

Collision and Immergence of Context and Content: Analysis of Adaptation on Slumdog Millionaire

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Abstract—*Slumdog Millionaire* is a 2008 film directed by Danny Boyle and based upon a 2005 novel originally called *Q&A* written by Indian diplomat Vika Swarup. The film's success is beyond words globally, as can be seen from the increasing sales of the book and film tickets, as well as various institutional awards and box office performance. This thesis, through analysis of the creation and reception contexts and recreation of the film in respect of the book, tries to prove that the skillful merging of the typical cultural elements and those universal concerns with a global purpose in the onset constitute the secret of the film's worldwide success. The analysis of the creation context will include aspects of industrial information, such as book fame, film production, film marketing, the vital "adapters" and the overall cultural background of the period; for the reception context, parts are divided into influence on book sales, box office performance as well as audience review of both amateur and professional. The second part of the essay is mainly laid upon analysis of the film's translation by comparing the source novel and the film in various aspects, namely, general overview of novel and film as two sets of codes, chronology and location maneuver, visual and audio devices, characters and costumes, as well as cultural connotations. Taking a detailed scrutiny of the above aspects, either from the objective industrial background of the film context, or to the inspirational process of recreation into film, collision and fusion of the two great cultures can be spotted everywhere, forming the unique charm of *Slumdog Millionaire* of its own.

Keywords—*Slumdog Millionaire*; *Q&A*; adaptation; context; recreation

I. INTRODUCTION

"A dramatic tale of wish fulfillment" [1], *Slumdog Millionaire* is a 2008 British drama film with Danny Boyle as the director and the co-director Loveleen Tandan in India, the screenwriter is Simon Beaufoy, and "after its world premiere at Telluride Film Festival and later screenings at the Toronto International Film Festival and the London Film Festival, *Slumdog Millionaire* had a nationwide grand release in the United Kingdom on 9 January 2009 and in the United States on 23 January 2009. It premiered in Mumbai on 22 January 2009 [2]."

As Harper [1] mentioned: "The two dominant themes that run through the film are destiny and desire", indeed by flashback, the film unfurls along the two threads the story of three intertwining slum kids Jamal, Salim, and Latika, a pair

of brothers and a little girl, who were born in the Indian Juhu slum, living in that bustling, crowded, yet destitute shanty areas. Next, there comes a collage of montages of the two boys making a living by stealing food from other carriages and sleeping on the top of train with sunset. By a dramatic falling, the two surprisingly were thrown right in front of Taj Mahal, the landmark of India, and were already turned into teenagers. Hungry and shrewd, the two quickly learned to be guerrilla tourist guides and stole visitors' shoes for living. However, as desire drives, Jamal has never quit the impetus to go back Mumbai to find Latika. Coincidentally, he ran into Arvind, a former unfortunate kid blinded by Maman who showed the whereabouts of Latika, whose reappearance as an advanced teenage prostitute stirred a storm as Salim killed Maman and claimed her right therefore led to the departure of Jamal of the two. Yet, the train again witnessed the cruelty of reality that the two was again severed by Salim, this time with a scar on her face. Then Jamal made his mind of joining the hot national TV show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*? Not much for the money, but more to see and be seen by Latika. Later with an interlude of the host's failed sabotage, Jamal wins his "destiny" and "desire" while Salim rests in redemption.

However, the plot development in *Q&A* is not as chronologically linear as the film. The protagonist is Ram Mohammad Thomas, a tiffin boy from Mumbai, and the book consists of 12 chapters with a prologue and epilogue, pay tribute to the TV show *WWTBAM* format. By first reading, the chapters are told in a recalling of Ram in the order of 13 questions on the show. However, they are not entirely unrelated, the chapters, each of its own unit, are but just reshuffled mélange of the fragments of Ram's past life experience, the story of himself and his friends. Just as a jigsaw puzzle, waiting for the careful reader, as smart and curious as the TV show audience, to discover the hidden logic of the sequence of chapters. Without doubt, the book, with its rough 300 pages, contain greater picture of Ram's life and how each question strike him with an answer. The structure of each independent unit is basically the same, with accounting of incident first and suddenly revert itself back to the present recounting between Ram and his lawyer Smita about the exact question and TV show stage representation. So, the novel can be called stories told within a story retelling. Also, the velvety rich texture of novel is also shown by the great number of people involved, and the

