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Is Slumdog Millionaire a Retelling of the Ramayana?

Abstract

Is a banner with a picture of Rama and Sita on it and the word, “*Ramayana*,” the only link between the film *Slumdog Millionaire* and the great Hindu epic? In this paper we explore elements in the film that correspond to elements in the *Ramayana*. There is no one-to-one correlation, and some relationships between the two are, in fact, mirror images. However, there are enough correlations and influences to suggest that the film might be considered a retelling of the *Ramayana*. We also acknowledge though that there are also features of the film that some would find offensive and that would lead them to reject this idea that *Slumdog Millionaire* is a retelling of the epic.

Keywords

Hinduism, Ramayana

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One of the most famous and popular stories in Indian culture is the story of Rama and Sita as told in the *Ramayana*. In North India, the festival of *divali* celebrates the return of Rama from exile and the taking of his rightful place as the king of Kosala. When the Indian state-owned television channel produced the story in serial form, millions of Indians were glued to their television sets to follow the adventures of Rama and Sita each week.

The *Ramayana* is one of two great epics in Hinduism (Sanatana Dharma).¹ The poet and sage Valmiki is credited with its composition in Sanskrit, with dates for this oral composition ranging widely from the fifteenth to the fourth century BCE. Tradition regards the *Ramayana* as *itihasa*, or history, as well as epic story, a repository of sacred stories, instructions on ideal behavior and rule, and, perhaps most importantly, as a source of teaching about *dharma* (righteousness, truth, duty). It is also one of the world's great love stories.

Perhaps because of the *Ramayana*'s length, and as an indication of its great popularity, different versions of the *Ramayana* exist, although the main points of the story generally correspond. A story-teller or teacher will decide what portions of the story he/she will tell depending on personal preferences, adherence to tradition, and the needs or interests of listeners. In such a manner, the *Ramayana* spread throughout India, Southeast Asia and eventually the world. It is told in many languages and in many forms, including dance, drama, and music. Many

paintings and sculptures also represent central figures or portions of the *Ramayana*. In more recent years, the *Ramayana* has been depicted in film and television,² as well as on the Internet.³

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Rama, his brother Lakshmana and Rama's wife Sita. Rama is the son of Dasharatha, the ruler of Kosala. Rama himself is certainly a heroic figure but, beyond this, he is most importantly an *avatar*, an incarnation of the great Hindu *deva* (god) Vishnu. Vishnu is known as the preserver of *dharma* (proper conduct, law, righteousness). Tradition tells us that whenever *dharma* runs low, Vishnu takes some form of incarnation to restore it.⁴ In the time of Rama, *dharma* has indeed run low. Demons disrupt the sacrifices of sages and priests. Whole areas of land lie in devastation, although the kingdom of Kosala and especially the capital of Ayodhya are themselves in good order. The crucial problem is a ten-headed demon named Ravana who, with his brothers, has acquired tremendous power through the practice of *tapas* (austerities) and who is now threatening even the *devas* themselves. In order to restore *dharma*, Ravana must be defeated, so Vishnu takes the form of a human being, Rama. As Ravana never sought protective powers against something so seemingly lowly as a human being, Vishnu's incarnation as a human represents the only chance to defeat him.

Rama and his brother Lakshmana receive the tutelage of Sage Vishvamitra and, even as young boys, they begin the process of righting the world and

restoring *dharma*. When he is a young man, Rama sees, falls in love with, and wins the hand of, Sita, the beautiful daughter of King Janaka, the ruler of Mithila. Sita is more than a beautiful and strong princess though. She is the daughter of Mother Earth and an incarnation of the *devi* (goddess) Lakshmi, who is the goddess of fortune, prosperity and beauty. Lakshmi is also the consort of Vishnu. It is therefore destiny that Rama and Sita fall in love and become united on earth.

When the elderly King Dasharatha decides to give up his throne, he chooses Rama to be the next king. Rama, as the eldest son, is the rightful heir to the throne. He is also popular among the people of Kosala and his selection as successor to Dasharatha is welcomed by the people of the land. However, Dasharatha had four sons by three wives, and Dasharatha's wife Kaikeyi wants her own son to become the next king. In the past, when Kaikeyi helped him in a difficult time, Dasharatha granted her two boons of her choosing. Kaikeyi now calls upon Dasharatha to give her these boons: first, the exile of Rama from Ayodhya for fourteen years; and second, for Dasharatha to name her son Bharata as king. While Dasharatha becomes distraught at the thought of granting these boons, the keeping of vows is of utmost importance, so he banishes Rama and names Bharata as king. Shocked by the thought of his son, Rama, living in the woods for fourteen years of exile, Dasharatha falls into a swoon and dies.

