Questioning *Slumdog Millionaire*: Ambivalent Practices and Imaginary Truths

Abstract

This article analyses the British film *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle. The film has created hype all over the world by supposedly showing a “true India,” thus generating a number of negative responses, mainly from India. The article employs postcolonial criticism in analysing particular visual and narrative aspects of the film. As the research revealed, despite *Slumdog Millionaire*’s attempts to recreate the authentic voice of India by employing hybrid cinematic aesthetics, the film remains an ambiguous project whose certain visual and narrative strategies contribute to the construction, exploitation and dissemination of exotic discourses and (neo)colonial relics.

In the introduction to his book *India Through the Western Lenses*, Ananda Mitra has emphasized the enormous role cinema plays in creating and disseminating images related to certain countries. According to Mitra, “[…] when one thinks of India it is more likely that a film like *Gandhi* or *Gunga Din* would easily come to one’s mind than an obscure news story on television or a “page” on the Internet’s World Wide Web” (Mitra 14). These ideas are still valid in today’s discussions of media’s role in shaping and constructing identities. Today Mitra’s point about India’s image can be updated, replacing the classic films he focuses on with only one film – *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by British filmmaker Danny Boyle in 2008. *Slumdog Millionaire* was screened in many important film festivals, won eight Academy Awards (Oscars) and more than a hundred other cinema awards all around the world. This film has not only become a part of the world’s cinema history as one of the most influential cinematic creations of the twenty-first century, but also “a cultural event, a phenomenon that speaks to many issues of our time” (Gehlawat xv). It is not surprising then that since its release *Slumdog Millionaire* has received a vast amount of attention not only in media and public discourse, but also in academic research: from the film being seen as a certain reboot of romance in postmodern and transcultural perspective (Duncan 2011), reflection on post-national globalization (Mukherjee 2013),
to a criticism aimed at the representations of poverty and slums (Sengupta 2013, Mendes 2010, Chandra 2013).

Filmed in Danny Boyle’s trademark style using a mobile and playful camera combined with colourful aesthetics borrowed from Indian popular cinema (Bollywood), *Slumdog Millionaire* is the story of Jamal Malik, a boy from Mumbai’s Dharavi slum. Jamal takes part in a popular TV quiz show *Kaun Banega Carorepati* (*Who Wants to be a Millionaire?*) and answers correctly all the questions. Before the grand finale and the last question where Jamal is about to win 20 million rupees, he is arrested by police on suspicion of cheating in the game. During the questioning, it appears that each of the questions in the show is related to some important events of Jamal’s life: childhood spent in the slums of Mumbai; travels, and, most importantly, Jamal’s love to his childhood sweetheart – Latika.

Despite the enormous success at film festivals and the commercial tag-line of “the feel-good movie of the decade,” the reception of *Slumdog Millionaire* was not unanimous raving appraisals. The film also accumulated a certain amount of negative responses from moviegoers, particularly in India. The criticism was mainly aimed at the (mis)representation and alleged celebration of commodified poverty in the film1 As noted by Mike Walsh, these issues hurt the patriotic sentiments of many Indians and fuelled up discussions about the “right” of an Englishman to (allegedly) misrepresent the country to which he does not belong (Walsh 71). This debate demonstrates the persistent importance and problems associated with cultural representations and cultural translations in the postcolonial context, as confirmed by Margery Fee:

> can majority group members speak as minority members, Whites as people of colour, men as women, intellectuals as working people? If so, how do we distinguish biased and oppressive tracts, exploitative popularizations, stereotyping romanticizations, sympathetic identifications and resistant, transformative visions? (242)

