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2010

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Publication Details

Khorana, S. (2010). 'Crossover audiences in the aftermath of Slumdog Millionaire', in E. Morrell & M. Barr (Eds.), *Crises and Opportunities: Past, Present and Future*. Proceedings of the 18th Biennial Conference of the ASAA, 5 - 8 July 2010, held at the University of Adelaide, Australia (pp. 1-10). Canberra, ACT: Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA); The University of Adelaide.

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Abstract

Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) set a precedent in terms of the crossing of geographic and cinematic boundaries by a diasporic creative practitioner. Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (released in 2008) seems to have taken the notion of the "crossover film" a step further by winning critical and popular acclaim throughout the world. It is for this reason that I will compare the critical and box office performance, as well as the publicity of the two films to better understand the crossover potential of diasporic films.

Unlike *Water*, *Slumdog Millionaire* was able to get past the "foreign language film" category (both in the Academy Awards and in terms of crossing over to the commercial audience). It could be argued that this is because only one-third of *Slumdog* is in Hindi, whereas *Water* is largely subtitled. More importantly, the former film seems to have been released in mainstream cinema complexes in the US, thereby deeming it acceptable for a non-foreign Academy Award nomination. Fox Searchlight distributed both films (although *Slumdog* also had the contribution of the independent arm of Warner brothers), yet *Slumdog* has won greater popular appeal. Many critics have noted its resemblance to Bollywood cinema of the 1970s, and others have remarked that it is possibly the first globalised film ('*Slumdog Millionaire*').

Keywords

millionaire, crossover, audiences, slumdog, aftermath

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

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CROSSOVER AUDIENCES IN THE AFTERMATH OF *SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE*
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Deepa Mehta's *Water* (2005) set a precedent in terms of the crossing of geographic and cinematic boundaries by a diasporic creative practitioner. Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* (released in 2008) seems to have taken the notion of the "crossover film" a step further by winning critical and popular acclaim throughout the world. It is for this reason that I will compare the critical and box office performance, as well as the publicity of the two films to better understand the crossover potential of diasporic films.

Unlike *Water*, *Slumdog Millionaire* was able to get past the "foreign language film" category (both in the Academy Awards and in terms of crossing over to the commercial audience). It could be argued that this is because only one-third of *Slumdog* is in Hindi, whereas *Water* is largely subtitled. More importantly, the former film seems to have been released in mainstream cinema complexes in the US, thereby deeming it acceptable for a non-foreign Academy Award nomination. Fox Searchlight distributed both films (although *Slumdog* also had the contribution of the independent arm of Warner brothers), yet *Slumdog* has won greater popular appeal. Many critics have noted its resemblance to Bollywood cinema of the 1970s, and others have remarked that it is possibly the first globalised film ('Slumdog Millionaire').

This leads to the question of whether *Slumdog Millionaire* is a globalised film because of a) the cross-cultural creative collaboration that led to the genesis and development of the film; b) its hybrid film grammar that enmeshes the storytelling techniques of commercial Bollywood and Hollywood as well as arthouse cinema; or c) the international distribution and publicity that made the film materially available as well as seemingly accessible to cosmopolitan audiences the world over.

I begin with a consideration of the cross-cultural nexus that led to the text that is now *Slumdog Millionaire*. Commenting on the press notes, Australian film critic David Stratton

notes that the script for the film has been adapted from Indian author Vikas Swarup's work of fiction titled *Q & A* ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). He adds that Kate Sinclair, the book scout for British Channel 4's feature film production arm discovered Swarup's novel. Screenwriter Simon Beaufoy of *The Full Monty* fame was then brought in to adapt the material, and finally Danny Boyle came onboard ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). Boyle, on his part, has this to say about his initial hesitation and eventual decision to get involved with the film:

I thought, I absolutely don't want to do this – it comes over as a soundbite but it's the god's honest truth. Then I saw Simon Beaufoy's name on the script and I thought, I'd better read some of this so I can do that thing where you say, 'I enjoyed it but it's not for me'. But after 10 or 15 pages I knew I was going to do it – I didn't even care how it ended... Apart from the narrative, I was drawn by the idea of India – I've always worked so I never did the whole backpacking thing (cited in Jivani, 'Mumbai rising').

It is worth noting that although this is not the first time a western filmmaker has tackled an Indian story, as Stratton notes, 'not until now, with *Slumdog Millionaire*, has a Western filmmaker so completely embraced an Indian subject' ('Dickensian slice of Mumbai'). Boyle mentions bringing in new age Indian composer A R Rahman because 'not only does he draw on Indian classical music, but he's got R&B and hip hop coming in from America, house music coming from Europe and this incredible fusion is created' (Boyle cited in Jivani, 'Mumbai rising'). Loveleen Tandon, a veteran casting director who has worked on diasporic films like *Monsoon Wedding*, *The Namesake* and *Brick Lane* (Pais, 'Making *Slumdog Millionaire* truly Indian'), met producer Christian Colson and also joined the film ('Loveleen Tandon on *Slumdog Millionaire*'). According to Boyle, Tandon's role constantly expanded as she became his guide on the 'finer cultural complexities of life on the street' (Pais, 'Making *Slumdog Millionaire* truly Indian'), and was eventually credited as co-director.

