

*Great humanizing story,
but hard to stop thinking about the importance of good family planning*

Written by Vikas Swarup

Screenplay by Simon Beaufoy

Directed by Danny Boyle

Dev Patel ... Jamal Malik

Tanay Chheda ... Middle Jamal

Ayush Mahesh Khedekar ... Youngest Jamal

Freida Pinto ... Latika

Tanvi Ganesh Lonkar ... Middle Latika

Rubiana Ali ... Youngest Latika

Anil Kapoor ... Prem Kumar (talk show host)

Madhur Mittal ... Older Salim

Ashutosh Lobo Gajiwala ... Middle Salim

Azharuddin Mohammed Ismail ... Youngest Salim

Irrfan Khan ... Police Inspector

Saurabh Shukla ... Sergeant Srinivas

Jamal Malik: If it wasn't for Ram or Allah, we'd still have a mother.

Actually, during my time at the theater, I don't remember hearing that quote from the lead character. A fantastic statement. It points to a relatively graphic scene earlier in the movie where a bunch of slum men apparently of one superstitious conviction (Ram?) attack with sticks and fire bombs another bunch of poor people of a (presumed) different superstitious conviction (Allah?). Jamal's mother is one of the victims. It's quite sad and senseless.

Jamal sits on the stage of a popular Indian "Who Wants to be a Millionaire" show; and remarkably he's answering a series of multiple choice questions correctly. [Jamal comes from nowhere and the more he wins, the more the host of the show Prem Kumar (Anil Kapoor) and his henchmen try to "convince" Jamal that he's cheating.] Through flashbacks ingeniously called up by the questions, we get the entire story of his 18-something life... how he grew up in the slums and worked his way into a job running tea for customer service telephone centers, and somehow was on the line when the show called.

A few weeks ago I reviewed a movie named WALL-E, which is about a robot who comes alive and is stuck on an earth where the humans have so trashed it that they have to leave. WALL-E stands for Waste Allocation Lift Loader—Earth Class, and this little droid who was left behind spends day after day compacting and stacking human refuse... garbage. The hazy, apocalyptic skies shroud literally mountains of trash; it's a depressing sight, but we know it's not real. Right?

Well, after watching Slumdog, one isn't too sure the WALL-E fate doesn't await humanity. The camera and sound machinery expertly convey this teeming glob of 'the poor' living underneath miles upon miles of corrugated aluminum makeshift roofing supported by cardboard, paper clips, bubble gum, and who knows what. The human waste removal system seems to rely on rain water feeding into a local pond, which is—well, let's just say nobody's fishing in it—and in one of the early scenes we learn that you do your #2s in outhouses set up on piers with holes opening directly to that body of stagnant, putrid water.

Wikipedia tells me the city of Mumbai (I'm assuming this is the PC name for what we used to call Bombay, India) plays host to nearly 20 million individuals. (Astonishingly, it's only the 5th most-populated city on the planet!) Just what percentage of the population is living in the ubiquitous high rises and in the relatively plush suburbs, which seem to exist adjacent to the corrugated-metal Shack Cities, who knows. But a working number for who's poor and may live a few weeks longer and who's dirt poor and facing starvation tomorrow morning is probably "half."

All right, so let's not dwell on the scenery, we're dealing with (simulated) real people here and a plot: Jamal Malik (Dev Patel, etc.) and his older brother Salim (Madhur Mittal, etc.) came forth from Woman smack dab

in the middle of the most impoverished environment imaginable. It makes American Appalachia look like a community of international bankers who just cleaned up after the Emergency Economic Stabilization Act of 2008. And these are cute scenes, because, well, kids are cute; these kids are not only cute, they're astoundingly resourceful and get a few breaks.

Jamal and Salim, orphaned at perhaps 5 and 6 years old by the above mentioned killing of their mother, take to the streets on their own; they bring Latika (Freida Pinto, etc.) under their wing, too, at one point. She has also been deprived of a parent-guardian, and during a heavy cold rain where the two brothers find shelter in a culvert, she's standing out there unprotected. Salim, always the hard case, doesn't want anything to do with her, and would let her freeze or drown. Jamal is the considerate one, and when Salim turns over to go to sleep Jamal beckons to her to climb into the culvert for some warmth and dry surroundings.

This is the beginning of the love story between Jamal and Latika.

The three of them move on scrounging, begging, and pilfering for a living here and there, until "kindly orphanage guy" encourages them to come along to his place in the countryside. Food and shelter aplenty, but you have to work as a beggar. Yada yada yada: kindly orphanage guy has some rough edges in his personality, Jamal and Salim leave, Latika remains behind, Jamal and Salim continue to scrape for a living, choose different paths, and by a fluke of a headset placement Jamal gets invited onto the quiz show.

Part of Jamal's early experience contains some education, reading and writing, then later in his younger teen years he takes jobs that entail access to the Web and to other sources of information. So he arrives at the studio with some credentials. But no one, least of all Prem, the show's dictatorial, false-faced host, has any idea Jamal can answer so many questions.

The wonderful gimmick of the movie is that each question a) calls up more or less in sequence a formative incident in Jamal's life, and b) as the incidents get closer to his current life we see Jamal is on a lifelong mission to find Latika once again and make her his own. As my lady friend remarked, the movie is "relentless;" one doesn't get much in the way of a break. It seems one or the other of the characters has to urgently get from point A to point B or to crawl figuratively over hot coals to find someone or something critical to his purpose.

And seeing this one at the theater, these days the sound guys feel they have to break your ear drums with the music or sound effects or they're not doing their jobs. Geez, about the only thing you can do is give in to the high decibel level, and fortunately the sound-visual-action qualities of this particular film are mentally absorbing. (I wasn't so complimentary of the Dark Knight experience, mainly because all the noise seemed to signify violence.) So, I'm not cool with the loud, but at least it's loud with a high-quality foundation.

Final comments: As suggested in the subtitle, this movie provides an enchanting humanization of Indians in general and rags-to-riches Indians in particular. It's a children's story really, like Charles Dickens transported to a more sultry climate, and it's a good children's story. Family fare? Yes, I think so. I feel a warmth and a reality from the leading man and woman, and Freida Pinto is to my sensibilities stunningly attractive. [You'll enjoy the music and dance during the ending credits, so don't rush for the exit.]

But... most viewers I feel will not be able to shake the anxiety the movie tends to generate over the overwhelming quantity of humanity—especially in so materially wretched a state—despite occasional emergence of storybook quality. Birth control, anyone? Anyone?

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Slumdog Millionaire | *India* | *Rags to Riches* | *Charles Dickens* | *Quiz Show*