Rama leaves Ayodhya and, despite his urging them to stay, is joined in exile by Sita and Lakshmana. Rama accepts his banishment with equanimity, as

obedience to parents is of greater importance than following one's own wishes and desires. Bharata, however, becomes dismayed at his mother's machinations, and follows Rama into the forest, trying to persuade him to return and be king. Rama refuses and Bharata returns to Ayodhya to act as regent for the duration of Rama's exile.

While Rama, Sita and Lakshmana are in exile, Ravana, the ruler of Lanka, hears about the beauty of Sita from his sister, Shurpanakha. Immediately infatuated with Sita's beauty, Ravana devises a plan to kidnap her. Maricha (Mareecha), Ravana's uncle, disguises himself as a golden deer, which Sita begs Rama to pursue. Rama leaves Lakshmana to protect Sita, but when they hear something sounding like Rama's cries for help, Sita tells Lakshmana to go and help Rama. While both are away, Ravana disguises himself as an ascetic and persuades Sita to come out from her protective refuge. Once this happens, Ravana reverts to form, seizes Sita and takes her back to Lanka, where she is held captive. During Sita's time in captivity, she refuses to succumb to either Ravana's advances or his attempts to terrorize her.

Once Rama becomes aware of Sita's kidnapping, he and Lakshmana set off to rescue her. In doing so, they encounter hardship and adventure. Rama also gains the respect and devotion of the *deva* Hanuman. Hanuman helps Rama find Sita in Lanka. A great battle takes place and Ravana is eventually defeated. Rama and Sita are re-united and Rama returns to be the rightful ruler of Kosala.⁵

The *Ramayana* is popular for many reasons. It certainly offers an epic story of love and adventure. Beyond that though, Rama provides us with an excellent role model for most of the epic. He represents important values in Indian culture, namely performance of one's *dharma*, but he also represents values that are shared with other cultures as well. Such values, exemplified by Rama, include: keeping one's vows, even if the consequences for oneself are painful; obedience to one's parents; and respecting one's elders and teachers. Rama is kind, exhibits perseverance, is full of devotion, and ultimately remains committed to his mission or task even when facing obstacles and difficulties. Perhaps the most important value in a cross-cultural context is his overcoming of evil in an effort to bring peace and justice to the land. Returning to the Hindu context, as the incarnation of Vishnu, Rama is destined to defeat Ravana, overcome evil and restore *dharma*. Thus Rama's destiny is an important part of the epic.

***Slumdog Millionaire*: mirroring the *Ramayana*?**

Why would someone see the film *Slumdog Millionaire* as a retelling of the *Ramayana*? Jamal (Dev Patel), the protagonist, is a boy from the slums of Mumbai—a “slumdog” and not the son of a king. He serves tea to those who work in a Mumbai phone center. He makes his way onto a popular television show, *Who Wants to be a Millionaire*, in the hopes that his long lost love, Latika

(Freida Pinto), will see him and come to him. The host of the show, Prem Kumar (Anil Kapoor), believes that Jamal is cheating and has him arrested and tortured in order to discover how Jamal has been cheating. When the police come to believe that Jamal is not a cheater, he returns to the show and wins 20 million rupees. Latika is watching the show and does come to be with Jamal in the end. In this synopsis there does not seem to be much parallel to the *Ramayana*. Furthermore, in the film Jamal and his brother Salim are, at least nominally, Muslim. The director of the film, Danny Boyle, is not even Indian. How could this modern film then, in any way, reflect the *Ramayana*?

Mirrors offer a way of understanding *Slumdog Millionaire* as a modern retelling of the *Ramayana*. At the historical level, the intertwining of Hindu and Muslim histories began by the eighth century CE in India. Through centuries marked by periods of communal strife as well as relative harmony, the two traditions became both separate yet seemingly irrevocably linked, like a face and its image in a mirror. The movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, directed by Danny Boyle and Indian film director Loveleen Tandan, draws some of its power from reflecting the complexity of India's history and present diversity.