The aim of this article however is not to engage in the debates about the “right” of members of different cultures to speak about the cultures other than their own, but to offer a postcolonial reading of the film, exposing and investigating the possible pitfalls of such representations. For decades India served as an ideological playground and battlefield in British popular imagination from which cinema is not an exception. From the “imperial cinema” of the 1930s and 1940s to the heritage films of the 1980s, British film production has constantly been engaged in constructing imaginary India, its own exotic Other. Evidently similar practices, even if modified, are still prevalent in today’s popular culture. For example Anjana Mudambi, in her analysis of *Slumdog Millionaire*, speaks about a new and redefined version of Orientalism in the film. Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of the intimate public, Mudambi contends that this intimate public “commodifies the Oriental subject, suppressing the racialized differences and colonial relationships created
in and justified through Orientalist representations by encompassing him/her within normative fantasies” (Mudambi 280), transforming the cultural Other into (an)other, a global sentimental community of sameness and difference. However, romantic narrative of the film aside, the problem with Slumdog Millionaire remains in the treatment of the film as an authentic depiction of India as well as the film’s mixed reception within the different audiences and a number of the ambivalent images and narrative strategies employed. Since the largest amount of criticism aimed at the film was regarding the (mis)representation of poverty and has been already covered extensively (see above), the present article sets to explore several narrative and visual strategies in Slumdog Millionaire which received less attention in the scholarship on the film: namely, aspects related to tourism, gender, and religion. These three perspectives confront the supposedly universalistic mission of the film and confirm ideological and exotic context, which will become especially evident when compared to the novel by Vikas Swarup Q&A from which the film was adapted. Despite Slumdog Millionaire’s attempts to recreate the authentic voice of India by employing hybrid cinematic aesthetics and disowning the practice of earlier films to include mandatory “white characters,” I argue that the film remains an ambiguous project whose certain visual and narrative strategies contribute to the construction, exploitation and dissemination of exotic discourses and (neo)colonial relics.

1. Slumdog Millionaire: Genre and Realism

A certain amount of criticism aimed at Slumdog Millionaire was concerned not particularly with the story, but with some of the images and representational strategies deployed in the film. One of the possible ways of explaining these representations in Slumdog Millionaire is through genre theory. Genre theory in film studies developed in the 1950s and focused on conventions associated with a particular body of films and the expectations spectators have about them. Even though films about India do not exactly constitute a separate genre, they are nevertheless connected with a specific geographical location which also creates expectations for the spectators. For example, a subgenre of British heritage films of the 1980s is called “Raj Revival” and is concerned with colonial India (films like A Passage to India, Heat and Dust, The Far Pavilions etc.). These films continuously used and reused specific sets of images in their mise-en-scène, such as the eastern market, train station, ruined temples, lush jungles etc., complying to the conventions of the genre and catering to the demands of spectators. But genres are not stable and are always changing, and, according to Leo Baudry, serve as a “barometer of the social and cultural concerns of cinema-going audiences” (qtd. in Hayward 168).

The images of India in heritage films (which often exploited nostalgic feelings for the colonial past) and Slumdog Millionaire are different. With the passage of
time the historical context has changed and the old sets of images do not work properly anymore for a more global India. Accordingly the old images have to be supplemented with the new ones. *Slumdog Millionaire*, therefore, sets out to explore the new stereotypes of India which would cater more effectively to the expectations and imagination of a contemporary spectator. *Slumdog Millionaire* thus incorporates these new sets of images related to India, such as cricket, call centres, Bollywood and its star cult following, poverty, slums and last, but not least – the Taj Mahal (images related to places, habits and practices). These images, however, are not one-dimensional, they are ambivalent, to use the term from the framework of postcolonial scholar Homi K. Bhabha. Robert Young observes that the term of ambivalence Bhabha borrowed from psychoanalysis, where it was used to express “a continual fluctuation between wanting one thing and its opposite (also “simultaneous attraction toward and repulsion from an object, person or action,” Young 153). Homi Bhabha employs this term in his critique of colonial discourses and sees it as an essential practice in the construction of the specific relation between the coloniser and the colonised. On the one hand, the coloniser tries to expose and confirm the colonised as exotic, radically strange and bizarre Other (hence the appearance of certain stereotypes related to the fearful aspect of the colonised, such as savagery, cannibalism and other fantasies) but, on the other hand, the coloniser attempts to domesticate the colonised subjects and incorporate them into the Western discourse (by collecting and constructing sets of knowledge about them) (Bhabha 70–72). In the colonial discourses, therefore, the colonised subjects are split into contrary positions, as explained by John McLeod, “they are domesticated, harmless, knowable; but also at the same time wild, harmful, mysterious” (53). The colonised thus are always ambivalent in the colonial discourses, always changing and never stable.

