“Slum-Pups No More”: Rescuing India’s Slum Children

Mary Grace Antony
Published online: 06 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Mary Grace Antony (2012) “Slum-Pups No More”: Rescuing India’s Slum Children, Journal of Intercultural Communication Research, 41:1, 17-36, DOI: 10.1080/17475759.2011.626061

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2011.626061

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
“Slum-Pups No More”¹: Rescuing India’s Slum Children

Mary Grace Antony

Indian poverty is often portrayed abroad in a manner that upholds imperialist frameworks of Orientalist deviance, while simultaneously endorsing a White interventionist rhetoric. Third-world children constitute an especially vulnerable victim category. This study compares Indian and international news coverage of two child stars in the blockbuster Slumdog Millionaire who were living in a slum during production, taken to Hollywood for the Academy Awards, and then returned to the slum. Findings reveal that although Indian coverage focused on the two children’s stardom at the cost of ignoring other slum children’s contributions, Western coverage promoted an interventionist rhetoric that emphasized the spectacle of poverty.

Keywords: Orientalism; Slum Children; Poverty; Western Intervention

Described as “Dickensian in scope and intent” (Kazmi, 2009, January 23), Slumdog Millionaire (Colson, Boyle, & Tandan, 2008)—hereafter, Slumdog—traces the story of an orphan boy’s dramatic journey from the slums of Mumbai to an American-style game show where he wins 20 million rupees (a little over $400,000). The relatively low-budget movie directed by British filmmaker Danny Boyle surprised competitors and took the entertainment world by storm, winning several Golden Globe Awards and eight Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Screenplay, and Best Director for Boyle (Argetsinger, 2009, February 23). However, despite these accolades, Slumdog has drawn strong criticism both in India and internationally for several reasons. First, it provides an “unflinching portrayal of India’s poverty” (Argetsinger, 2009) and of those who dwell in what is sometimes referred to as the “largest slum in Asia” (Jacobson, 2009). Situated in the heart of India’s financial capital, Dharavi and its surrounding slums pose an embarrassing contrast to the national “perception of [India] as a rising economic power and the Third World’s
beacon of democracy” (Sengupta, 2009, February 21). Second, the movie’s title has provoked strong reactions among Indian populations, for whom the term “dog” carries significant negative imperialist connotations. Although it is based on the novel “Q&a” by Indian diplomat Vikas Swarup (Swarup, 2005), the movie’s scriptwriter and producers opted to change the title to “Slumdog Millionaire”—a decision that caused considerable outrage in India and motivated some groups to ransack theaters where the film was being screened (Wax, 2009, January 31).

This paper will focus on press coverage of two child stars featured in the film and the related controversy that attracted significant attention within India and abroad. Two of Slumdog’s youngest stars were residents of that very slum during the film’s production (Randhawa, 2009, February 20). Ten-year-old Azharuddin Ismail and eight-year-old Rubina Ali Qureshi were living with their families in the squalid slums of Mumbai, an issue that provoked strong reactions from human rights and social activist organizations regarding the exploitation of marginalized groups. Boyle and Slumdog’s producer Christian Colson staunchly denied accusations of underpaying the children, claiming that both child actors received suitable remuneration for their participation in the movie. However, the protests did not diminish and gathered momentum when both children were flown to Los Angeles for the 81st Academy Awards. Along with Slumdog’s other cast and crew members, Azharuddin and Rubina were housed in five-star luxury and rubbed shoulders with the cream of Hollywood society for a few brief days, before they were flown back to their native country—and their homes in the slum.

Critical scholars have examined how Indian poverty is portrayed and distributed in international spaces in a manner that upholds long-standing Western imperialist frameworks of subjugation and Orientalist deviance (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001; Hanson, 2000; Shah, 2006; Shome, 1996). However, this particular incident illustrates the unsettling processes whereby poverty may be exploited and marketed to primarily Western audiences at the expense of oppressed and marginalized populations in developing countries. In this paper, I argue that Azharuddin and Rubina function as little more than empty signifiers within a larger narrative of capitalist promotion and subjugation that diminishes the agency of those who are relegated to society’s fringes. Many contemporary media campaigns endeavor to promote a dominantly Western philanthropy toward distant Others, as in the case of high-profile celebrities’ international adoptions (Silverman, 2007) and much-publicized poverty eradication programs such as popstar Bono’s ONE campaign (Grace, 2005, April 7). However, the manner in which Rubina and Azharuddin were conveniently “adopted,” discarded, and later “re-adopted” by film celebrities and the local government authorities exposes the seamy underbelly of marketing and promotional strategies that operate under the pretext of charity efforts to benefit the underprivileged. In this essay, I aim to unravel the discourses surrounding Azharuddin and Rubina during the filming of Slumdog and their trip to the Academy Awards in an effort to understand how notions of rescue and charity manifest in present-day media environments to disempower deprived groups in developing countries. First, I outline how Orientalism (Said, 1978) and the myth of the White man’s burden...
function in tandem to promote a Western interventionist framework that promotes misrepresentations of Indian poverty. Following this, I examine emergent themes in newspaper coverage of Azharuddin and Rubina in leading Indian and non-Indian newspapers. My findings reveal that although Indian reports foreground disparities between privileges accorded to the child stars compared to other equally deserving slum children featured in *Slumdog*, non-Indian coverage largely promotes a Western interventionist discourse of rescue and vulnerability. The children are discursively packaged and circulated in a manner than emphasizes their oppression at the hands of exploitative socioeconomic structures, including their immediate relatives. Ultimately, I contend that this incident exemplifies the manner in which discourses of self-empowerment and agency in postcolonial spaces are subverted and repressed to preserve Orientalist interpretations of prevailing sociopolitical structures that promote a sympathetic Western gaze and the spectacle of poverty.