greater variety of occupations involve, which all make the novel life a grand depiction of every walks of life of realistic Indian society told in a relaxed and easy format of WWTBAM hosted by Prem Kumar. Salim, Ram's best friend instead of brother, Father Timmothy, frustrated Mr. Shantaram, an astronomy scientist, his innocent daughter Gudiya, who's suffering from his alcoholism and harassment, Lieutenant Taylor from Australia, the button empire entrepreneur, Juvenile house perverted housekeeper, train bandits, soldier, professional killer, film star the tragedy queen Neelima, Nita, the prostitute, all these flashing names and incidents meshed into a complicated net with Ram, the witness, at the center.

II. CONTEXTS OF CREATION AND RECEPTION

"An adaptation, like the work it adapts, is always framed in a context — a time and a place, a society and a culture; it does not exist in a vacuum. Fashions, not to mention value systems, are context- dependent [3]." In the opening, Hutcheon pointed out the inevitability of context in a work. *Slumdog Millionaire* has a unique dualism in its context where two cultures collide and fuse.

The production of the film is much more complex than that of the book, *Slumdog Millionaire* was produced by Celador and Film4 combined. "A global light entertainment company, Celador has produced a number of popular light entertainment shows and is probably best known for *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and co-producing the film *Slumdog Millionaire*. Celador owns eighteen UK radio stations as of March 2013 [4]." The distribution companies for *Slumdog Millionaire* contain UK Pathe, India Eros Entertainment, US Fox Searchlight Pictures and Warner Bros. Pathe is an international company for film equipment and distribution, founded in France, its current director is Jerome Seydoux. "Eros International is an Indian motion picture production and distribution company, based in Mumbai. Founded in 1977, Eros International is a leading global company in the Indian film entertainment industry. Eros co-produces, acquires and distributes Indian language films in multiple formats worldwide, with the group distribution network of over 50 countries, with offices in India, UK, USA, Dubai, Australia, Fiji and Isle of Man. Eros has over 1,900 films in its library, plus an additional 700 films for which the group hold digital rights only [5]." "Fox Searchlight Pictures, established in 1994, is an American film distribution company within the Fox Entertainment Group, a sister company of the larger Fox studio 20th Century Fox. It specializes in US distribution of independent and British films, its films include *Juno*, *Black Swan*, *127 Hours*, and *Slumdog Millionaire* is Searchlight's largest commercial success [6]." This combined distribution and production background has affected *Slumdog Millionaire*'s composition from the very beginning, no wonder a lot of critics are focused on its adulation for western appetite and over Hollywood.

As for who is the adapter of *Slumdog Millionaire*, according to Linda Hutcheon: "the move to an interactive mode entails a shift from a solo model of creation to a collaborative one [3]." The success of the film adaptation is