It is the cross-cultural creative talent of the film that set up its hybrid cinematic grammar, one that borrows from conventions of commercial Hollywood and Bollywood, as well as the arthouse tradition. For reference points, Boyle mentions watching all of Mira Nair's films, Satyajit Ray's *Pather Panchali*, as well sampling contemporary Bollywood directors like Ram Gopal Varma, Anurag Kashyap and Aamir Khan on Tandon's

recommendation (Jivani, 'Mumbai rising'). Based on these influences, renowned film theorist David Bordwell notes that Ram Gopal Varma film '*Company*'s thrusting wide angles, overhead shots, and pugilistic jump cuts would be right at home in *Slumdog*' ('Slumdooged by the past'). Tandon mentions that when she read the script, it reminded her 'of the fantastic Salim-Javed characters from the 70s' ('Loveleen Tandon on Slumdog Millionaire'). This is in reference to the scriptwriting duo comprising Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar whose films were popular in the 1970s and 80s, and often characterised by tropes like trains and coming of age stories.

While Boyle acknowledges his tribute to Bollywood in some instances, in others he attributes it to the Indian cultural context. When queried on the inclusion of a Bollywood-style song-and-dance routine at the end of the film, he says, 'The dance isn't a nod to Bollywood, it's there because you can't go to India and not dance' (cited in Jivani, 'Mumbai rising').

In addition to the Bollywood tropes mentioned, the film uses a number of techniques associated with mainstream Hollywood cinema. According to Bordwell, these include adaptation, the double plotline, flashbacks, flashforwards, empathy, parallel editing and others ('Slumdogged by the past'). He concludes, 'the film is anchored in film history in ways that are likely to promote its appeal to a broad audience' ('Slumdogged by the past'). At the same time, Smitha Radhakrishnan of *Asia Pacific Arts* notes: 'It's a fundamentally American story – the individual triumphs, good people win in the end, hard work, savvy, and luck are richly rewarded' ('Slumdog Sincerity'). However, despite using popular conventions to appeal to a wide range of audiences, *Slumdog* is often considered a festival or arthouse film because of its child-centred plot (Bordwell, 'Slumdogged by the past'). In other words, it appears that the film is being categorised as both cross-cultural and cross-genre. As has been demonstrated, in the case of diasporic films like Mehta's that may cross cultures as well as genres, this presents a challenge in terms of the international publicity of the film as well as its discursive categorisation in media reviews. *Slumdog* has turned the tide by transforming the publicity challenge into a situated yet crossover marketing advantage.

There have been reports of Danny Boyle referring to *Slumdog* as a British film as it was financed in London (Pais, 'Making *Slumdog Millionaire* truly Indian'), while its Indian co-director Loveleen Tandon has called it 'fully and totally Indian' ('Loveleen Tandon on *Slumdog Millionaire*'). However, this difference of opinion regarding the "nationality" of the film between its western director and its Indian co-director does not necessarily imply a conflict of auteurship or belonging.

In other words, although the film as text is a discrete entity, its multiple creative and financial locations, coupled with the wide-ranging sites where it is read makes every aspect of its production and consumption a non-discrete, fluid space of personal-political-poetic becoming. This fluidity is reflected in the very change in the film's publicity poster that transformed from a black background with a close-up of the male lead in the early days of its release, to a white background with a colourful long shot of the happy couple after the film's Golden Globe success.

The next section of my argument gives more detailed comparative analysis of publicity images used to promote the film. What follows is a semiotic analysis of both posters that reveals how certain tropes were used to win even more audience support. This is followed by an analysis of two sets of theatrical release posters of *Water* that demonstrate an increasing emphasis on the political context/controversy rather than the crossover content for better marketing.



The first poster for the film uses a number of superimposed images and text in bold fluorescent colours against a black background. It is the female lead of the film, captured in a running pose, who is at the centre and who in turn draws our attention to the male lead whose facial close up is more muted. Significantly, the male and the female characters are looking in opposite directions. Their gaze, which is also turned away from the viewers, signifies a search for something elusive. Immediately facing the viewer is the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*-style question and four options in purple and white that give us a clue as to the nature of this search. Audiences worldwide are familiar with this question-answer format and recognise it immediately as it was developed in the UK and subsequently licensed in over a hundred territories over the past decade (Stelter, 'Slumdog Revives Interest in TV Show'). The text itself connotes that the film is a story of lost love that may be found with one of the four listed options. However, neither the text nor the images suggest whether this tale of love is a happy one. The title of the film is in a reddish yellow font with occasional black lines breaking its symmetry. This signals a possibly buoyant tale, albeit one marked with setbacks. Also in red and yellow is the text at the top of the poster that declares the film has been a popular choice at the Toronto Film Festival, besides being considered life affirming by *Time* magazine.