**Literature Review**

*Orientalism and the Commodification of Poverty*

Edward Said’s hallmark “Imaginative Geography and its Representations” (1978) describes Orientalism as the creation of idealized and fictional representations that dramatize distant cultures. The unknown and unfamiliar are highlighted to enhance the strangeness and difference of other people and places compared to Western modes of living and being, irrespective of the authenticity and veracity of these portrayals. The Other is thus confined and defined in modes that preserve and perpetuate Western (predominantly white) structures of domination. Although Said concentrates on the damaging manner in which Orientalism has (mis)represented Islam and the discursive figure of the Arab in the Western imagination, this process is evident in several other sociopolitical contexts—particularly in the case of former colonial states. For instance, several academics have examined how India has been produced and reproduced within the Western imagination for centuries (Cronin, 1989; Hutnyk, 2000; Khushu-Lahiri & Rao, 2008; Mehta, 2002; Moore-Gilbert, 1986; Shah, 2006).

Orientalist themes frequently entail the juxtaposition of contradictory binaries that nevertheless serve to confine and describe the Other within predefined frameworks that negate actual socioeconomic and cultural realities. For example, Western literature (particularly during the British Raj) has frequently portrayed India as both a land of fabulous wealth, and yet also as a country of dire poverty where the caste system and untouchability prevail (Favero, 2003; Mehta, 2002). The Other is therefore strategically constructed and positioned within long-established power frameworks:

The crucial issue of *who is looking at whom and how* is a relational issue...
and these are enmeshed in conditions of power, national and international. (Shome, 1996, p. 507)

Although pivotal in many ways, Said’s work has drawn criticism over the years, more recently for its somewhat essentialist North-South and East-West categorizations. In the preface to a special edition of *Communication Theory* devoted to theorizing contemporary work in postcolonialism, Shome and Hegde (2002) state that frameworks such as Bhabha’s “third space” and Said’s “Orientalism” may not be especially relevant to contemporary times, globalization, and diasporic formations (p. 257). Although this observation may hold for some contexts, I argue that Orientalism provides an invaluable foundation for examining the manner in which native (non-diasporic) previously colonized peoples are portrayed—and continue to be portrayed—within the Western imagination. Despite the opportunities afforded by new communication media for alternative voices and experiences, timeworn discourses prevail among the popular media that reinforce the inescapable inferiority of an uncivilized “third-world,” and thereby reinforce the global hegemonic order. Particularly in the case of *Slumdog* and the depiction of Indian poverty abroad, these processes and structures enable the continued subjugation of liberated postcolonial states by invoking established Orientalist tropes and the ensuing “postcolonial affect,” that is, the political motivation of emotions in postcoloniality to enable certain logics and regimes of colonialism in contemporary times (Shome, 2009).

Poverty and corruption are dominant themes in the discourses surrounding so-called “third world” countries among more developed nation states. Indeed, Western media audiences are frequently confronted with images of starving masses in filthy environments, and are urged to contribute toward charity and poverty-alleviation funds. While I do not intend to criticize the goals of these philanthropic endeavors, the manner in which non-Western Others are packaged and represented in these campaigns bears critical reflection, particularly when such strategies portray poverty and misfortune in a manner that reifies spectacle over political agency. For instance, Shah (2006) observes that media depictions of the Kamathipura red-light district in Mumbai encourage passive spectatorship over productive change by highlighting elements of social deviance and stigma associated with prostitution. In this manner, media representations preclude the potential for active social change by positioning Kamathipura as an external and non-normative space, and thereby contribute toward the continued oppression of women and sex workers in general. Likewise, Roland Joffé’s 1992 film *City of Joy* provides a concrete example of “the orientalist rhetoric that emphasizes the chaos and primitivity of the natives” (Shome, 1996, p. 506), as in the case of strategic cinematography at Kolkata’s Howrah train station:

> there are several overhead and long distance shots that convey an extremely chaotic and disordered view of the city: we see beggars and lepers with distorted faces screaming for food; a loud band welcoming the arrival of a local minister...anxious passers-by colliding with each other...and children who seem to be lost in the crowds. (p. 506)
The commotion and turmoil, by extension, accentuate the progress and order of Western social spaces and modes of interaction. Through images such as these—which Appadurai (1988) refers to as “metonymic freezing”—specific symbols of the Third World become representative markers of its sociocultural entirety (Shome, 1996), and a distorted Indian “reality” is commodified and distributed for Western consumption. Biased representations such as these promote a Western interventionist discourse than undermines the local initiative and empowerment of underprivileged groups. Nowhere is this more apparent than in discourses of salvation that advocate rescuing these pathetic victims—particularly Third World children—from miserable conditions.

Rescuing Slum Dwellers—The White Man’s Burden

In her analysis of how City of Joy reinforces discourses of liberal white paternalism, Shome (1996) refers to the “white man’s burden”—a popular Hollywood genre that showcases the travails of a white savior in distant lands, typically underdeveloped countries. She argues that cultural myths such as that of the white savior propagate and reify discourses that justified the conquest of several “Third World” countries in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In City of Joy, a young white American doctor, Max Lowe travels to Kolkata, India, to improve the lives of slum dwellers and lepers. Through his efforts, he provides medical aid and moral support in challenging situations to these unfortunate victims, earning the nickname “Magic Max.” Shome (1996) emphasizes that it is not the philanthropic act itself that drew censure, but the manner in which the film (based on the novel by Dominique LaPierre) disregarded the sacrifices and efforts of Indian medics and local groups that were engaged in the same tasks. Rather, both media texts projected Lowe as the sole driving force behind medical progress and development in the slums. Additionally, the white man’s burden was celebrated in several film reviews, whereas the Indian authorities’ indignation was presented as the “hyper-sensitive response of an unstable society unable to face its own poverty-stricken reality” (Shome, 1996, p. 505). Furthermore, the discursive affirmation of Western intervention in underdeveloped regions assumes greater potency when the victims are children.