no longer solely credited to the screenwriter alone, but "composer, designer, cinematographer, actor, editor; However, the director is considered the primary adapter of a film... Because the characteristic preoccupation, tastes, and stylistic trademarks of the director are what stand out and become identifiable [3]." As for Danny Boyle, "with a background in theater, cinema audiences got their first hint of Boyle's unpredictability when he followed an electrifying adaptation of Irvine Welsh's smack odyssey *Trainspotting* (1995) with *A Life Less Ordinary* (1997), which included elements of comedy, fantasy, road movie and musical [7]." Famous for directing the 2012 Olympic Games, Boyle has his distinct personal charisma, shown by a series of choices. For example, he "turned down a subsequent OBE to remain a man of the people — which he then proceeded to do. Politicians, companies, even entire countries must look upon his PR skills and marvel [7]." This disposition can be shown why he chose to make the slum scene as real and true to life as possible. According to an interview of Danny Boyle of making *Slumdog Millionaire*, he said: "you lie to make money. I remember to sell *Slumdog Millionaire*, we said it was *Amélie* with a bit of *Trainspotting* thrown in. In America it matters, because they sell *Slumdog* and *127 Hours* as warm-hearted redemptive stories. In America you're a number and you don't have an identity like you do here [7]." This obvious accusation or detest of American utilitarianism and money worshipping seems to remind or serves as an explanation for the "American Time" scene that's added to the film. The Indian co-director Loveleen Tandan studied sociology and mass communication at Indian Universities, and was originally doing cast director work while later during the shooting, she's contributed a lot on the Hindi part of the film, including translation to the actors, drafting Hindi dialogues, Boyle thought she's worth a credit [8]. The editor Chris Dickens is also the editor of *Les Misérables*, whose job in *Slumdog Millionaire* has been given high credit as giving the interweaving narrative a "rich and fugal flavor [9]".

Although director is regarded as the sun king, "in a film the director and the screenwriter share the primary task of adaptation.... Someone else first interprets the adapted text and paraphrases it for a new medium before the director takes on the task of giving this new text embodied life [2]." Therefore, the screenwriter is the think tank who magically molds the script through his "personal artistic filter". In 1997 Beaufoy earned his Academy Award nomination for Best Original Screenplay for *The Full Monty*, "the hugely successful comedy of working-class life, for this rollicking male-stripper comedy, he is showing an acute ear for nuances of pain, scabrous humor and poignancy." ("Beaufoy, Simon", BFI Screenonline) After his success in *Slumdog*, Beaufoy immediately adapted the *127 Hours* (2010) and the newest *The Hunger Games: Catching Fire* (2013) [10].

During a Saturday interview, Beaufoy was said to have turned down Hollywood lures and returned to British social realism tradition after his success of *The Full Monty*, and commented on his cooperation with Danny Boyle and *Slumdog Millionaire*: "British audiences are toughest on British films. So often a British film is the last thing they

want to see. If you please them you really know you've made an impact. ... Beaufoy says he could not have had a happier experience than on *Slumdog Millionaire*, which he credits, in large part, to director Danny Boyle. 'There's nobody better to work with. Danny is intensely collaborative. He wanted my opinion the entire time, that's how film-making should be, but in fact it's incredibly rare.' ... In the writing of the screenplay, Beaufoy made three research trips to Mumbai. 'Any authenticity in the film is due to the people we met there. We asked them what they thought we should film. It was they, for instance, who told us about the big gangster problem in the slums. I ended up writing something operatic and melodramatic which is so not my usual style [11].'" From Beaufoy's words, his personal preference is focused on exposing extremes and antithesis, which can be traced in the *Slumdog Millionaire* itself: the helicopter airport right next to the slum, the beautiful Taj Mahal with messy laundry ground.

Q&A, published in 2005, is the first book written by Indian diplomat Vika Swarup, which has won "South Africa's Boeke Prize 2006, shortlisted for the Best First Book by the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and won the Prix Grand Public at the 2007 Paris Book Fair. To date, the book has sold translation rights in 42 languages [12]." "A book prize awarded in South Africa, launched in 1995, the Exclusive Books Boeke Prize has only been awarded to novels written in English. Since its inception, ten of the books to receive the award have had a film adaptation released." To take a look of the chart of the awarded book each year is like taking a look of the Academy Award Best Adaptation source tank. The 1999 being *The Reader* by Bernhard Schlink, 2002 *Atonement* by Ian McEwan, 2003 *Life of Pi* by Yann Martel, 2004 *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini, 2005 *The Time- Traveller's Wife* by Audrey Niffenegger, 2008 *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson, 2010 *One Day* by David Nicholls [13].

The fame of the source novel has served as a valid reason for it's been chosen and adapted, "book fairs, screen festivals and writers' weeks are becoming more and more film makers source pool [14]". As Simon Murray pointed out in his case study, focusing mainly on Frankfurt Book Fair, "Such cross-media 'speed dating' demonstrates most dramatically how the previously serendipitous and haphazard 'shopping' of rights in literary properties is now increasingly formalized and consciously orchestrated within the book fair circuit [14]."