This ambivalent practice of image construction is seen in *Slumdog Millionaire* as well. The known, predictable and identifiable imagery of India (call centres, cricket, Taj Mahal etc.) is supplemented with sets of images emphasising the mysterious, dangerous and unknown Otherness of the country (child blinding, bizarre religious imagery and dangerous communal violence, seducing Oriental dances etc.). Cultural ambivalence in the film is also articulated through the binary division between the modern and the backward, most clearly visible in the anachronistic architecture of Mumbai, where timeless slums are juxtaposed to growing skyscrapers. Jamal and Salim, framed in the extreme long shot of urban Mumbai, are discussing the city as the new centre of the world. It is tempting to interpret this scene as the filmmaker’s attempt to dismantle the West as the dominant player in the world’s economy and to confirm the growing role of the former marginalized “Third World.” But at the same time Salim promptly assures that the whole new skyscraper filled neighbourhood is owned by his employer – gangster Javed. The film confirms India’s modernity and potential, but refuses to treat it as an independent activity and relates it to the underworld and the gangs.
Slumdog Millionaire, thus, attempts to construct the “real India” which sports illusionary modernity on the surface but remains firmly tied to poverty, crime and petty thefts, as exposed by Jamal who brings American tourists to see the dhobi ghat and the “real India” and who later find their car dismantled into pieces by the gang of homeless boys.

There is, in this respect, a certain continuation in the cinematographic constructions of India. The difference would be that the imagery of dangerous jungles, wild animals and mysterious religious cults in the old films are replaced by the urban jungle of slums and the dangerous underworld of Mumbai gangsters. In both instances the spectator becomes a cinematic voyager who is able to explore the predictable yet strange Orient through the camera lenses. Slumdog Millionaire sets out to authenticate its cinematographic India as a reality, and the camera work in the film is extremely important for this mission: digital hand-held cameras are always in motion, swirling in many, sometimes unexpected, directions while the abundance of canted angles and POV shots create an illusionary authentic tourist experience, where the spectator actively participates in the film. This film style is not a coincidence, because the film’s director of photography is Anthony Dod Mantle, who actively took part in the Dogma ‘95 cinema movement and worked with such filmmakers as Thomas Vinterberg and Lars von Trier. Dogma ‘95 is a film movement which became prominent in the late 1990s as a revolutionary reaction against Hollywood-style illusion of cinema. The Dogma ’95 manifesto (“The Vow of Chastity”) demanded the usage of hand held cameras, shooting on location and requested filmmakers to capture the sense of real time, space and emotion, making the film not an artwork, but a way of forcing the truth out of characters and settings (Badley 83‒84). In a similar manner, Slumdog Millionaire with its portative digital cameras and incorporated real “documentary” footage (e.g. policemen who turn around to face the camera and tell “no filming”) and the widely pronounced fact of real slum children acting in the film attempted to create and authenticate this experience of India as a reality – the strategy which was identified and embraced by many spectators and critics alike. For example, in Jenna Roberts’s review of the film she claims that Slumdog Millionaire has “more reality to it than most documentaries” and that the film reveals “brutal facts” of life of people in India (Roberts 2009). Thus, the imagery of the film becomes a “myth” of a new India: naturalized and authenticated images which make certain values and attitudes to become natural, real, and accepted as truth (Barthes 128).