Childhood is largely considered to be a “special period of vulnerability” and universal social norms typically advocate “a special responsibility to intervene to prevent [child] abuse and neglect” (Ortiz & Briggs, 2003). In their analysis of transnational adoption, Ortiz and Briggs (2003) claim that overseas children are depicted as victims of a poverty that can be remedied through technological and educational development. The authors refer to the prevailing myth of the “plasticity of the overseas poor—particularly overseas poor children” (p. 53) which resonates with imperialist tropes of a resilient yet adaptive native who cannot be completely realized until she/he encounters modernist intervention. A particular visual culture of adoptable children provides a portal for middle-class whites in the West to imagine the needs of the poor and thereby become their champions (Dubinsky, 2007). In this manner, Orientalist tropes of deprivation and poverty combine to discursively
position the “Third World” child as particularly needy and deserving of Western redemption.

Again, I stress that I do not condemn the urge to extend a helping hand to a less fortunate individual. Instead, it is important to recognize the processes whereby channels of salvation are inscribed in patterns that uphold prevailing systems of inequality and oppression. In the case of *Slumdog*, the discourse of Western intervention complements the symbolic “adoption” of its two slum child stars by Western filmmakers, who aim to rescue them from a lifetime of poverty and squalor. However, these discourses simultaneously prompt concerns regarding the politics of salvation—specifically, *who* may be saved and *by whom*. Accordingly, this project will interrogate the manner in which Azharuddin and Rubina were represented in leading Indian and non-Indian press outlets, as well as how these discourses in turn reflect or contradict dominant Orientalist tropes of Western intervention with regard to Indian poverty.

**Method**

**Data**

Newspaper articles that addressed Azharuddin and Rubina were located using the Lexis-Nexis and Access World News academic search engines. All available news articles up to and including March 22, 2009, were included in the analysis—one month after the 81st Academy Awards ceremony on February 22, 2009. This timeframe therefore allowed for a comprehensive investigation of print coverage of both child stars during the casting and filming of *Slumdog*, as well as an adequate period for the themes of interest to emerge following the Academy Awards. The one-month period was additionally selected because it offered the opportunity to examine how the child stars were portrayed beyond the euphoric post-Oscars phase. Therefore, this period of interest could potentially allow for a more complex discursive development of Orientalist tropes, if they were present in the sample. In addition, I chose to compare Indian versus non-Indian coverage to determine whether disempowering interventionist discourses were restricted to specific geographical regions and press outlets, particularly given India’s colonial history.

Non-Indian newspaper coverage was obtained using the Lexis-Nexis Academic search engine and the keywords “Azharuddin Ismail,” “Rubina Ali,” and “Slumdog Millionaire.” A total of 55 articles were obtained from several major newspapers in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia. Following the elimination of duplicate articles, this number decreased to 41 news articles, including film reviews and opinion columns. These categories were included to add richness to the findings and allow for a comprehensive analysis of all possible reactions in newspaper coverage of the children. Next, I located all articles published in three major English dailies in India: *The Indian Express* (based in the north in New Delhi), *The Times of India* (based in Mumbai) and *The Hindu* (based in the southern city of Chennai).

2 M. G. Antony
newspapers were selected to encompass a range of reactions across the country. A total of 27 articles were obtained using the same keyword combinations, and the elimination of duplicate reports yielded 22 articles in all. The total dataset therefore consisted of 63 print articles, including accompanying photograph and graphic captions.

Analysis

I conducted a critical thematic analysis to uncover the main themes in newspaper coverage of Azharuddin and Rubina. This involved qualitatively analyzing the news articles using the constant comparison technique (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whereby the texts were examined for common themes and concepts via a three-stage coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Dutta-Bergman, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Analysis focused on how Azharuddin and Rubina were described in newspaper reports—with an emphasis on areas that supported the previously outlined critical Orientalist themes of poverty and the white man’s burden—including repetitive terms, expressions, and implications. Open coding involved reading each article and noting various themes and patterns that became apparent, and then comparing these motifs across other articles, with a focus on areas where themes intersected or contradicted one another. For instance, following the Academy Awards, Azharuddin and Rubina were promised free housing by the Mumbai state housing development department. Several news reports carried stories on how the children were being rewarded for their efforts that brought the country glory. On the other hand, some news reports and picture captions published around the time of the 81st Academy Awards mentioned how other slum children who had minor roles in the movie were not included in the pomp and ceremony. In combination, the two categories provide evidence of who may lay claim to praise and recognition within this particular sociopolitical context. Coding allowed for the presence of multiple frames within a single article.

The articles were then axially coded, where they were re-read to ensure that the content within a particular theme was consistent and adequately represented all available opinions. Where relevant, new categories were identified and added to the initial set. To clarify, in the prior example, the categories “reward” and “rejection” were combined to yield a stronger parent category that could examine how these subcategories validated each other. All collected data were then selectively coded and carefully examined one final time to ensure that subcategories were consistent with the theme of each parent category, that the parent categories were distinct with minimal overlap, and to verify that no themes had been overlooked or misrepresented. At this stage of the analysis, the specific terms (and inherent connotations) utilized to describe the two children and other slum dwellers were closely examined—for instance, “squalor,” “destitute,” “extraordinary,” “slum-pup,” and “toast of Tinseltown”—with special attention to the source of each news article, that is, whether it appeared in an Indian or non-Indian publication. In line with Moyo’s (2009) analysis of Western coverage of African
elections, the underlying purpose was to determine how discourse strategically operates to frame people and events in a manner that reproduces dominant ideologies and myths. Shome (1996) refers to this process as “the crucial issue of who is looking at whom and how” (p. 507). These findings are presented in the following section, with direct quotations included where necessary to supplement particular themes.