One way of testing whether the film was successful or not is to see the market increase. And the newly tie-in reprint of Q&A has achieved great symbiosis with *Slumdog Millionaire*. "According to Nielsen BookScan, the paperback tie-in edition has sold 52,006 copies since its publication on 2nd January this year — more than the original novel, entitled Q&A, managed in three years. Q&A was released as a £12.99 hardback on 1st April 2005 and has sold 1,485 copies to date. The paperback, released on 1st February 2006, has sold 38,457 copies [15]."

Hugely successful, the film receives various praise and critiques. *Slumdog* has received much criticism; "Rather than allowing itself to be simply written off as pure entertainment

or love story, the film dangerously sells out 'authentic' Third World experience — Poverty, squalor and repression." "The spectator is encouraged to adopt a tourist's gaze of India — one predicated on the exoticness of the image." "This is a 'poverty tour' for the western audience [16]." "A number of critics implied that the film's allusions to Bollywood — the epic love story, archetypal characters and the closing dance number — were evidence of Boyle's concern for portraying 'real' India.... The film implies an outsider's curiosity, the result, perhaps unavoidably, is a westerner's rather extravagant view of the East [1]." However, as for the screenwriter himself, "Beaufoy welcomes the controversy it has stirred up. 'Bollywood cinema is always about beautiful, rich people marrying well and doing dances in front of the Matterhorn to fabulous music, and suddenly a film comes along which shows the slums. It has really disturbed the status quo, sparking an argument not just about whether outsiders should make a film about slum dwellers but whether a film should show slums at all. Indian film directors have been very warm and generous [11].'" Amateur reviews are furious, especially among Indian radicals, "how dare this Englishman come to our country and win international acclaim for showing how shitty it is [17]."

III. COMPARISON AND RECREATION

On the relationship between literature and film, possibilities of transference, fidelity issues have taken a lot of attention of early and vital adaptation studies, George Bluestone, in *Novels into Film* has analyzed root differences of the two media as well as their different limitations [18]. Cutchins and Cranes have in the *New Approaches of Adaptation Studies* incorporated new aspects including musicals, soundtracks, and early cinemas [19]. Linda Hutcheon has offered basic elements involved in adaptation which need to be paid attention to [3]. Giddings, Selby, and Wensley in *Screening the Novel* has focused on the practice of theory and made a good overview as well as classical film studies [20]. Also, the newly published *Adaptation Industry* by Simon Murray infused a refreshing sense to the pool, wiring on the aspects of authorship, media agents, film and book festivals, and the rights procedure involving both media. "On the one hand, film is good at exposition with the adept manipulation of time and space, one the other hand, there are a lot of literary abyss like irony, symbolism, metaphor which would take immense miles of celluloid to render [14]." However, they are codes that diverse but intersect, "Keith Cohen sees close relationships between the very sign systems themselves: 'What makes possible, then, a study of the relation between two separate sign systems, like novel and film, is the fact that the same code may reappear in more than one system [20].'"

In the novel, the chapters are not arranged in the order of time, but rather "circuitous" as that of the TV show questions. Therefore, it's extremely scattered and nonlinear. However, the film is basically developing according to a linear sequence of things. "In keeping with its roots in classical Hollywood narration, the constant flashbacks in *Slumdog Millionaire* do not severely disrupt the overall linear progression of the story. The linearity of the film is due to

the fact that each sustained flashback appears in chronological order from the past to present [1]." "In moving pictures the visual precision of the image impresses a sense of immediacy, of the here- and- now, which creates a sense of the continuous present. Film is now, as you see it. It is this which makes flashback so effective an element in the vocabulary of film. It is difficult to achieve in literary text. The shifting, imprecise chronology of a literary text has many strengths and possibilities which the skilled writer exploits. In translating literature into moving pictures, once-upon-a-time collides with here-and-now [20]." The novel, independent in each unit is told in an autobiographical tone by Ram, with his internal monologue and cynical comment. Yet, the film is told with an omnipotent view, where we can's probe any character's psychological flow. However, both media have cleverly set up a narration device to help keep the ball spinning. In the novel, it's Smita, the lawyer who listens to the story, while in the film, the policeman served as a line reminder by always asking "What happened?" On the design of the structure, Swarup says in the appendix interview: "To my mind, the pace of the novel stems from the fact that there is this dualism, this contradiction, this tension between these two strands of the novel. What links these two strands is 'memory' [21]."