The ambivalent nature of the film will be analysed even further in this article by extending the narrative and visual aspects of the film into specific representational corpuses: imagined geography, gender (representation of female characters) and religious identity.
2. *Slumdog Millionaire’s Imagined Geography*

One of the most memorable moments in the film is a sequence in Agra, where Jamal and his brother Salim earn money pretending to be tour guides at the famous Taj Mahal. It is often argued that world-famous buildings are filled with symbolic meaning (Urry 2005), therefore it is important to compare the film’s Taj Mahal with its representation in the novel and in Indian cultural landscape. The Taj Mahal was built in the 17th century by the emperor Shah Jahan as a mausoleum for his beloved wife Mumtaz and in Indian culture and popular imagination is often described in terms of femininity and linked to the concepts of romance and eternal love. Vikas Swarup in the novel *O&A* fills the Taj Mahal with similar connotations: it is a symbol of both love and death, because in Agra Ram Mohammad Thomas not only experiences his first love for a young prostitute Nita, but also the death of his first true friend, Shankar. Ram’s love and the symbolism of Taj Mahal is revealed through the feminization and erotization of the building when it is compared to Nita: “She snaps opens her blouse in one motion. She isn’t wearing a bra. Two pert breasts pop out like domes of a brown Taj Mahal. They are perfectly round and smooth and the nipples stand out like exquisite pinnacles” (Swarup 301).

In *Slumdog Millionaire*, these symbolic references are completely omitted and the Taj Mahal in the film becomes just another signifier, associated with the Indian tourist industry. References to love and femininity are removed leaving the only possible reading of the place – a tourist fantasy, articulated by Jamal when for the first time he sees the domes of the Taj Mahal appearing from the mist: “Are we dead now and gone to heaven?.” The film comically exposes the boy’s inability to recognize his own cultural landmarks when Jamal presents the Taj Mahal as a five-star hotel to groups of tourists (this confusion is caused because of the real five star Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai). An important segment in the film is where Jamal takes an instant photograph of a woman tourist seated on the bench with the Taj Mahal in the background. The woman tourist receives her photograph and compares it with a photo of Princess Diana photographed in the identical position in the tourist brochure. This famous photograph of Princess Diana was taken during her trip to India in 1992 and is a well-known image, familiar to many consumers of British popular culture. John Urry in his conceptual book *The Tourist Gaze* has analysed how tourist photography functions culturally. He argues that the tourist photography functions as a certain signifying system, which connects the person and the place being photographed in a certain power and knowledge relation. John Urry writes that “to have visual knowledge of an object is in part to have power, even if momentarily, over it. Photography tames the object of the gaze [...]” (Urry 127). Princess Diana’s photograph in the film, therefore, becomes symbolic: it connects the exotic with the known. The Taj Mahal, even if it is far and exotic, is already known, explored
and conquered precisely through Princess Diana in its background, and continues to be in possession as indicated by the identical photograph taken by the tourist.

Later in the film Jamal works at a call centre in Mumbai where he tries to convince an annoyed client that he is located in Britain. Desperately seeking to name any place in Britain, he connects two locations from the tourist posters hung on the wall of the call centre’s office: the lake of Loch Ness in Scotland and London’s Big Ben, telling the client that he is speaking from “Big Loch Ness.” It seems that the film takes a certain pleasure in constructing Indian call centre workers as Bhabha’s mimic men – they may attempt to imitate the British accent and learn British cultural specificities and locations, but, inevitably, will never be able to become like Englishmen. Therefore, comparing the tourist objects used in the film (the Taj Mahal, Big Ben and Loch Ness), we can see a certain ideological message *Slumdog Millionaire* communicates. In contrast to India, which is already known, explored and freely available to anyone who wants to visit it from the West, Britain, the film suggests, will always remain only an inaccessible fantasy and imaginary dreamland for the East.