For screenwriter Simon Beaufoy, the film *Slumdog Millionaire* in a way reflects the city of Mumbai itself. In the novel *Q&A* upon which the movie was loosely based, the main character's name is Ram Mohammad Thomas, reflecting the author Vikas Swarup's desire to have his character represent an "Indian

everyman, one who sounded as though he was Hindu, Muslim and Christian.”⁶

Screenwriter Simon Beaufoy and the directors changed the name of this character. In the film, Jamal K. Malik and his brother Salim are clearly Muslim, although Salim, interestingly, is the only character in the film who engages in some overt form of religious practice. Toward the end of the film he prays before leaving to make a hit as a gangster. It is also Salim who, while dying in a hail of bullets, murmurs "God is great." For Jamal's part, if anything, the main character is understandably bitter about religion, "If it wasn't for Ram and Allah, I would still have a mother," he says at one point. The death of his mother by a Hindu mob yelling "They're Muslim, get them!" means that Jamal can answer a key question about the Hindu *deva* (god) Rama on the quiz show that provides the frame for *Slumdog's* story. However, the linkages between Hindu and Muslim, between the movie and the great Hindu epic the *Ramayana* are much deeper than this. As the talk show host Prem Kumar (Anil Kapoor) comments in the film, "Religion! Interesting!"

Beyond the main character's name and background, *Slumdog* differs in a number of significant ways from the novel, and these differences serve not only to make the movie plot, in Swarup's own words, "riveting," but also to create a love story, very different from the novel.⁷ Simon Beaufoy, the screenwriter, remarks "I realise that the tone of *Slumdog Millionaire* wasn't in the end created by us film-makers but by the city [Mumbai] itself. We were infused by a people that

celebrate life unconditionally, in all its joys and hardships.”⁸ History, along with the great Hindu epics that are part of history, deeply influence the people of Mumbai, the *masala* (Bollywood) and art house movies made there, and now the non-Indian and Indian film-makers and audiences who immerse themselves in Mumbai's people and stories. Specifically, the love story of the movie, of Mumbai, is not the western "Romeo and Juliet," but rather Rama and Sita. And this love story has a long history in film.

The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* exerted their influence on Indian film-makers from 1913 onward:

The important link that exists between the two epics and mainstream Indian cinema can...be usefully understood in terms of the idea of communication. The epics were transmitted orally and were closely related to ritual and folk performance. Being at the core of Indian culture, they found articulation in a variety of ways and forms in local narratives. What this promoted was the proliferation of diverse narratives and performances within the solidly established matrix of the epics....The discourse of the Indian popular cinema, as with the epics, has its basic text, and the different movies that are made can be likened to the diverse epic performances and narratives.⁹

Thus, when Beaufoy went to Mumbai to find how he might adapt *Q&A* into a screenplay, he “looked at the culture around him to find his answer.”¹⁰ This culture around him he describes as “a very passionate place, a very romantic place.”¹¹ It is also a place steeped in various re-tellings, cinematic and otherwise, of the *Ramayana*. We may, therefore, regard *Slumdog's* narrative and characters

as a recent, largely outsider, recounting of the epic which, despite notable modern variations in plot, is nonetheless within the custom of performance variations regarding epic tales and influences drawn from those epics.

Turning now to the film itself, despite specific differences such as those previously noted, there are also significant, although not exact, elements that parallel or alternatively, mirror-like, reflect those in the *Ramayana*. First and foremost, there is the general plot of *Slumdog Millionaire*, revolving, like the *Ramayana*, around a love story, adventures, and the relationship between brothers. From this perspective, the story is about Jamal, who is accompanied on a series of adventures by his brother, Salim. Jamal falls in love with Latika—the most beautiful girl in the world—who is then kidnapped and held against her will first by Maman, who exploits her for his own profit, and then by the slum gangster, Javed, who takes Latika as his girlfriend. The brothers then pursue Latika. They save her from her kidnapper—in this case represented by both Maman and Javed—and destroy these evil beings. In the end, justice is served and, similar to the *Ramayana*, there is a happy ending, albeit somewhat clouded with loss and sacrifice. A case can thus be made that there are at least general parallels here between Rama and Jamal, Lakshmana and Salim, Sita and Latika, Maman, Javed and Ravana.¹²

