

Your Opinion

The 'Slumdog' Fight

BY CHITRA DIVAKARUNI

Success spawns uproar. Great success spawns great uproar. This has certainly been the case with the film "Slumdog Millionaire." It may or may not win the Oscar for best picture, but it's already carried away the prize as the most hotly debated film of the season.

I'm going to set aside the question of "Slumdog's" cinematic merits (which I and many film critics worldwide agree are numerous) and focus on the charge that has been popping up on a number of blogs: that the movie is "poverty porn." As I understand it, this accusation boils down to three issues, all of which have misconstrued the nature of art.

These critics are angered by the fact that hordes of Pepsi-sipping, popcorn-munching, affluent Western audiences are entertained by a spectacle of India's poor struggling for survival in the slums of Mumbai. They're also upset that director Danny Boyle, a white guy, is being lauded for a film about India that just doesn't get it right, that's filled with clichés and exaggeration and people who are downright bad. And last, they say the film reinforces centuries-old stereotypes about India—dirt, poverty, chicanery and worse (think Macaulay, think Kipling) — and doesn't show the real India, the modern India with its economic successes, the India of the reverse brain-drain, India shining.

To answer the first criticism, I'd like to point out that the film is entertaining almost as many affluent people in India as in the West—if by affluent, we mean people whose economic status is

It aims at portraying a slice of life honestly, uniquely and memorably. And if, through what we read or view, we have understood even one life better—and bettered our understanding of our own existence and our connection to others—the artist deserves our admiration and thanks.



Chitra Divakaruni

Those who claim that "Slumdog" is filled with exaggerations and clichés need to remember that this is fiction. In documentaries, exact representation, uncolored by personal beliefs, might be the goal; in feature films (and fiction and painting), it isn't necessarily so. When one accuses "Slumdog" of exaggerations and caricatures, it is similar to accusing Van Gogh of distorting his sunflowers or M.F. Husain, one of India's foremost living artists, of not getting his horses' colors right. In "Slumdog," Boyle is following the convention

Some say the Oscar contender is 'poverty porn,' but that criticism misconstrues the nature of art.

significantly better than that of the slum dwellers. And for many of them, the Dharavi slum in Mumbai is a foreign, unseen country. Literally for some, because they live in neighborhoods that, though only miles away from an urban slum, are worlds apart; metaphorically for others, because painful, persistent realities tend to become invisible to us. As for being fascinated by the misadventures of characters who are beleaguered, and feeling better about our lives by contrast, isn't that part of the timeless pull of art? Isn't that why Aristotle praises tragedy for its cathartic value?

As to the objection that only Indians (preferably, only Indians living in India) can truly understand the complexities of their country and show an authentic India, that too arises out of a misunderstanding of the nature of art. Decades of abuse from Orientalist writers who have objectified and denigrated India in order to promote an agenda of Western superiority have fostered this mind-set.

But the world is different now. It has moved past colonialism—and even post-colonialism, I dare say—into globalism. It is a world in which we can know more about each other—and hear each other's uncensored voices. Thus, it is now far more possible for artists, regardless of their race, to create a valid representation of a culture, if they have done their homework and are passionate about portraying the truth as they see it. It will not be the whole truth, particularly in the case of a roiling, complicated and contradictory culture such as India's.

But I don't think art aims at that.

of the picaresque, a genre that depicts with energetic abandon the many misadventures of a hero, usually of low social class, who ultimately triumphs over a corrupt society by using his wits.

But, in fact, are the details exaggerated in the film? Ask the volunteers of Pratham, a nonprofit organization that has been working in the Dharavi slum since 1994, spreading literacy through their modest, single-room balwadis (slum schools), and they will tell you of children forced to work 12-hour factory shifts for a payment of two daily meals; children beaten by parents, employers and the police; and yes, children orphaned, kidnapped or mutilated. And then they will tell you of the amazing rescues they've performed, of children now educated, placed in safe homes, vocationally trained or entering college.