### 3. *Slumdog Millionaire* and “the Male Gaze”

The next ambivalent angle of *Slumdog Millionaire* will be analysed investigating the construction of the only female character in the film – Latika. When comparing the novel *Q&A* with the film the most visible change is found in terms of female characters. First of all, the only female character in the film – Latika – differs dramatically from the female characters in Swarup’s novel. There are three main female characters in the novel – actress Neelima, young prostitute and Ram’s beloved Nita, and his childhood friend (and later his lawyer) Smita. The film reduces and, supposedly, merges these three characters into only one – Latika. This reduction however does not add any complexity to the character, but on the contrary, rather reduces her subjectivity and, most importantly, autonomy. The three women in the novel each demonstrate a uniquely strong character and are independent while in *Slumdog Millionaire* Latika does not possess any individuality of her own. Not only is she given only a few lines in the film, she is also always dependent on (or belonging to) the male characters in the film (in the beginning of the film she belongs to the child exploiter Maman, later to Jamal’s brother Salim and finally – to Salim’s employer, gangster Javed). Such means of characterization expose the ambivalent nature of the film and reveal an important tenet of postcolonial studies about the construction of “Third World” females as “fixed and pre-known” (Childs and Williams 166) and contribute to this discourse through the construction of Latika’s character. The representation of the main female character of the film echoes postcolonial scholar’s Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak’s (1993) formulations developed in her most influential writing “Can the
Deimantas Valančiūnas

Subaltern Speak?,” where she states that “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (82‒83). In this article Spivak does not claim that the woman cannot speak in a literal sense but argues that she is not allowed a subject position and is continuously being spoken for: “she is rewritten continuously as the object of patriarchy or of imperialism,” as Robert Young explains (2004, 206). *Slumdog Millionaire* provides Latika a voice which is precisely her inability to speak: the subaltern female is confirmed as being voiceless. So even though the film may not be a direct part of the imperial project described by Spivak it still promotes a certain image of the Indian female, and by silencing Latika (intentionally or not) falls into a trap of perpetuating stereotypes of mythologized and imaginary Orient. In addition, Chandra Talpade Mohanty in her article “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” observed that Western critics have projected a monolithic image of a “Third World Woman,” seen as a homogenous group and defined by such images as a virgin, a submissive wife, or a veiled woman. In numerous such studies, she argues,

> average third-world woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being ‘third world’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized etc.). Thus, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom’ to make their own decisions. (qtd. in Childs and Williams 200)

Mohanty’s ideas are found not only in Western critical discourses but also circulate in popular culture and, evidently, in *Slumdog Millionaire* where, through Latika’s character, the image of an exploited, abused and non-active Oriental woman is articulated as an authentic representation of Indian females. In the novel *Q&A* Ram’s lawyer Smita tries to dismantle patriarchal and authoritarian power discourses, *Slumdog Millionaire* reconstructs Latika as a passive female character waiting to be rescued by a male saviour.

Such Oriental fantasy can also be identified in the visual representations of Latika. For this investigation I will employ the concept of the “male gaze” developed by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her extremely influential (and fiercely debated) article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” In the article, Mulvey discusses the close-knit relationship between cinema, camera and the female body. She operates with two major Freudian concepts, scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) and voyeurism, as sources for cinematic spectacle and pleasure. This pleasure, however, is gendered, as Mulvey argues in her article: “in a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (19). Therefore men on screen
are the active agents who order the gaze of the camera which delivers the pleasure of observing the passive female characters in their “traditional exhibitionist role” as erotic objects, “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). The male spectators identify with the masculine gaze of the camera in a voyeuristic observation of a sexualized female’s body, while female spectators have either to identify with the dominant male gaze or with the passive female on screen.

