

Cultural dimensions in slumdog millionaire

Environment, Air



Slumdog Millionaire is a movie that invokes various cultures at work within India including Muslim/Hindu tensions, British colonialism and American pop culture in the form of the framing device of an American game show. Based on an Indian novel, the movie also adds another layer of cultural bias when it is based on Oliver Twist. Furthermore, there is a class structure in the movie that contrasts the poverty of the protagonist with the game show of the middle class existence. Even within the poor culture, there is a subculture of crime that is respected by the members of the poor class, but is largely ignored by the middle and upper class people. The criminals in Slumdog Millionaire are similar to the Ryan Reynolds character in Adventureland. He is the repairman for all the rides and among the teenage workers who are working at the place for their summer jobs, he is the highest class member of the fair. Yet, among his peers he has low status.

According to Edward Hall, culture is “ an unconscious framework of shared meaning which makes communication possible but makes intercultural conflict inevitable.” (Shaules, 2007, p. 27) The screens of intercultural knowledge are constantly being challenged in this film as Dev Patel’s Jamal is being asked how he could know certain things, while being ignorant of simple cultural artifacts. However, one of the things that makes the film fascinating for American audiences is how some of these cultural artifacts are more familiar even if they are the more complicated questions.

Early in the movie, Jamal flubs the question for the national emblem of India and the police chief notes that his five year old daughter could answer the question. Jamal responds by asking about the cost of certain food in his neighborhood and other questions that the police cannot answer. When they

cannot answer, he replies that even five year olds in this particular place know these answers. As a child of the slums, he is ignorant of certain cultural artifacts and very cognizant of others.

In fact the whole movie is informed by the cultural artifacts of India, which includes the shared experiences of going to the movies and the distance between tourists and Indians at the Taj Mahal. At the end, the fact that Jamal's girlfriend does not know the name of the three musketeers is very indicative of the way that culture behaves in a covert manner that allows for people to know cultural tropes without knowing their origins or contexts.

Hofstede's five dimensions are important in discussing this movie.

Power/Distance is very much a part of the culture of this movie and it even frames the movie since Jamal's performance at the Indian version of Who Wants to be a Millionaire is distrusted due to the fact that he is on a lower strata in the social order. He is a Muslim who grew up in the slums and early in his life he was orphaned. Even his brother Salim has reached a higher scale on the P/D by proving himself to be more vicious than Jamal.

Hofstede's second dimension of Individualism (IDV) is more interesting in the context of this movie because India has a low individualism with many relations being based on caste and family ties and community. " This refers to the strength of the ties people have to others within the community. A high IDV score indicates a loose connection with people. In countries with a high IDV score there is a lack of interpersonal connection and little sharing of responsibility, beyond family and perhaps a few close friends." (Mind Tools, 2013) Yet, Jamal is forced by circumstances to work in a highly individualized

framework. Throughout the movie, he is cut off from his family and friends. His mother is killed in the Bombay riots and his brother continues to betray him even as the woman that he loves is sold into sexual slavery. Hofstede's "Masculinity" dimension is an interesting one but it seems to be arbitrary and based on Western gender roles from the 1950s.

As a movie for Western audiences, the more sensitive Jamal is the hero of the movie even though he is much less traditionally masculine than his brother. His brother is the one that shoots people and dominates many situations. Selling his girlfriend into sexual slavery is portrayed as something that is sad, but also something that seems reasonable given the circumstances. India is in the midst of a national dialogue concerning gender roles, with two gang rapes happening to women who dared to board buses.

The Uncertainty/Avoidance Index is depicted in the train scene when the brothers are stealing food and doing everything that they can do to make money and live. They are con artists who are always hustling and the MIA song on the soundtrack provides an undertone of excitement. India is in a time of great transition and its ability to accept change and risk has allowed it to welcome a great economic recovery. The brothers in this scene become metaphors for the Indian economic culture of innovation and change.

However, India is still a culture that has a high UAI on a structural basis.

I am actually not sure why Hofstede suggests that people communicate with UAI cultures by expressing their emotions through hand gestures and raised voices. It seems like a stereotype that covers people who come from hot-

weather climates like Italians, Jews and Arabs with the joke “ what do you call a broken hand? A speech impediment” attached.

Finally Long Term Orientation is one of the major forces in the movie, where the absence of family is a tragedy and the characters replace their mother with gangsters. Even though the movie is about Jamal’s self-actualization, his happy ending involves forming a family unit with his childhood crush and then dancing a Bollywood group dance number.

There are several cultural identities that Jamal has throughout the movie. He is Indian but he is also poverty stricken. His Muslim cultural identity emerges in the Bombay riots when his mother is killed by Hindu radicals. The cultural bias of the Hindus is at its most extreme and deadly at this point. Cultural bias is also apparent in the opening question where Jamal knows the face on the hundred dollar bill even though he doesn’t know Indian currency. Jamal knows the \$100 bill because he is in the subculture of begging and has come in contact with western currency more than Indian money.

Cultural patterns are the interrelated cultural traits that are put forth in a culture. “ the Westerners are assumed to be members of low-context cultures, and need direct and explicit verbal messages because they share little background information or context. And they have strong orientations to value individualism, equality and assertiveness in their social interaction and interpersonal communication. The Easterners, on the other hand, are believed to be high-context, and do not require much in-depth background information since most of the information is already in the individuals. And they, due to their history and tradition, tend to respect collectivism,

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hierarchy and interpersonal harmony in the society.” (Qingxue, 2003) In one scene the brothers show two tourists the impoverished area of India while a group of children steal everything in their car. The scene has a rather obvious payoff when the tourists see that their car is robbed and Jamal says “ You wanted to see the real India. Here it is.” The tourists respond by stating that they are real Americans and then give him money.

When Jamal and his brother are reunited, Jamal and his brother talk about the gangster from the slum. Jamal is speaking to him but Salim is looking away and smoking. The verbal communication reinforces the family bond since Salim is not allowing Jamal not to get away. In the next scene Jamal watches Salim as he prays, goes to work and acts like he owns everything. Jamal leads him to his childhood lover as an adult. An interesting part about the scene where Jamal is praying is that it serves as a non-intentional communication with Jawad.

For the most part, this movie fits in with the co-cultural theory in which the major leaders of India are the American businesses and cultural mavens who are communicating with the Indian business leaders and authorities.

Meanwhile there is an entire culture of India that is not viewed by the dominant members of society and this subculture of crime and poverty has its own cultural tropes and patterns that are not necessarily the India that most tourists will see. The “ real India” scene is fascinating in that it provides the one insight that those Americans will have of India and they choose to throw money at it.

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