One of the aims of art is to hold up a mirror to society in the hope that uproar will lead to change. Charles Dickens did this successfully—novels such as "David Copperfield" led to child-labor reform in Victorian England. Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's early 20th century novels, such as "Palli Samaj," inspired a movement in Bengal that bettered the condition of widows.

Perhaps "Slumdog" will be the catalyst for a similar transformation, one that will make India shine for more of its people. It is certainly possible. Perhaps, even, it is written. But that depends on what we, the viewers and the world, choose to do next.

(Chitra Divakaruni is the author of, most recently, "The Palace of Illusions." She serves on the board of Pratham.)
(Courtesy: L.A. Times)

Dr. Noel Q. King

A Sikh Scholar and World Renowned Historian

Dr. Noel Q. King, a towering academician, scholar, historian, and a saintly person, who illuminated the academic and literary circles for half a century, quietly passed away on Feb 1, 2009 at his home in California.

Noel Q. King was born in Rawalpindi in 1922, near Taxila (now in Pakistan). His family relations with the Sikhs span almost two centuries. His great grandfather worked for the Khalsa Army during the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in the first part of the 19th century as a horse doctor. His father, William King, laid telegraph lines throughout northern India and up into Tibet. Dr. King's family stayed in India until the 1940s. The young Noel King moved with family from place to place experiencing multi-cultural living.

Noel King joined the British Army at the beginning of World War II. He served in India, Burma, and Europe. He was part of the Indian British army unit that gave the first ground defeat to the Japanese army in Burma. He received a Bachelor's degree in Theology and an M.A. degree in history from Oxford University. In 1954 he got his Ph.D. in late Roman early Byzantine history and Patristic Theology from the University of Nottingham.

Dr. King taught in several universities all over the world including, Punjabi University, University of Ghana, University of Nottingham, Oxford University, Makerere University (Uganda), University of Papua/New Guinea, University of California Santa Cruz, and Senior University International.

In the late 1950s he moved to Ghana for seven years, where he set up a program of Religious Studies at the university in Accra. He then moved to do the same for Makerere University in Uganda. Dr. King was one of the very few people in the world with a deep knowledge of Christianity, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism among other religions. He wrote 11 books and published chapters in many other books. He also wrote dozens of scholarly articles in various professional journals and encyclopaedias.

He joined University of California at Santa Cruz in 1967 where he taught until 1991 where he was a Professor of history and comparative religion. Noel King was a Professor Emeritus of history and comparative religion at University of California, Santa Cruz. On his retirement, the Noel Q. King Lecture was established in 1992 to honor the popular teacher and respected scholar. This annual lecture is presented by the Committee for the Advancement of Religious Studies at UCSC. Dr. King was instrumental in providing foundation courses and a comparative framework for those interested in religious studies major as well as those students who just wanted to learn about religion in an academic setting. He inspired many young scholars throughout his academic career.

He guided many students in their research on Sikh history and supervised theses and dissertations on topics related to Sikh history. He was the only Western scholar who stood with the Sikhs through thick and thin and fearlessly wrote against those who tried to distort the Sikh history in the name of academic research. He was honored for his services to Panth at the Vishav Sikh Samelan in Amritsar. There he also received recognition from Jathedar Sri Akal Takhat Sahib. He personally guided two Sikh students myself and Dr. Raghbir Singh Bains) who received doctorate degrees in Sikhism. Both these scholars have been honored by Sri Akal Takhat Sahib.

I met with him in 1992 for the first time at San Francisco in an academic conference. I was impressed by his scholarship and deep understanding of history and theology and realized that he was not an ordinary person. Dr. King was a soft-spoken person. Scholarly terms and Latin phrases describing theological concepts and unique historical events came out of his mouth effortlessly and his demeanor and presence created a unique aura that was both uplifting and captivating. I have never seen any scholar, who, in an instant, using his vast knowledge of the world history and comparative religious studies, could bring out historical gems related to the Sikh history. Yet, he was always humble and respectful of others and he supported academic and historical search.