One potential challenge to this interpretation is the complex character of Salim. Often in *Slumdog*, Salim does act as a protective, brave and faithful

brother, thereby inviting some comparison to Lakshmana in the *Ramayana*. However, Salim does not possess Lakshmana's unremittingly loyal, steadfast and upright character. Indeed, Salim acts inappropriately toward Latika on several occasions. He lets go of Latika's hand as they try to escape from Maman by jumping on a train and consequently, she is recaptured. Later in the film, once they have found Latika again, Salim does help Jamal save Latika from Maman by killing Maman, thereby destroying one evil villain. Unfortunately, Salim also takes Latika for his own, forces away Jamal, then turns Latika over to the next villain, Javed. But again, later in the film when Jamal makes contact with Salim again, Salim helps to reunite his brother and Latika. He helps Latika escape from Javed and expresses sorrow for the wrong things he has done. Salim, at the cost of his own life, then kills Javed, destroying evil in the process. Salim's character is therefore strikingly mirror-like. By the end of the film, he has religion on his lips, but has acted in ways contrary to most religious tenets. Like Lakshmana he is a loyal brother, but he is also the reverse—in his betrayals of both Jamal and Latika, as well as his willing association with Javed, he becomes closer to the figure of the kidnapper/monster Ravana. Unlike Lakshmana, he does not survive, but like Ravana, in some versions of the *Ramayana*, there is perhaps a sense of this complex being finding release or even betterment and peace through death.¹³

Other linkages to the *Ramayana* are more apparent, although again bearing differences. In the *Ramayana* there is but one main kidnapper, Ravana. In

Slumdog, there are two kidnappers. But both kidnappers are killed, leading to the sense that, while justice and peace might not be restored to society in general, at least liberation from the kidnappers will result in a better life for those who are freed from their control. Indeed, by portraying the abuse and mistreatment of children, the filmmakers provide us with a powerful portrayal of *adharma*, the chaos and evil that is the antithesis of *dharma*, as well as the necessity to defeat and remove those who perpetrate acts of *adharma*.

The connections between Latika and Sita are rather clear and, at first, seem straightforward. Latika, like Sita, is very beautiful and the element of her destined relationship with Jamal is strong throughout (see below). Much like Sita's time of captivity in Lanka, while held captive by Maman, Latika somehow remains untouched. She is not raped, mutilated, or forced into regular brothel life as would be expected. Later however, Latika suffers and, in a sense, perhaps this is her own "trial by fire." Instead of a simple reunion with Jamal after the years with Maman and a happy ending at that point, Latika endures a life under the domination of Javed. However, here some complexity creeps in to comparisons with Sita. During this time with Javed, Latika, who is no longer untouched, to all intents and purposes gives up, succumbs to the situation. In this instance, we have a mirror or *opposing* image of Sita. Interestingly, as if to signify this, the house where Latika lives with Javed is full of mirrors and reflections. When Jamal, after many years, encounters her there, Latika is at first unwilling to

believe in Jamal's dream of a better life together and is too frightened to leave with Jamal and live on, as he says, "love." Finally, with Salim's help, Latika does successfully flee to safety and Jamal. Perhaps, in the end, Latika's character, like Salim's, reflects more subtlety than at first appears. Latika is more than the beautiful, kidnapped female in need of rescue. By showing her beauty, devotion and purity as well as her time of despair and abuse, her role in the film can indicate the presence of what is highest in us as human beings, how this can be stripped away in life, and the need for rescue—whether through love, divine power, or some other means. In the end, both Sita and Latika are more nuanced figures than people often realize.

But what of the central character, Jamal, and any potential correspondences with the figure of Rama? Once again, on the surface we have a mirror, or contrary, image. As we noted above, Rama is a prince who becomes a righteous king. He is also a *deva*, a god, the *avatar* (incarnation) of Vishnu, preserver of *dharma*. Jamal, in contrast, is a "slumdog" and born into a Muslim family. Given these enormous differences, it is understandable why many Hindus would strongly reject comparisons, such as we are doing here, between *Slumdog Millionaire* and the *Ramayana*, Jamal and Lord Rama.¹⁴ If we move beyond these surface comparisons though, some possible points of correspondence arise.

Jamal is not the great warrior that Rama is, but he shows the same persistence in achieving his aims. Jamal is clever, learns from experience, applies

that learning successfully and, in the end prevails, as does Rama. Both Jamal and Rama fall deeply in love, lose the woman/girl they love to kidnapers, pursue that love, suffer a host of adventures, trials and tribulations, then are reunited with their destined love. Indeed, one reason people find both the *Ramayana* and *Slumdog* so inspirational is because of this message that devotion and love conquer all.