The second poster of *Slumdog Millionaire*, used for its release in the UK after the film's Golden Globe success, is both distinct from the first and builds on its message of buoyancy. Set against a white background with eye-catching text and colours, this one draws our attention to the bright orange lettering declaring *Slumdog* is "the feel-good film of the decade". The yellow and orange hues of this text lead us to the similarly coloured outfit of the female lead who is now standing with the male lead. In a significant difference from the first poster, both characters in this one are looking in the same direction that is just above the eye-level of the viewer. This connotes both a love story that ends on a hopeful note with the lovers glimpsing their future together, as well as an upward/uplifting vision to inspire the audience. Also noticeable is the colourful confetti ensconcing the happy couple, again signalling a celebratory mood. The pinks of the confetti lead us towards the much-bolder, pink-hued title of the film, with a diminished version of the *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*-style question regarding lost love just underneath it. This question is now in yellow, and the correct option, that is, "Destiny", has been highlighted for us in the same pink as the title. *Slumdog Millionaire* thus becomes synonymous with destiny, an optimistic one in this case, and leaves behind the "search with an unknown outcome" connotations of the previous poster.



The two original theatrical release posters of Deepa Mehta's *Water*, juxtaposed above, appear to use similar colour palettes, composition and fonts. Both do not use water imagery directly, but allude to it through the blue sky that constitutes the background along with tall architectural structures that seem enmeshed with the surrounding natural scenery. This could be in reference to the significance of a natural element, that is, water to the cultural themes of the film suggested by the tradition-symbolising architecture. While the sky appears paler in the first poster, the architecture is diminished in the second. The other major difference between the two is the absence of the male lead (Narayan played by John Abraham) in the first. Therefore, the absence of the rescuing/complementing male figure results in the female lead (Kalyani played by Lisa Ray) being consigned the foreground, albeit with downcast eyes. It may be concluded that his presence in the second poster implies a possibly brighter future for the female (as seen in a bluer, more prominent sky), and a smaller role for tradition (as seen in the diminished architecture). However, like the first poster of *Slumdog Millionaire*, the second poster of *Water* has the male and female lead characters gazing in opposite directions, and away from the viewer. This casts doubt on the outcome of their love story. A stylistically simple font is used to declare the film's title, followed by cast and crew details. Such devices position the film as distinct from the colour and extravagance of Bollywood and also insert it in the global arthouse category often synonymous with understated detail.



The initial posters of *Water* were followed by at least two more versions after the film's Best Foreign Film nomination from Canada at the 2006 Academy Awards. Not only are the subsequent posters of a brighter hue compared to the first two, but they also use direct water imagery and are marked by the absence of the male and female leads. In the first, we are first drawn to the distinctly royal blue waves, followed by the bold white capitalised font declaring that *Time* has pronounced the film as a triumph. It is not clear how this victorious state is achieved in the content of the film, hence the possible link to Mehta's own triumph in getting the film made after its production was halted by Hindu fundamentalist elements in India. A narrow yellow strip in the middle declares the title of the film in the same royal blue as the water above. This yellow is also mirrored in the costume of the child lead (Chuyia played by Sarala) who displays upbeat body language even as the austere widows surrounding her seem to blur. The next poster puts a red tint on the background consisting of a river bank and surrounding old structures. The child, dressed in white, forms the centre of this image and is shown squatting and holding a leaf. The white of her robe is the same as that of the font declaring the film's title on the bottom half, and the accolades from the media and the Academy on the top half. It appears as though the second set of posters attempt to literally put a bright tint on the film by capitalising on the viewer's ability to recall Mehta's production triumph, as well as

highlighting the child lead who has a more hopeful outcome in the film than the male and female leads. However, the question remains whether this is a deliberate effort that pays dividends at the box office or fails because it has excluded or blurred the austerity of the widows' lives.

From the above analysis of the two posters of *Slumdog Millionaire* and the two sets of posters of *Water*, it is clear that the arthouse-inclining open-ended connotations of the first set have been turned into a more commercial slant in the second. While this seems to succeed with *Slumdog*, it does not appear to be the case in *Water*. It is no surprise then, that according to movie review website Rotten Tomatoes, *Slumdog* has grossed almost \$140 million at the US box office ('Slumdog Millionaire 2008'), whereas *Water* only earned just over \$3 million ('Water 2006'). Another widely used online resource, Box Office Mojo, puts *Slumdog Millionaire's* worldwide earnings so far at almost \$300 million ('Slumdog Millionaire: Movies'), while *Water* only fetched about \$10 million ('Water'). Regardless of which of the two films has more critical merit, *Slumdog* seems to have successfully turned its cross-cultural and cross-genre origins into a crossover marketing campaign, thereby earning more critical and popular acclaim.

Using this analysis as a springboard, I argue that broadening their audience demographic in the west, as well as reaching out to mainstream viewers in the home country may absolve diasporic creative practitioners from the personal accusation of pandering to the western liberal niche. The political strategy of capitalising on the distribution circuits of the home and host nations, and the use of poetic means to appropriate commercial devices in publicity material also has the potential to render diasporic cinema more accessible to crossover audiences.

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