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Paper 2

The 2009 film *Slumdog Millionaire* was proclaimed the “feel good” movie of the year. The film had a small budget of only 15 million dollars. However, with seasoned independent film director Danny Boyle shooting the story on location in Mumbai, the film became a huge success. *Slumdog Millionaire* grossed \$378 million, making Fox Searchlight extremely happy. The production of this film also affected other things besides profit, it influenced the way viewers saw the Indian race and slums of Mumbai. The film despite being produced by independent and self-proclaimed “progressive” conglomerate Fox Searchlight, it perpetuated the idea of “Orientalism” and sensationalized a population struggling with British neocolonialism. It is important to study this film due to its wide spread reach with middle and upper class white Britain and America. The appeal to this audience won it 2009 eight Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Direction making the film highly influential.

Slumdog Millionaire is a film whose timeline stretched across main character Jamal’s life growing up in a Mumbai slum with his brother. Jamal through a series of unfortunate and fortunate events ends up on the show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* After suspicion of cheating Jamal recalls his life’s events which lead him to the questions answers. In the end Jamal finds the girl he’s loved since his days in the slums and they live happily ever after, in true Western ideological fashion.

The film was produced by American based company Fox Searchlight Pictures which has produced other films like *12 Years a Slave*. The company which is an offshoot of 20th Century Fox and focuses on British and American Films (MovieInsider.com). The movie was picked up after production by Fox Searchlight President, Peter Rice, joined with Warner Bros. President,

Jeff Robinov, both white males from Western upbringings. Peter Rice went on in early 2010 to become Rupert Murdoch's number two as Lead of Fox Broadcasting (movieinsider.com).

The director of *Slumdog Millionaire*, Danny Boyle, was born in Manchester England and has directed and produced many independently successful films in his career. Before directing *Slumdog* Danny Boyle said he had never been to India (FoxSearchlight 00:03) and said before committing to the film he wanted to go to India, one to visit and two to see if it would be a feasible film to create. Boyle was praised for capturing the beauty of the chaotic city of Mumbai and making audiences more aware of the poverty and issues Indians face (Davis).

There are many ways *Slumdog Millionaire*'s production had influence on people's perception of the Indian Race. Because the film was picked up by a major Independent label like Fox Searchlight, we know that there will not be the niche market appeal like many other films that would be passed over. As Winseck points out in his article, Fox's vertical integration gives wider distribution outlets but also "creates limits on creativity and diversity of the marketplace" (Winseck 21). Because Searchlight is still such a large corporation, they are still focused on profits opposed to informing people about a pressing or controversial issue. The diversity of images which they are willing to promote is limited to what their target audience wants to see.

The target audience which Fox is making films for is mostly white and middle class. One of the problems associated with this narrow market is the production of the same stagnant images which will be familiar to Western audiences (Mendes). In *Slumdog Millionaire* it looks like the labyrinthine slums, the skyscrapers of Mumbai and the call center which Jamal works in after leaving the slum (475). This limited view even when paired with sad stories like in *Slumdog*, provide an orientalist view that makes Westerners feel comfortable. Even the title *Slumdog Millionaire* portrays Indians in a way that is identifiable with the white audience. During British

colonization of India natives would be called “dogs” so the term is inherently derogatory and filled with negative connotations (Kim).

“In the late 1980s and early 1990s Rupert Murdoch found ways to profit from the cultural production and consumption practices of African Americans (Zook 591)”. This exploitation of minorities by media corporations can be seen in *Slumdog Millionaire* with the use of “the virtual gaze” (Mendes 475). This allows people to experience parts of tourism without having to actually travel to that area which might even be dangerous. However, in an interview Danny Boyle said he never felt in danger in the slums and thought of everyone as family (Davis). In the same interview when asked if he had learned anything about Mumbai that people might not know he answered by saying “Actually, I learned a lot. It's not so much what you learn about Mumbai, it's what you learn about yourself, really.”

Having been produced by both an American studio and a white director make the film entirely sensationalized and only shows race on a micro level. There is no explanation of what caused the poverty which the characters came from or even a realistic picture of how one might rise above that poverty. Instead, white audiences are told by a white director that if someone is smart enough and works hard they can a happy ending. What aren't reflected in the film are the over 500 million people living in India living below the poverty line and never rising above that due to neocolonialism (Kim). This storyline serves as a reflection for the Western world's individualistic ideology which makes for a great feel good film; government programs and political upheaval do not make for entertaining love stories.

In conclusion, the film *Slumdog Millionaire* while an entertaining and whimsical, did not affect the Indian race or culture in a positive way. The overall production of the film including being a Fox Searchlight sponsored film and having a white British director made for a micro

analysis of race and life in India as well as for hyper sensationalized themes. It is important to study and analyze the production of films and media because it widens our often narrow view and reveals the root of perpetuated prejudices.

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