There are other, more subtle, similarities as well. We find the theme of exile, whether due to education or necessity, in both the film and the epic. In the *Ramayana*, Sage Vishvmitra takes the young Rama and Lakshmana from home. Together they visit certain sites and the Sage tells them about the history of each place. Rama also has a chance to prove his intelligence, strength and bravery in these places. Jamal and Salim, for their part, go to Agra and learn not only to survive, but also learn about human nature, customs and money. They master these particular lessons with great success and the experiences they have mean that Jamal can later answer the quiz show questions correctly. Granted, Jamal and Salim live by their wits and, one might argue, in a lawless manner—a striking contrast to the moral rectitude of Rama and Lakshmana. Yet survival is necessary to eventually find Latika again. Furthermore, while lacking any adult guidance or formal teaching (let alone a Sage), Jamal gains a kind of knowledge that even the police inspector later admits is “bizarrely plausible.” The nature of this knowledge—the application of which is so wonderfully demonstrated through the

quiz show in the film—is based upon experience, inference and memory. Traditional Indian *pramanas* (valid forms of knowledge) include *pratyaksha* (direct perception) and *anumana* (inference), with *smrti* (memory), as well as application of knowledge, playing a vital role in the learning process. In difficult circumstances, Jamal nonetheless educates himself and this poses a problem for those in modern authoritative positions who encounter him, namely the game show host, police inspector and police officer, all of whom would be more accustomed to Western style values in education. “Professors, doctors, lawyers, never get beyond 60,000 rupees,” says the inspector, “What the hell can a slumdog possibly know?” “The answers,” Jamal replies, “I knew the answers.” As India increasingly embraces Western-style education and values, pursuing this line of analysis toward the film adds an intriguing, even subversive, counterpoint: a “slumdog” employs merely two or three aspects of traditional Indian education and succeeds where all the others with their modern, i.e. Western, learning fail.¹⁵

The other exile in the *Ramayana* of course takes place when Rama must leave the kingdom for fourteen years. Jamal and Salim, as well as Latika, are exiled early in the film because they lose their mother and have no other relatives to take care of them. By the end of the film, Jamal is eighteen years old. If we place his approximate age at four when his mother is killed by mob violence, we could conclude that his ‘exile’ also lasts for fourteen years. At the end of this period, just as Rama’s return to Ayodhya is celebrated by crowds, so also, after

winning the quiz show, Jamal is celebrated and cheered on by his people—the common people for whom the show represents “a chance to escape” and to “walk into another life.”

The *Ramayana* is ultimately a scripture about *dharma*, with Rama setting a moral example for all who read or hear the story. In *Slumdog* Jamal, despite his circumstances, is also a moral and remarkably honest person. He does not lie, even when tortured. When Jamal accuses the police inspector of thinking that he is a liar because he is from the slums, the inspector replies, “But you’re not a liar, Mr. Malik, that’s for sure. You’re too truthful.” Even the interrogator must admit that Jamal is an honest man, thereby highlighting his virtue.

The quiz show itself provides more examples of Jamal’s honesty, the film’s links with the *Ramayana*, and the use of mirrors or reflective images as a method to reveal these. One of the questions the game show host asks is, “In depictions of the God Rama, he is famously holding what in his right hand?” Of all the possible questions that Jamal might have been asked, that he is asked about Rama suggests that Rama is important to the film. When Jamal gives the correct answer—a bow and arrow—to the question he has to later explain to the police inspector how he knew the answer. In an early indication of *Slumdog Millionaire*’s links to the *Ramayana*, communal tensions erupt and the slum in which young Jamal lives is attacked. While running away from the assailants, Jamal comes face to face with his mirror image—a boy of his own age, dressed as

Rama. In the Indian tradition, there are standard iconic representations of *devas* and *devis*. In Rama's case, and the child in the film reflects this, he holds a bow and wears a sheath of arrows, while the *mudra* (ritual gesture) of his hand indicates that there should be no fear or danger. The two boys, Jamal and this boy dressed as Rama, with identical height and expression, stare at each other before the moment ends and Jamal runs. The experience allows Jamal to later correctly answer the question, while offering an intense moment of linkage between Jamal and Rama, subject and reflected image, which is simultaneously similar and opposite.