**Results**

The results of my analysis reveal a range of dominant themes regarding how Azharuddin and Rubina were symbolically adopted and later discarded by the filmmakers, celebrities, and influential Indian officials. Although some themes were common to Indian and non-Indian coverage of the two children—such as the extreme poverty in the slums and the exploitation of already disadvantaged individuals—some themes received greater attention than others in Indian newspapers compared to non-Indian newspapers, and vice versa. Results have therefore been organized on the basis of dominant categories that emerged in Indian versus non-Indian coverage. Three main themes emerged in Indian newspaper articles: (a) praise and rewards for Azharuddin and Rubina but not for the other slum children featured in *Slumdog*; (b) the child artists’ future opportunities as a result of their fame; and (c) other proactive attempts to empower slum dwellers and the poor. Non-Indian news articles devoted substantial attention to the following two themes: (a) disparities between *Slumdog*’s global success and the children’s real-life circumstances; and (b) the psychological and emotional impact of *Slumdog*’s success on its child stars.

**Critical Themes in Indian Newspaper Coverage**

*Fortune for a favored few.* Several news reports commented on the fact that while the two main child stars had received substantial media attention and tangible rewards, at least 20 other children from the same slum who had minor roles in *Slumdog* were largely unrewarded and unrecognized (Jaisanghani, 2009, February 23). Salman, Shah Rukh, and Bhoora all played maimed beggar boys in *Slumdog* and received only Rs. 50 (approximately $1) per day for their work. Another slum resident, Nagma Shakeel Ahmed, said that although she was happy for Azharuddin and Rubina, she felt that the producers should have taken all the children who participated in *Slumdog* to the Academy Awards: “For example, if you are cooking mutton all the masalas [condiments] that go into it make it tasty” (Gaikwad, 2009a, February 24). These individuals felt that the overt display of favoritism toward Rubina and Azharuddin overlooked the contributions of other equally unfortunate and deserving slum children. For example, 11-year-old Zakir Mohammed who played child actor Ayush Khedekar’s (the youngest Jamal) stunt double in the infamous feces-plunging scene “jumped again and again into a gooey pool of chocolate and peanut butter” for the paltry sum of Rs. 50 a day (Gaikwad, 2009b,
March 8). Many of these extras also had to forgo their education for an entire year because the shooting schedule required that they miss school for two months, following which their teachers recommended that they drop their classes and re-enroll the next year. Interestingly, there was no mention of these children in international news reports.

In addition, their parents protested that the “children’s tender hearts have been broken by the ‘unfair treatment’ meted out to them” (Jaisanghani, 2009), while Azharuddin and Rubina received proper homes, significantly heftier paychecks, a trip to Hollywood, and enrollment in a local school. Following Slumdog’s success at the Academy Awards, the Mumbai Housing and Area Development Board (MHADB) awarded both child stars free apartments in a housing complex, enabling the two children to escape the poverty and cramped living conditions of their slum homes. Expressing an awareness of these biased benefits, Rubina’s mother Munni said that although she was happy for her daughter’s success, “I will be glad if they rewarded the other four children as well”—to which MHADB officials promptly responded that “they could not oblige everyone” (Naik, 2009, February 25). Overall, Indian newspaper articles expressed a lingering sense of injustice and exploitation for the other slum participants.

A clear discourse of privilege is thus apparent in local reports of how the filmmakers and state agencies treated Azharuddin and Rubina compared to the other slum children. As one concerned reporter notes:

The housing board decision may have come as a godsend for the families of Rubina Qureshi and Mohammad Azharuddin but it smacks of a desperate attempt by state agencies to be part of the limelight...What parameters were used to select the two beneficiaries? Why were the other child artistes in the film (like Ayush Khedekar) left out of the gravy train?” (Naik, 2009)

Local news reports highlight the hypocrisy of state authorities and filmmakers, who perform a superficial “rescue” of these two slum children while leaving the others to languish unrecognized and remain bystanders to Azharuddin and Rubina’s fantasy story (Gaikwad, 2009b). In this sense, both parties engage in the continued exploitation of an already underprivileged and deprived group.

Accolades and opportunities. Another dominant theme in Indian coverage was the future opportunities in the entertainment industry that were now available to Rubina and Azharuddin as a result of their new celebrity status. Only one non-Indian newspaper mentioned these prospects, stating that the child stars were “are now signed up with acting agencies” (Roche, 2009, February 24). On the other hand, Indian news articles contained several details of the children’s newfound stardom. For instance, a Bollywood movie rewrote its script following Rubina and Azharuddin’s return from Los Angeles to include the two child actors in a scene where they play themselves. The reporter noted that “it also marks their entry, in a sense, into Bollywood’s big league as top actors like Shah Rukh Khan, Rishi Kapoor and Juhi Chawla are also doing cameos in the film” (“For Son Launch,” 2009).
This reporter concluded that the last-minute addition to the script—where the protagonist prevents a bomb blast at the airport on the day of the children’s arrival from Los Angeles—was an obvious attempt to grab “a share of the Oscar pie” and capitalize on the children’s celebrity power.