We are celebrating the life of this great teacher, scholar and friend of the Khalsa who held Khalsa in very high esteem. He regularly donated money to Sikh Gurdwara San Jose and other Sikh institutions. He also helped Sikhs in many other ways. About four years ago, a young Sikh professor from Amritsar wanted to go to Paris and Canada to study French in order to better understand the Franco-Sikh relations. He generously donated for that cause. It is another thing that her trip did not materialize due to university bureaucracy. During my research work on Miri and Piri and Sikh struggle, I visited him about once a month for three years. Later, I met with him 3 or 4 times a year. I was always treated like a family member.

My last visit to him was only three weeks before he passed away. By this time he was quite frail, but he was still as graceful as ever in his manners and conversation. He asked me about my family, job and other Panthic matters. He always enjoyed the Indian sweets (burfi, jalebi, etc.) and I tasted the best locally produced apple juice and the best Darjeeling tea in his home.

During my last visit to Dr. King, I had the opportunity to meet with his eldest son Francis King was visiting him from England. This made my trip even more worthwhile. Francis King is a former Diplomat in the British government who served in various countries including India. Like his father, he too has close relationship with the Sikhs in several countries.

Francis told me that he was a diplomat in New Delhi when

Indira Gandhi was killed in October 1984. Tens of thousands of Sikhs were massacred in Delhi alone and their women violated in a government sponsored carnage which continued for several days. A Sikh family lived next door to his residence. They told Francis that their life and honor was in danger and they needed his help. They wanted him and his wife to give shelter to their women folk for few days until things got calmed down. He gladly agreed to their request. Thus he helped in saving the Sikh lives and honor. After hearing this touching story, my eyes became moist and I thanked him for helping the Sikh family in the most difficult situation. I hope this relationship continues for many more generations.

Dr. King had a very high regard for Sri Guru Granth Sahib and



Dr. Noel Q. King

Sikh Gurus and often quoted Gurbani. Before leaving for his world safari about 6 years ago, he asked me to bring along a Nitnem Gutka (Daily Sikh Prayer book) so he could read it. He used to travel every year and visit several countries until about three years ago when his health did not allow him to travel. His first preference was always to stay with a Sikh family whether it was in the US, India, Africa, or Canada because he trusted them greatly. He had friends all over the globe among all religious communities. He spoke several languages including Punjabi, Hindi, Urdu and Latin.

Dr. King is survived by his wife Laurie King (a well-known novelist), three sons, three daughters, 11 grandchildren and 4 great grandchildren, living in different parts of the world.

(A Tribute by Dr. Tarlochan Singh Nahal.)

Slumdog India!

The "Slumdog Millionaire" movie, which is being getting many film awards including Golden Globe and projected to even get this year's Oscar Award as the best film has in fact portrayed India as the slumdog. Like many urban cities around the globe, Mumbai has her own slum yard, where all kind of sins and inhumane acts are being carried out as it is being depicted in the 'slumdog millionaire' but it does not mean that the entire Nation is like that. The director of the film failed to show any positive image of India in this film. But that is the real image of Hollywood, I do not want to argue on that. My main concern is why so many film critics and guilds are impressed with this film to be worth for the best film of the year? What was wrong with film like "Taare Zamin Par" and "Lagan" and several others, which have positive human message and real image of humanity. But again, like film makers, the western film critics are also guided by their false instinct to promote negative im-

age of non-white culture. It would be useless to blame American public for watching this movie because they do not go to see movie or watch T. V. to get a message of humanity but to get entertainment alone otherwise 'Shrek' and 'Spiderman' could not have made profit of hundreds of million dollars releasing their brainless movies for the decades and our TV media could not have dared to show American made missiles, bombs and guns destroyed lives and ancient civilizations around the globe.

As far as Indians are concern, I would like to advise them not to show this movie to their young kids, who have not seen India, otherwise they will depict a wrong image of India in their minds for ever. In reality India is not like slumdog but Indian villagers and country men even though are poor, their hearts are full of love, affection and humanity. Rightly, Indian masses have rejected this movie.

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