The film has successfully preserved the essence of the original, which I believe is the optimistic "feel good" factor in the novel, achieved by the classical Hollywood getting together ending. The tricky design of the plot served as an accolade to true emotion and humanity amidst money and commercialism. This has perfectly fit into the large social background of 2008 financial crisis. The entertainment tinge has greatly outweighed the serious social critique "The end dance 'Jai Ho' imposes a quality of 'entertainment' to the whole story [22]" and the author admits that: "there is an undercurrent of Bollywood running through the novel. The real treat for me, personally, is that Q&A itself is likely to become a plot for a Bollywood film! Though Film Four have optioned the film rights, several Indian directors have approached me for the Hindi remake [21]."

Besides visual and narrative device, audio device is also successful in *Slumdog Millionaire*. "The soundtrack for *Slumdog Millionaire* was the best album on iTunes for some time and climbed from No. 48 to No. 22 on the Billboard chart immediately after the Oscars ceremony. Many *Slumdog* fans worldwide, including Americans, were buying this soundtrack. In a sense, it is a novel fashion for people to discover movie and musical content from India. Thanks to current information technologies such as the Internet, access has become much easier [23]." "The film music composer A. R. Rahman won the 2009 Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score and won two out of three nominations for the Academy Awards, including one for Best Original Score and one for Best Original Song for *Jai Ho*. The song "O... Saya" got a nomination shared with M.I.A., and the song "Jai Ho" won the Oscar, which Rahman shared with lyricist Gulzar [24]."

For the major roles, they experienced three phases of life. The younger kids were (besides Jamal) real slum kids chosen from there. And after the film, they received some financial

support from the film for education. The adult Jamal Malik is acted by Dev Patel, a then 18 year old new star who has only had a TV debut. The adult Latika is acted by Freida Pinto, a model with no acting experience at all. The yellow scarf, representative of the childhood innocence and loyalty to love, serves as a vital device in costume design. Giddings, Selby, and Wensley quoted in their overview that: "References are constantly made to what is 'left out' or 'changed', instead of what is there [20]...." Although the film has made a great recreation of the novel, emphasizing on the entertainment side, the serious social critique in the source novel is gone or diminished into simplicity.

IV. CONCLUSION

In 2008, this hit has giving the market and viewers around the world a "feel good" factor. Although there is criticism or doubts concerning its cultural stands and purpose, Boyle's epic scenes created, Beaufoy's neat tailor of the script, combined with other crew's hard work have made it one of a kind. The exact charm of this film comes from the contending tension and comparison between the collision of these two forms of culture, but the objective western or international background of this film has also decided it can't be an entirely Bollywood film for the Indian market solely. The immergence of Hollywood traces is embedded both in its industrial context and its text of narrating.

After discussion mainly on the contexts of creation and reception, and recreation of the film in respect of the book, it can be found that the success of *Slumdog Millionaire* is not an equal fusion but a collision with western immergence which served as a two-side sword that helped its popularity. And in a way, it makes the Indian directors reponder whether the "Indian Shining" needs to adapt into a more contextually and textually complex film in order to make Indian films go further in the future. *Slumdog Millionaire* has indeed offered an upward lifting experience as a novel creation in the globe, just as the author himself said after the film's success of his book: "The reason for the novel's global appeal, I imagine, is that though it is set in India, the themes and emotions evoked are universal and the underlying message is one which applies to every community and culture — of creating your own luck, of the underdog beating the odds and winning [21]."

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