Mulvey’s theory has attracted a considerable amount of criticism, primarily because of its reductionism, essentialization and homogenization of all the forms of cinema. However, if considered in a certain ideological context the male gaze theory could be useful in understanding both narrative and visual strategies in Slumdog Millionaire’s construction of Latika. To add to the already discussed narrative construction of Latika as passive and dependent, there are many scenes in the film where she is being looked at by male characters or observed by an “anonymous” camera without her awareness of being observed, strategically framing the shots with camera filming through different objects (keyholes, windows, gate bars etc.). This camera position establishes spectators (both male and female) as certain privileged voyeurs from where they can observe the Oriental female as an exotic and erotic spectacle; to take pleasure in the privileged superiority over her passive and abused figure. This strategy, where the narrative of the film is organized and controlled by male characters, once again transforms the active female characters of the novel into the passive filmic Latika, which caters to the spectators’ expectations about (and pleasure in) the passive females of the East.

Mulvey’s theory was based on the psychoanalytical textual readings of the cinema, therefore, some empirical (or “audience research”) data could be a useful addition to the discussion of the film. Shakuntala Banaji has carried out research where she analysed Slumdog Millionaire’s reception by British, diasporic, and Indian spectators. The research revealed that the film was received differently by these audiences. Banaji observed that the film was very well received by British spectators and quite negatively by Indians, who, inevitably, compared Slumdog Millionaire with Indian popular cinema. Banaji argues that “evidently, a number of viewers felt the film’s voice and perspective was that of a voyeuristic outsider, one who grabbed and narrated bits and pieces for effect but did not have any lasting emotional investment in the subject matter of the film” (18). From this observation, it is clear that the “voyeuristic outsider” Banaji mentions confirms the exotic discourse of the film – despite its supposedly universal mission, the film has failed with Indian audiences, but reached Western spectators effectively because it catered to the dominant expectations and fantasies of the West.

Since Slumdog Millionaire attempts in a way to imitate the mood and style of Indian popular cinema a comparison has to be drawn between these two cinematic cultures with respect to the representation of females. The female as an erotic spectacle is also a part of Indian cinema. The voyeuristic gaze in Indian films, however, is different because it is based on different ideological and moral grounds.
Asha Kasbekar has analysed extensively certain cinematographic voyeuristic strategies in Indian cinema, where eroticized cabaret dance numbers featuring Anglo-Indian girls are consistently among the most popular (298–301). However, this voyeuristic gaze is different than that described by Laura Mulvey. Mulvey’s theory is based on cinema semiotician Christian Metz’s theory of cinematic voyeurism. According to Metz, for the voyeuristic position to be at all possible there has to be a certain “gap” separating the (anonymous) spectator as a voyeur and the spectacle (or screen) (742). But as Kasbekar’s study reveals, in Indian cinema a woman as an erotic spectacle must be effectively combined with ideological and moral norms (or what Rosie Thomas calls “moral universe,” 291). Therefore, Indian cinema has developed several strategic principles where an eroticized female as spectacle would not collide with the moral universe. For example, the cabaret scenes with explicitly eroticized dances in many Indian films almost always would incorporate diegetic audience observing the performance and thus “sharing” the voyeuristic gaze with the spectators at the cinema hall. This approach allows the audience to transfer and filter its own voyeuristic gaze back through the a diegetic spectators (Kasbekar 296).³ As also noted by Madhava Prasad, Indian films often employ a specific framing technique of “frontality” – when a character gazes directly at the camera. This cinematographic technique removes the Metzian “gap” between the characters on screen and the spectators in the cinema hall (102).

It is clear then that this kind of “authorized voyeurism” in Indian cinema performs a different ideological function than that in Western cinema. It encourages the audience to engage in visual pleasures of an erotic spectacle to a certain extent, as later the film’s narrative will inevitably restore the cosmogonic universe of morals and values. This is where the attempts of Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* to imitate the aesthetical aspect of Indian popular film fails: trying to masque itself with a certain Bollywood-style the film remains tied to the cinematographic grammar of the West. Therefore, the camera’s gaze in *Slumdog Millionaire* is not only masculine it is also westernized. The viewers observing Latika through the eyes of Salim or Jamal as a sexual object, project their own (Western) fantasies about Oriental females thereby distancing themselves from the supposedly romantic context of the film.