Similarly, another article recounted how the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in Mumbai organized an event to felicitate Azharuddin and Rubina in the presence of several high-profile politicians (Dubey, 2009, March 13). Although the NCP president denied allegations of his party cashing in on the new celebrities in the run-up to the election campaign season, his rivals argued otherwise. An NGO also partnered with a local educational institute to provide for the children’s education, and a spokesperson said, “The children’s dreams have already come true with the popularity they have gained from *Slumdog Millionaire*. But they need to go further, so we have proposed to give them a scholarship” (Dubey, 2009). These instances illustrate the manner in which organizations and prominent individuals who would otherwise have little to do with two slum children were now eager to publicize their collaborations with Rubina and Azharuddin. *Slumdog’s* success catapulted these children from anonymity and social ostracism to the limelight, and they were now courted by the cream of Mumbai society. Opportunities and accolades such as these underscore the sympathy expressed in the preceding category for other children whose participation in *Slumdog* was conveniently forgotten. Regardless of whether Azharuddin and Rubina were merely “the flavor of the month,” the alacrity with which they were adopted and promoted by other celebrities reinforces the earlier theme that the fruits of success were only accessible to a select few.

**Other success stories.** A final theme that was conspicuously absent in non-Indian coverage concerned empowerment and developmental efforts that were pioneered by slum residents to improve their own living conditions. To clarify, although most international newspapers devoted much space to charitable donations that would provide for Azharuddin and Rubina, barely any of these articles mentioned proactive ventures and enterprises undertaken by Indian social activists and the slum dwellers themselves. *Slumdog’s* Indian co-director Loveleen Tandan acknowledged the complex spaces that slums occupy as destitute yet industrial zones, saying “Slum dwellers have a life. It’s not like they are these poverty-stricken people sitting around waiting for some-one to come and help them. They have a life, a culture, a business…It’s hustle and bustle” (Maher, 2009, February 21). However, she prefaced these comments with the statement, “Of course, I’d been in slums before. They are everywhere….I just walk through these spaces” [italics added], emphasizing her externality to the lives of slum dwellers. She therefore observed (and no doubt approved of) the slum dwellers’ agency, albeit from a distance.

News analyst Mitu Sengupta, who is also a faculty member at Ryerson University, offered a far more vivid description of the diverse and contradictory reality of slum environments that unambiguously challenged stereotypical media images of slums as “place[s] of evil and decay, of a raw, chaotic tribalism” (Sengupta, 2009). She noted that the annual turnover of small businesses in Mumbai’s Dharavi slum
was between $50 and $100 million, with several thriving industries including garment manufacturing, pottery, leather, plastics, and food processing. In addition, surveys conducted by Microsoft Research India indicate that these slum residents exhibit high absorption of new technologies, with cellphone retailers and cyber cafes lining the crowded lanes. Socially collaborative networks are also highly successful, and Sengupta listed a range of initiatives developed by slum residents to combat social issues such as healthcare, schooling, waste disposal, child abuse, and violence against women.

Previous filmmakers have endeavored to ensure that slum residents benefit from the profits of films that feature slum populations. Most notably, Mira Nair set up the Salaam Bank Trust in 1989 to benefit the children who acted in Salaam Bombay! (Iyer, 2009, January 30). Although non-Indian newspaper coverage highlighted Boyle and Colson’s efforts to provide for Azharuddin and Rubina individually, Indian newspapers mentioned that a fund had also been installed to assist Mumbai’s slums in general (Suroor, 2009, January 31), citing Boyle: “This is our chance to give something back to an extraordinary city which has helped us produce an extraordinary film.” Two other contributions were entirely disregarded by non-Indian media. One was that Bollywood actor Anil Kapoor (who played the quizmaster in Slumdog) had donated his entire fee to a slum-based NGO (Iyer, 2009). Second, a government-run hospitality institute launched an initiative to provide slum children with free education to further their careers in this area, also guaranteeing 100% industry placements (Bhardwaj, 2009, February 25). This same institute had already rehabilitated 54 teenagers hailing from slums in Mumbai who had a history of drug abuse. The absence of any mention of these local projects to assist and empower slum residents among non-Indian print outlets is rather telling, and hints at efforts to propagate an image of the pitiable and ill-fated slum dweller. Furthermore, international newspapers made no attempt to inform international audiences of Indian attempts to empower the marginalized and disadvantaged.

Themes in this category therefore address a range of issues that the non-Indian media chose not to highlight, most notably, how a larger narrative of privilege simultaneously deprived equally deserving child actors of fame and opportunity. Additionally, slum residents’ productive and entrepreneurial endeavors were ignored—an omission that likely serves to propagate Western discourses of modernity, development, and philanthropy. The slum dwellers are thus discursively confined within familiar frameworks that preserve dominant Western impressions of poverty and deprivation in the “Third World.”

Critical Themes in Non-Indian Newspaper Coverage

Not a happy ending for everyone. Several news articles highlighted the discrepancies between Slumdog’s box office success and the fact that two of its child stars were living in abject poverty. Although the movie showcases “the occasionally brutal rags-to-riches story of a slum dweller” (Teeman, 2009, January 31), many articles were quick to point out that the two child stars were still living in filthy and
destitute conditions. One reporter cited Boyle’s reaction to Azharuddin’s homeless-ness: “They found him on a car rooftop fast asleep. Nowhere else to live that night but on a car rooftop. Sometimes they sleep on the cars to stay away from the rats” (Barnard, 2009, November 14). Yet another reporter wrote, “Rubina, 8, lives in a tiny hovel in a rubbish-strewn slum near railway tracks. Azharuddin sleeps under a polythene sheet-covered roof in the same slum. Open sewers run nearby; neither home has running water” (Slumdog Kids to Get New Homes, 2009, February 26). These writers frequently contrasted such nightmarish descriptions of the children’s slum homes with the movie’s net box office profit of £117 million (approximately $175 million) worldwide (Blakely, 2009, February 26). Several reports also mentioned that although Azharuddin’s father earned less than £1 (approximately $2) per day collecting scrap wood, he was currently unable to work because he was suffering from tuberculosis (Blakely, 2009; Page, 2009, February 21; Randhawa, 2009). These articles therefore stressed the obvious incongruity between a multi-million dollar movie’s box office success and its child actors living in the very conditions that the film’s protagonist eventually escapes. Many of these stories accused Boyle and Colson of capitalizing on the misfortune of the poor, describing Slumdog as “a poverty tour” of India (Wax, 2009), and labeling the filmmakers as “peddler’s of the country’s poverty” (Wax, 2009), “peddling ‘poverty porn’ and perpetuating stereotypes” (Page, 2009). Nonetheless, it is somewhat ironic that the terms employed by these same writers when describing the children’s slum homes draw from the very discourses that they criticize. To clarify, the filmmakers and non-Indian reporters both foster the passive and sympathetic Western gaze that ultimately promotes the spectacle and wretchedness of extreme poverty (Shah, 2006; Shome, 1996).

