a weave that he himself doesn’t know the shape of.

It is in the last chapter of the novel that striking revelations about how Swarup has connected the dots come to light. It is when the last question is thrown at Ram to answer and when he takes a break does he reveal to Prem Kumar the host of the show that he has come to the show only to take revenge for Neelima Kumari and Nita as Prem Kumar is the only person responsible for the condition of both the ladies. Ram also carries a gun with him and has all the intentions to kill Prem Kumar when for the first time in his life he starts thinking about the worth of a billion rupees and the things he could do with it. Ram aspires to set Lajwanti free from jail, make Salim a hero in the film industry, buy Nita’s freedom and live a life that had always been a distant dream than reality for him, Salim and the others like him. Finally, he grants Prem Kumar’s request to let go his life against the momentous amount of money he could win. And he wins it in the end with the hint received from Prem Kumar.

The reality of Smita Shah, lawyer of Ram, also comes to light when she tells Ram that she is Gudia from the chawl, for whom Ram was the only source of relief in the agony she went through. The end of the novel does close like a story in which suddenly many missing links fall into place making the matrix complete.

Anyhow when read twice from the critical point of view, the more appealing and realistic the initial chapters of the novel are, the more made up and conclusive the last chapter seems. To have such a wonderful luck as to meet Salim by chance in Mumbai, to find Prem Kumar as the sole person responsible for the misery of Neelima and Nita, and the appearance of Gudia like a savior at the right point in time all add up to the much improbable, and quixotic end of the story.

Ultimately the struggles and interactions of these “three musketeers” illustrate an effort to revive the romantic quest in a postmodern, cross-cultural narrative. The critical and popular responses to the film by Eastern and Western viewers suggest the risks inherent in such an undertaking while urging a continued interpretive dialogue that supports transcultural, and if such a thing exists, global innovation in literature and film. One of the striking features of the film is the use of camera as a ‘third-person’. Through this technique the director has been able to create the magical dramatic effect especially in the scene where Jamal and Salim are running on the streets.

This film is a composite art very much like any other art form. *Slum Dog Millionaire* is rich in themes, both basic and complex. It’s an exuberant celebration of perseverance and the triumph of the morally sound. The film also explores the power of love to lift us out of dire circumstances, and of course, the possibility of destiny. It also raises the question of moral relativism. As an audience, we see how easy it is to cheer as desperate orphans steal and deceive in order to survive, knowing that circumstance has left them little other choice. Is their thieving right? Maybe it’s the theme of victory over adversity that makes *Slumdog Millionaire* the perfect film for these times. During stressful times of geopolitical strife and financial insecurity, it is comforting to feel a protecting, guiding hand from above. Just as in the Great Depression when Hollywood musicals and screwball comedies dominated the screen; uplifting, joyful films provide more than escapism: they bring solace and assurance that better times are ahead. *Slumdog Millionaire* is a successful and popular Bollywood film. Bollywood films are movies that are produced in Mumbai in India, and this is one of the largest film productions in the whole world.

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