4. *Slumdog Millionaire* and Religion

Religious discourse in the film becomes evident during the third question of the quiz, where Jamal is asked what object god Rama carries in his hand. The question becomes a flashback to Jamal’s childhood revealing a painful experience of his mother’s death as she is killed by religious fanatics during the communal Hindu and Muslims riots. In the midst of this violent chaos Jamal sees a child dressed as the god Rama and carrying a bow in his hand (traditional iconographic attribute
of the god). The gruesome image is imprinted into boy’s memory as a traumatic experience enabling him to relive the past and answer the question correctly.

Communal conflicts are a grim reality of contemporary postcolonial India. Tensions between Hindus and Muslims have been fuelled countless times since the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, especially becoming prominent after the destruction of Babri Mosque by Hindu extremists in the city of Ayodhya in 1992. The film director’s choice of exploiting these religious tensions in *Slumdog Millionaire* is a problematic decision and requires greater attention, especially if compared to the novel by Vikas Swarup. The abovementioned scene in the film does not appear in the book. The film introduces a large number of changes out of which the most prominent one is the clearly articulated religious identity of the characters: Jamal and Salim are Muslims. The main protagonist’s name reflects these changes. In *Slumdog Millionaire* his name is Jamal, while the character in the novel is called Ram Mohammad Thomas. Name is an important marker of identity in both literature and film and requires a closer examination. In the novel, Ram is an orphan boy left at the doorstep of a church and adopted by Thomas, the local priest. At first the priest names the boy after himself but local religious communities are concerned about the Christian name because the boy’s religious identity is not clear. In order to resolve the conflict three names are given to the boy – Ram Mohammad Thomas, representing all three main religious communities in India. Here Swarup goes beyond the communal binaries of religions in India and rather tries to think about the unity and plurality of religious identities in the imaginary landscape of multi-religious and multi-ethnic India: an idea which is not entirely new in Indian popular discourses.⁴

The decision of the filmmaker to change the main character’s identity into the Muslim one, therefore, can be interpreted as yet another exploitation of a certain exotic discourse of India. Western media and popular culture (films included) continuously keep exploiting certain cultural relics of colonial discourses. As observed by David Ludden, persistently using such concepts as yoga, mysticism, caste, ritual, untouchability, cremated widows (*sati*), holy war (*jihad*), and communalism, “Western accounts of India have long stressed the exotic features that make India foreign to modern, Western, readers” (9). Ludden also adds that the communal Hindu and Muslim conflict in Ayodhya “dramatizes the very religious traditionalism and irrationality that describe and explain India’s poverty and backwardness” (10). Similarly, in the film’s episode of communal riots the spectator is made to observe the barbaric rivalry between the religions of the East, where even children become a part of this exotic, strange, and barbaric religious discourse (i.e. a boy dressed as the god Rama) and where the figures of state authority are indifferent to the conflict (e.g. policemen peacefully seated in their car observing the burning of a man in the street). Without a proper contextualization, this scene for many viewers would connote only the irrational and savage nature of the Oriental religions. It is not a first time, however, that Western cinema
exploits Hinduism as a barbaric and weird practice for the purpose of exoticism. For example, the image of goddess Kali terrified the first missionaries in India with its incomprehensible iconography and retained this representational quality in such British films as *Stranglers of Bombay* and *The Deceivers*, where Kali is made into a patron goddess of a fearsome gangs of goons, and in the famous Hollywood film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, directed by Steven Spielberg. In *Slumdog Millionaire* the iconographic representation of a boy dressed as Rama and the discourse of communal violence is another attempt to fetishize the exotic strangeness of Hinduism in a manner consistent with previous films.