A key sub-theme that emerged in these reports was an inability to reconcile Slumdog’s happy ending with the reality of Azharuddin and Rubina’s lives. In the film, the hero Jamal Malik escapes life in the slums, winning both the substantial monetary prize and his sweetheart Latika. This is in stark contrast to the more sobering conclusion of Salaam Bombay!—where the protagonist Krishna returns to life in the slums following his escape from a juvenile home. Hanson (2007) explains that director Mira Nair eschewed a happy ending in Salaam Bombay!—which also tells the story of a child from the slums—because this would have been a fatuous decision that denied the virtually hopeless reality of street children’s existence. Slumdog’s frivolous ending—complete with a Bollywood dance sequence—underscores the insight of Nair’s choice because it belittles the entirety of suffering and anguish that preceded Jamal’s struggle to succeed, while callously disregarding Rubina and Azharuddin’s actual circumstances. In addition, because the non-Indian press made no mention of both children’s newfound celebrity status following the Academy Awards, the movie’s conclusion significantly exaggerates their apparent continued misery. In this manner, these news articles describe the children in terms that reify and support a Western interventionist discourse to rescue the poor and unfortunate from exploitative capitalist structures. To do so, however, they strategically omit any information that contradicts this carefully constructed narrative of deprivation and suffering.
“One minute he’s the toast of Tinseltown, the next…” The psychological and emotional repercussions of sudden fame and stardom on the two child stars was another key theme in non-Indian coverage. However, this issue was neither framed in terms of the negative effects of instant celebrity on impressionable young minds, nor hinted at the possibility that the children were likely to be targeted and/or exploited by both Indian and non-Indian individuals eager to capitalize on their newfound star status. Instead, concern for the children’s emotional welfare largely hinged on how they would cope with the extremes of Hollywood glamour and life in Garib Nagar (the slum)—specifically, their return to living in the slums after a taste of five-star luxury in Los Angeles. Earlier reports mentioned how Rubina idolized the actress Freida Pinto (who plays the adult version of her character) saying, “I want to be a star like Freida… I am going to ask Danny-uncle (director Boyle) to take me to London and be in more films” (Nelson, 2009, January 27). Many newspaper stories included details of the children’s shopping expeditions prior to their trip to America (Iyer & Dubey, 2009, February 19). Some stories mentioned their trips to Disneyland (Singh, 2009, February 24) and how they were besieged by autograph hounds on their first ever airplane flights (Gaikwad, 2009a). In addition, several news reports and picture captions stressed that this was both children’s first experience of five-star accommodation and international travel.

Following their return, however, these reporters were quick to highlight how the children struggled with their “real” living conditions after the pomp and ceremony of the Academy Awards. Some articles mentioned that Azharuddin was suffering from fever and exhaustion following his return to Mumbai, quoting the young actor: “I am very sad. I feel sleepy, hot and sick all the time. I can’t get to sleep here—there are too many mosquitoes and it is so hot. I just wish I was in America still” (Henderson, 2009, March 2). The parents described the children as struggling to readjust to life in India after their five-day trip to Los Angeles. One reporter claimed that Rubina no longer wanted to meet her old friends and continually begged her parents to move out of the slum:

“I don’t want to live here in the slum any more,” Rubina said, wearing the dirt-stained ball gown that she has not wanted to take off since Oscars night. “I don’t want to sleep on the floor any more. I want a proper bed and to live where the air does not smell of poo. I have seen what it is like in America. Here, there is garbage everywhere, people get angry, swear and shout. I have realised how bad life is here. I just want to get out.” (Henderson, 2009)

This particular report paints the poignant picture of a vulnerable and emotionally damaged little girl, who cannot cope with the stress of oscillating between the extremities of poverty and luxury. The fact that she has not yet removed the dress that she wore to the Academy Awards more than a week earlier betokens a psychological attempt to cling to her brief taste of riches and fortune. A social worker in the same slum echoes these concerns, “I cannot believe these kids have just been left like this after being taken to Hollywood. It is bound to affect them
psychologically” (Henderson, 2009). The children’s dissatisfaction and frustration at being thrown back into the squalor from which they were “rescued” by Western filmmakers is therefore highlighted, as well as their yearning for the superlative comforts that they experienced with these “rescuers.” The parents and social workers’ comments reinforce these aggrieved sentiments, maintaining the injustice of this callous treatment. While I do not dispute the insensitive manner in which both children were deposited back in the depths of poverty after experiencing the pinnacle of stardom, I propose that reports such as these reinforce Western interventionist discourses of rescuing slum children from their environments, thereby propagating the stereotype of the slum as filthy, deviant, and “a living hell” (Dargis, 2008, November 12).