We find another example of these linkages when Jamal finally finds Latika, who is living with Javed. Who Wants To Be A Millionaire is playing on the television in the background and the question being asked of another contestant is: "Which of these is a small chain of islands connecting India and Sri Lanka?" Taken by itself this moment in the film does not do much to show a parallel between Slumdog and the *Ramayana*, but with the other elements of the film, and particularly since Ravana, in the epic, is the king of Lanka, this moves from unrelated background noise to another sign that elements of the *Ramayana* are present in the film.

As noted above, destiny is an important part of the *Ramayana*. Since Rama is an incarnation of Vishnu and Sita an incarnation of Lakshmi, they are destined to be together on earth. Even though Rama carries out his actions as a human, it

is his *dharma* that he should live and behave as he does. Overly simplistic interpretations of destiny, *dharma* and karma result in the sense, and criticism, that choice or freedom of will therefore do not exist. Rather, and the *Ramayana* provides ample illustration of this, people, conditioned by their past, have the choice to fulfill their *dharma* or to deviate from it. At any point, Rama could deviate from his *dharma*, but, by choice, he does not. In *Slumdog*, Jamal faces many times when he could abandon Latika, resort to violence, submit to difficult circumstances, cheat, or even simply pursue his winnings for the sole sake of their material value. He chooses not to do any of these, thereby showing that what is “written” or “destined” actually relies throughout on the *choice* to do the right thing in multiple circumstances. The most obvious examples from the movie, admittedly, seem much more simplistic than this interpretation leading some, considering Jamal’s agency throughout the film, to criticize the emphasis on destiny.¹⁶ However, the more nuanced interplay between *dharma*, destiny and choice, almost always present in Sanskrit epic literature, helps us understand what would otherwise be its awkward or heavy-handed presence in the film.

Early in the film, the following words appear on the screen: “Jamal Malik is one question away from winning 20 million rupees. How did he do it? A. He cheated. B. He’s lucky. C. He’s a genius. D. It is written.” Since Jamal has not cheated, is not lucky and, despite being clever, is not a genius, the answer that we,

the audience, are to select is “D. It is written,” thereby setting the tone of destiny for the rest of the movie.

The theme of destiny continues in interactions between Prem, the game show host, and Jamal. When Jamal tells Prem that he does not know the answer to one of the quiz questions, Prem tries to talk Jamal into going forward with the game, presumably in the hopes that Jamal will lose the money he has already won. During a bathroom break, Prem seemingly encourages Jamal by telling him, “Maybe it’s written, my friend.” In another use of mirror images, Prem writes the answer to the next question in the steam on the bathroom mirror. Jamal sees this answer, but refuses to use it because that would be cheating. Back on the show, Prem whispers to Jamal, “Do the right thing and in approximately three minutes you’ll be as famous as me. And as rich as me. Almost.” Then he adds, “Relax. It’s your destiny.” Given that Prem has supplied Jamal with the incorrect answer, this is one of the the ironic uses of destiny in the film.¹⁷ Jamal however chooses the answer that is different from the one Prem wrote, and it turns out to be correct. Again, by *choosing* to do the right thing, Jamal actually fulfills his destiny, that which is “written.” Agency and destiny coexist.

Ultimately, for Jamal the point of winning the game show is to regain contact with Latika and to find a way to be together in a safe and happy life. This, Jamal believes, is their destiny and this sense of destiny motivates him throughout the years. When Jamal and Salim find Latika working for Maman and they

manage to escape to an abandoned hotel, Jamal says to Latika, “I knew I’d find you in the end. It’s our destiny.” Latika responds with just one word: “Destiny.” Finally, at the end of the film, when Jamal and Latika meet up on the platform of the railway station, having defeated all the villains and having brought celebration to all people, Jamal says to Latika, “This is our destiny.” As they kiss, the words “D. It is written,” appear. Destiny, therefore, is a significant element in the film, yet it is not an element that leads to passivity, to merely letting fate have its course. Rather, the path to actually fulfilling one’s destiny, as in the *Ramayana*, involves tremendous courage, tenacity, moral righteousness and love. To do what is right is a difficult path, even when it is “written” or “destined.” Through the actions of Rama in the *Ramayana* and Jamal in *Slumdog*, we see the difficulty, necessity and ultimately the rewards of following this path.

Perhaps the most explicit reference to the *Ramayana* in *Slumdog Millionaire* comes at the very end of the film. The filmmakers include a Bollywood-style song and dance number on the train platform. As the credits run, Freida Pinto, Dev Patel and other members of the cast and crew joyfully dance to the song *Jai Ho*. As the two main actors finish dancing, they walk hand in hand away from the camera underneath a banner that was partially obscured before this. The banner has images of Rama and Sita on it with the words “*Ramayana*” written across. This is the moment that most clearly supports our perspective that there are numerous parallels between *Slumdog Millionaire* and the *Ramayana*, the epic

scripture whose influence and inspiration extends from ancient times to modern, from India to the world.