It is also important to note that besides the abovementioned episode of communal conflict, religion does not play any significant role in the boys’ life. Jamal’s religious identity is neutralized and Salim’s religiosity is revealed only in several short segments of the film: in one scene Salim is seen praying before he goes out for a job assigned by his gangster boss and in the final segment of the film, after being shot by his mates Salim utters “God is great” as his last breath. This polarization of the brothers’ religious attitudes is possible to interpret through the exotic and stereotypical construction of Islam in Western discourses. Jamal works in a secular environment amongst cosmopolitan youth and as a result does not articulate his Muslimness while Salim articulates it precisely because he grows up in the dangerous environment of the underworld where gangster activities are (indirectly) linked to aggressive Islamist practices. In this way, the film confirms the stereotypical polarization of Islam creating “secular Muslim” Jamal and “fanatic Muslim practitioner” Salim, who seeks heavenly blessings before committing a crime. In one way or the other both Hinduism and Islam are observed with a certain amount of suspicion in the film, contributing to the discourse of exotic Otherness.

**Conclusion**

While discussing the representation of India in Western media in the context of various commemorative anniversaries, Graham Huggan notes that Britain retains a necessary dependence on India and it is no longer manifested in terms of economic resources but in terms of imagination (Huggan 2001, 63). The analysis of *Slumdog Millionaire* in this article has revealed that the film belongs to this sphere of imagination. Despite *Slumdog Millionaire*’s attempt to appeal to a wide transnational audience and the film’s ambition to recreate the authentic voice of India by employing hybrid cinematic aesthetics and disowning the practice of earlier films to include mandatory “white characters,” certain visual and narrative representations in the film nevertheless are proved to be ambivalent and tied to Western ideological practices. The ambivalent nature of the film was analysed...
segmenting the narrative and visual aspects of the film into specific representational corpuses: (imagined) geography, gender, and religion. The analysis of these three perspectives confirmed the ideological and exotic context of the film. By complying to the Orientalist expectations and fantasies of the viewers, *Slumdog Millionaire* displays and exploits old and new stereotypes about India by constructing binary divisions between the modern and the backward, the known and the explored on the one hand, the mystical and the dangerous on the other or by creating the imagery of the weak, abused and sexually stimulating Indian females or the country’s strange, bizarre and violent religious practices. These certain representational practices employed in *Slumdog Millionaire* alter India as an exotic spectacle, readily available for the eager consumer in the West. In this way *Slumdog Millionaire* creates an imaginary India by projecting it as a fantasy but, at the same time, as a reality, thus catering to the constant wish of Western viewers to maintain the exotic Oriental ‘Other’ as a confirmed diametrical opposition to the ‘Self.’

Notes

1 In many virtual and public discussions on *Slumdog Millionaire* the film was labelled with such descriptions as “slum chic” and “poverty porn” (Duncan 313). For a lengthy discussion on the poverty in *Slumdog Millionaire* see Sengupta 2013.

2 In Danny Boyle’s adaptation the protagonist is called Jamal Malik, while in the novel his name is Ram Mohammad Thomas. This is an important change and will be discussed in detail further in this article.

3 Asha Kasbekar talks of more such strategies in Indian films, for example characters of some authority observing the dance approvingly or the erotic performance is a part of what she calls a “noble sacrifice,” where woman demonstrates her eroticism in order to save her lover or husband (e.g. *Sholay*), nation (*Khalnayak*) or where she cooperates with police (*Don*) (Kasbekar 301–302). This eroticised female position is legitimised through these cinematographic strategies and does not collide either with ideological normativities of the state nor with a “moral universe” of viewers.

4 The idea of religious coexistence is perfectly recognized by Indian cinema goers. One of the most popular films in India is *Amar, Akhbar, Anthony*, depicting three orphan brothers being adopted by fathers of three different religious communities (Hindu, Muslim and Christian). The film promotes the idea that different religions can perfectly coexist together and that religious identity is not inborn, but acquired.
References


Filmography