Two other issues reinforce this message. First, some reports mentioned that Rubina “came back to a warring family with both her biological mother Khushi and her stepmother Munni claiming custody of her” (Child Stars in Troubled Return, 2009). Second, several non-Indian newspapers carried reports of how Azharuddin was publicly slapped by his father shortly after his return for refusing to oblige a reporter’s questions (Child Stars in Troubled Return, 2009, March 2; Henderson, 2009; Pettifor, 2009, February 28). The young star allegedly turned down an interview because he was tired and jetlagged, causing his father to lose his temper and slap the child. By contrast, only one Indian news article mentioned this incident (Dad Slaps Slumdog Kid, 2009, March 1). One report carried a particularly vivid account of this event:

Azharuddin was slapped and kicked at the family home in Mumbai in full view of neighbours and passers-by. The ugly scenes, which lasted 30 seconds, broke out in the Dharavi slum in Bandra…his father, 45-year-old Ismail, lashed out at the boy, kicking him and slapping him round the face…Cowering Azharuddin then yelped as he tried to evade his father’s flailing hands and feet. (Roche, 2009)

This same report cited an eyewitness reaction, “It was like a scene out of Slumdog Millionaire.” This direct comparison to the film’s plotline underscores the exploitation of defenseless and helpless street children. The child’s off-screen suffering is equated with the protagonist’s torture onscreen, vilifying the father and thus further supporting the “rescue” narrative outlined above. By extension, this same narrative implies that it is not enough to merely extricate Azharuddin and Rubina from their miserable environments—both children also need to be saved from their own exploitative and opportunistic parents. The families of the children are vilified and demonized in a manner that enhances the vulnerability and innocence of the little ones. All these reports fail to mention that his father had earlier rescued Azharuddin from a mob of television reporters at a restaurant where he was waiting to eat his first meal after returning to India: “Ismail, who had already had enough since the past few days, rose in rage and physically pushed every camera person out” (Dubey, Jaisanghini, & Nair, 2009, February 28). The omission of this important piece of information is therefore strategic because it demonstrates how Azharuddin’s father—and by extension, both families—are also victims of the
sudden transformation of the children from veritable nobodies to high-profile celebrities. Rather, the non-Indian press prefers to dehumanize the parents, presenting them as part of a larger exploitative structure that oppresses these two children.

This category therefore provides strong evidence for the manner in which non-Indian press reports of Azharuddin and Rubina portrayed both children as helpless pawns at the mercy of materialistic and abusive individuals. In this manner, the construction of both children’s home environments and traumatic ordeals mirrors the *Slumdog* film narrative, positioning them as worthy victims of interventionist attention and rescue. Furthermore, these media narratives deny the positive consequences of sudden celebrity status in Mumbai—including education benefits, free housing, political endorsements, and acting and modeling opportunities—preferring instead to cling to the Orientalist image of the pathetic and abandoned “Third world” child. The implications of these decisions, as well as their potential implications for slum residents in general, are discussed in the next section.

**Discussion**

In an era characterized by increased global diversity and rapidly blurring boundaries, postcolonial scholarship attempts to critically address issues of identity and representation confronting contemporary societies. Shome and Hegde (2002) argue that the fundamental thrust of this research remains “geopoliticizing the nation and locating it in larger (and unequal) histories and geographies of global power and culture” (p. 253). When imaginative and largely inaccurate Western frameworks are imposed on non-Western peoples and places, they impact how these individuals and regions are received and interpreted by both Western and Eastern audiences (Lalvani, 1995), frequently by invoking postcolonial affect (Shome, 2009). Critical scholars must interrogate the political and social circumstances under which these (mis)representations are constructed, as well as the material and ideological consequences they are likely to pose for already subjugated and marginalized groups. This study identified dominant themes in Indian and non-Indian newspaper coverage of two of the youngest actors in the critically acclaimed box office success, *Slumdog Millionaire*, as well as the extent to which these themes supported or challenged traditional Orientalist tropes of poverty in India. Although non-Indian coverage emphasized the children’s miserable living conditions and the emotional damage that they suffered following their return to the slum after the trip to Hollywood, this coverage packaged the young celebrities in modes that adhered to dominant Orientalist tropes that project India as a land of poverty and corruption, where children and other vulnerable members of society are attacked and exploited (Favero, 2003; Mehta, 2002). The sociopolitical reality and benefits of the children’s success were ignored or disregarded in favor of a misrepresentative depiction that highlighted their anguish and hardship. On the other hand, Indian newspapers emphasized the inherent unfairness of rewarding Rubina and Azharuddin but not the
other street children who participated in *Slumdog*, and also focused on proactive enterprises initiated by slum populations to address local issues. Indian coverage therefore emphasized discourses of inequality and self-empowerment that were conspicuously absent in non-Indian reports. This analysis corroborates research on satisfaction among slum dwellers in Calcutta that “while the poor . . . do not lead enviable lives, they do lead meaningful lives . . . capitalizing on the non-material resources available to them and finding satisfaction in many areas of their lives” (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001, p. 349). Rather, prevailing opinions about the poor and underprivileged are indicative of negative sociomoral stereotypes that relegate poverty to the realm of the despicable and deviant, when instead “perhaps we should be asking why we assume they are miserable” (Biswas-Diener & Diener, 2001, p. 347) [italics added]. Sengupta (2009) concludes that popular media representations of slum dwellers such as *Slumdog* frequently deny the realities of life in the slums—as well as the tension of reconciling abject poverty with happiness, meaningfulness, or satisfaction—thereby bolstering a narrative of disempowerment and dependence. The poor are therefore constructed and commodified in a manner that reifies prevailing Orientalist discourses of helplessness, which in turn propagates a distorted perception of sociopolitical reality. The slum remains a fetid, vulnerable, and deviant zone within the public imagination, with its success stories suppressed and ignored. These results are consistent with Moyo’s (2009) analysis of CNN’s coverage of the 2008 Zimbabwe elections, in which then president Robert Mugabe was reduced to a stock master-villain character, while Western media coverage carefully avoided competing polysemic representations of reality and historical context that would muddy this familiar portrayal of third-world corruption. The findings of the current research project demonstrate the disturbing manner in which colonial tropes of modernity, progress, and civil society emerge in the branding of the savage Other as barbaric, poverty-ridden, and destitute. Importantly, this process is accomplished at the expense of ignoring and omitting stories that contradict this carefully constructed narrative in order to promote a sympathetic (in this case, Western) gaze toward slum children crying out to be “rescued” from their “squalid” circumstances. Indeed, recent postcolonial works have called for a close examination of colonial history, as well as its role in the subtle mechanisms that maintain the subjugation of postcolonial states in an era touted for globalization, multiculturalism, and diversity (Grossberg, 2002; Hegde & Shome, 2002; Moyo, 2009; Obijiofor, 2009). As pointed out by Wasserman (2009):