¹ The other epic is the *Mahabharata*, which is the world's longest poem. The well-known *Bhagavad-Gita* is a tiny excerpt from the *Mahabharata*.

² For example, two modern film versions come from Subhash Ghai (one of the most successful directors of the current generation in India) whose film *Ram-Lakhan* (1989) draws upon themes from the *Ramayana*, while, more controversially, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) offers a Western woman's perspective on the epic.

³ The British Library offers a brief, Flash version of the *Ramayana* at <http://www.bl.uk/learning/cult/sacred/stories/>. Readers who are unfamiliar with the *Ramayana* can get an overview of the story at this site. For those interested in reading the *Ramayana*, C. Rajagopalachari's *The Ramayana by Valmiki* (Laurier Books, 2001) is an excellent translation.

⁴ See, for example, *Bhagavad-Gita* 4.7.

⁵ What happens after this varies in versions of the *Ramayana*.

⁶ Jeffries, Stuart. "I'm the Luckiest Novelist in the World". *The Guardian*. January 16, 2009. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/jan/16/danny-boyle-india>.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Beaufoy, Simon. "Life on the Hard Shoulder." *The Guardian*. December 12, 2008. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/dec/12/simon-beaufoy-slumdog-millionaire>.

⁹ Gokulsing, Moti K., and Wimal Dissanayake. *Indian Popular Cinema: A Narrative of Cultural Change*. Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Stylus Publishing, 2004, p. 20.

¹⁰ Voynar, Kim. "Consider the Source: Simon Beaufoy's Adaptation of *Slumdog Millionaire*." Accessed 14 September 2015. www.moviecitynews.com/columnists/voynar/2008/08119.html.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Such general comparisons between the plot of the film and the *Ramayana* have been made by others. See, for example, Alfred Collins' article, "Salaam *Slumdog!* Personal and Cultural Trauma and Restitution in the Mumbai Slums" in *National Academy of Psychology (NAOP) India Psychological Studies* (September 2009) 54:194–201.

¹³ See, for example, R.K. Narayan's *The Ramayana*. After Rama has defeated Ravana, "one noticed Ravana's face aglow with a new quality. Rama's arrows had burnt off the layers of dross, the anger, conceit, cruelty, lust, and egotism which had encrusted his real self, and now his personality came through in its pristine form—of one who was devout and capable of tremendous attainments. His constant meditation on Rama, although as an adversary, now seemed to bear fruit, as his face shone with serenity and peace" (1977, 159). Or, in another version, commenting on Ravana's death, Rama says "It is true that this [demon's] life was full of lies and deceit and cruelty and unrighteousness. But he was also splendid, brave and strong and he had never been defeated in battle. Death ends all hostilities" (Sattar 2000, 627).

¹⁴ Some interesting comparisons between the epic and *Slumdog Millionaire*, as well as rebuttals of those comparisons, can be found at <http://www.svabhinava.org/abhinava/Dialogues/Slumdog-frame.php>

¹⁵ For further information on traditional forms of Indian education, as well as their benefits, see Desmarais, M. M. (2012). "Close Relations: Pandits, Pedagogy and Plasticity" in *Samskrta-Sādhitā 'Goodness of Sanskrit': Studies in Honour of Professor Ashok Aklujkar*. Delhi: DK Printworld.

¹⁶ For example, in her article "Reading Slumdog Millionaire Across Cultures," Duncan (2011) appears to understand destiny and agency as oppositional or incompatible. She notes, "Even Jamal's repeated assertion that his quest is destined or 'written' seems an affront to popular cinema's Sanskrit roots; the bootstrapping quality of Jamal's rise from street urchin to millionaire suggests more agency than a predetermined plot line can withstand." In contrast, we argue that destiny and agency always coexist and such a co-existence is exemplified in Sanskrit literature such as the Ramayana.

¹⁷ Another ironic reference to destiny comes when Maman is trying to persuade Salim to work for him rather than becoming one of the oppressed and abused children that he controls. Maman says to Salim ironically, "Your destiny is in your hands, brother." The message here is that Salim's destiny is very much *not* in his hands.

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