> Although globalization does not equal imperialism, the process of globalization cannot be fully understood without understanding the history of colonialism and its persistent legacies . . . It is therefore necessary to link our view of contemporary global media architectures, markets and flows with the history of colonialism and decolonization; the persistent patterns of domination and exclusion with colonial and postcolonial discourse; and refuse an ahistorical approach to the challenge for equitable and ethical global media. (p. 5)

In this manner, discourses that suppress the complex reality of modern Indian society—for instance, the vital interdependence that exists between politicians, social
workers, slum dwellers, and corporate sectors—are invoked to rearticulate the two children within familiar Orientalist tropes of vulnerability, deviance, and destitution. The result is the preservation of the “narrative of European modernity” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 256)—and, I would add, prosperity—that undermines the emerging global identity of a previously colonized region and its peoples. One can only imagine the economic and political repercussions of this signification process, whereby the liberated postcolonial subject is subjugated, packaged, and mediated as an inferior and needy being, deserving and desirous of Western intervention.

A more disturbing discovery concerns the manner in which the two children were reduced to little more than empty signifiers within larger exploitative structures of capitalism and consumption. Within the non-Indian sphere, they became symbols that justified a Western interventionist strategy to deliver them from harm and exploitation, thereby upholding Orientalist discourses that fetishize non-Western women and children (Hooks, 2006; Lalvani, 1995). The overwhelming focus on childhood tragedy and exploitation obscures more sinister discursive strategies that deny and misrepresent the sociopolitical realities of the Indian urban context. Azharuddin and Rubina ceased to exist as real-world and tangible people with complex and contradictory subjectivities. Instead, they were adopted and appropriated into promotional strategies that provided Western audiences with a distorted representation of their circumstances that mirrored the Slumdog narrative—and by extension, affirmed the corruption and exploitation portrayed in the film narrative. In Indian spaces, the children served as tokenist signifiers to represent the reward and recognition that is seemingly accessible to all Indian citizens—slum dwellers or otherwise. Within this context, their meteoric rise to fame mirrored the rags-to-riches journey of Jamal Malik (Slumdog’s protagonist), affirming the narrative’s happy ending. They thus functioned as symbols of success and redemption, and a useful means whereby state government authorities could wash their hands of the embarrassing issue of poverty. Slumdog’s gritty portrayal of street children and beggars in Indian cities undermines the modern glossy makeover that India is struggling to project in international circles—an image that complements its aggressive urbanization and economic development over the last two decades. A discursive battle is therefore being waged between the former colonizer and the formerly colonized, in a manner reminiscent of the Indian struggle against imperialist rule to establish an independent identity. Azharuddin and Rubina’s triumphs in international and domestic spheres were therefore a means by which Indian authorities could refute and retaliate against this “attack” on the narrative of modernization and technological progress.

Although this research focused on press portrayals of Slumdog’s two child stars—and thus investigated barely a fraction of the publicity enveloping this popular media text—it opens up opportunities for further investigation, including the ways in which original Indian texts are “tamed” and “neutered” to make them more appealing to international (primarily Western) palates (Hutnyk, 2000; Khushu-Lahiri & Rao, 2008). For instance, Slumdog contains several significant departures from the original novel Q&A (Swarup, 2005), the most significant of these being the fact that the
protagonist does not grow up in the slums at all. Instead, he is adopted by a British priest and later develops friendships with Australian diplomats, prominent businessmen, and fading movie stars. It is intriguing that these significant interactions with affluent and powerful figures were excluded in the movie adaptation—an issue that prompts critical reflection regarding the motivations of the screenwriter and filmmakers behind altering the hero’s background to commodify and accentuate his neediness and poverty. The current project provides a compelling argument for the manner in which Orientalist and Western interventionist discourses combine to increase the vulnerability and dependency of “Third World” populations, while simultaneously depriving them of self-empowerment and agency. It is therefore crucial that postcolonial scholars continue to provide “a historical and international depth to the understanding of cultural power” (Shome & Hegde, 2002, p. 252) and interrogate the processes whereby channels of salvation uphold long-standing systems of inequality and oppression.

Notes
[2] One of the main drawbacks of this study was that it did not examine regional newspapers. It is likely that many of these outlets would have carried significantly different themes from the English news dailies in India. In addition, I did not examine broadcast media reports or blogs, which again may have yielded more diverse themes and findings. However, the three Indian newspapers included in this study comprise a significant segment of the English readership in India, and also represent reactions from three different parts of the country.
[3] Roche, E. (2009, February 28). One minute he’s the toast of Tinseltown, the next he’s nursing a sore ear from dad.

References
Dad Slaps Slumdog Kid; Renuka Frowns in Delhi (2009, March 1). The Times of India.


For Son Launch, Producer Turns to *Slumdog* Kids. (2009, March 5). *Indian Express*.


Iyer, R. (2009, January 30). Kids haven’t been left to slum it out. *The Times of India*.


