

The Poverty Tour: Life in the Slums of Mumbai and Manila as Seen  
in Danny Boyle's *Slumdog Millionaire* and Merlinda Bobis's  
*The Solemn Lantern Maker*

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In the twenty-first century Mumbai and Manila, lingering postcolonial issues have merged with contemporary issues of globalisation and neo-imperialism as both India and the Philippines are faced with the realities of Western hegemony. This article will examine how the creators of the film *Slumdog Millionaire* and the novel *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, both from 2008, have chosen to portray these similar realities in different ways. Two major questions could be asked about these texts. Has British director Danny Boyle fallen into the trap of Orientalism, as outlined by Said in 1978, glamorising the abject poverty of the Mumbai slums, making them look appealingly exotic under a Western gaze? Is the Philippine-Australian author Merlinda Bobis's representation of the penury of Manila's street children, from their huts to shopping malls, passing through an underworld of sex tourism, a more authentic representation than Boyle's? Or is it merely a native informant's appeal for global readership? These postcolonial texts have become commodities in a global market, where their marketing in the Western world by global media corporations affects their reception and interpretation.

Keywords: Danny Boyle; Merlinda Bobis; postcolonial exotic; neo-imperialism; globalisation; poverty

Un tour por la pobreza: la vida en las barriadas  
de Mumbai y Manila según *Slumdog Millionaire* de Danny Boyle y  
*The Solemn Lantern Maker* de Merlinda Bobis

En el siglo veintiuno, en Mumbai y Manila, algunas cuestiones poscoloniales, que aún están sin resolver, dejan paso a temas contemporáneos de globalización y neo-imperialismo. A su vez, India y Filipinas se enfrentan a la realidad de la hegemonía occidental. Este artículo

examinará cómo los respectivos creadores de la película, *Slumdog Millionaire*, y de la novela, *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, ambas del año 2008, han elegido representar realidades similares de maneras distintas. Se podrían plantear dos cuestiones importantes sobre los textos. ¿Ha caído el director británico Danny Boyle en la trampa del orientalismo, expuesta por Said en 1978, haciendo atractiva la pobreza extrema de las calles de Mumbai, para que parezca exótica bajo la mirada occidental? ¿La representación de la autora filipina-australiana Merlinda Bobis de la penuria de los niños callejeros manileños, desde sus chabolas hasta los centros comerciales, pasando por los bajos fondos del turismo sexual, es más auténtica que la de Boyle? ¿O es meramente el llamamiento de una informadora nativa a los lectores y lectoras globales? Ambos textos poscoloniales se han convertido en mercancías en un mercado mundial, donde su comercialización en Occidente afecta a su recepción y a su interpretación.

Palabras clave: Danny Boyle; Merlinda Bobis; exotismo poscolonial; neo-imperialismo; globalización; pobreza

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The latter half of the twentieth century brought independence to previously colonised peoples leading to a time of nation building for many new democracies, among them the Philippines and India. Towards the end of one century and the beginning of another, lingering postcolonial issues have merged with contemporary issues of globalisation and neo-imperialism as both the Philippines and India are faced with the realities of Western hegemony. I wish to focus on two texts which articulate this reality: *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, a novel by Merlinda Bobis (2008a), and *Slumdog Millionaire*, a film directed by Danny Boyle ([2008] 2009). First, I will examine how the author and director of the respective texts have chosen to portray the similar postcolonial and indeed neo-colonial realities of the Philippines and India in distinct ways, which could be partially attributed to their respective personal backgrounds. Then, I will address the problems of exploitation and human rights conflicts that exist in the Philippines and India, as illustrated in both texts. These problems were once a consequence of colonialist oppression, however, as the texts demonstrate, they have persisted, with globalisation now acting as a neo-imperialist force that perpetuates the colonial legacy. Finally, I will look at some broader issues of the texts as commodities in a global market, and how the marketing of these texts in the Western world in turn affects their reception and interpretation.

Writer and academic Merlinda Bobis was born and raised in the Philippines and currently lives in Australia. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* was published in 2008 by Murdoch Books in Australia and Random House in the United States. Set in Manila during the week before Christmas, it tells the story of Noland, a mute lantern seller who finds himself next to an American tourist when she is injured during the drive-by shooting of a political journalist. Noland takes her to his hut in the slums where he and his mother care for her. This act of kindness has drastic consequences for all concerned, unveiling corruption, child prostitution and poverty, leading to Noland's implication as an alleged terrorist and kidnapper.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is an Oscar winning, 2008 film from British director Danny Boyle. It is an adaptation of the novel *Q&A* by Indian author Vikas Swarup (2006), with a screenplay written by Simon Beaufoy. It follows the turbulent life of Jamal Malik, from a childhood of poverty in the Dharavi slums of Mumbai to his successful appearance on the Indian version of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* As luck (or destiny) would have it, the questions he is asked relate to events that have marked his life; a coincidence too great for the show's presenter who hands him over to the police on the suspicion of cheating.

As is to be expected when a Hollywood director adapts an Indian novel, there are some differences. Changes are made to the plot and some details are left out, the reasons for which would make for an interesting comparative study in their own right. This comparative study wishes to focus on the portrayal of slum life, an aspect which features more prominently in Boyle's film than in Swarup's novel. Moreover,

the greater scope of the aesthetic nature of the cinematographic text in turn offers an interesting contrast to the detailed depiction of slum life in Bobis's prose text.

Before discussing the texts themselves, some brief background information about the colonial and postcolonial histories of the countries in question is essential as the colonial history of each nation figures as an embedded plot within each text. The Philippines was a Spanish colony for over three hundred years until the Spanish-American war in 1898. It was subsequently taken over by the United States, which, apart from a period of Japanese wartime occupation between 1942 and 1945, remained in control until it achieved full independence in 1946. Democracy followed with a US style constitution, although it has been marred by corruption, state oppression through the martial law of Ferdinand Marcos, and various coup attempts. The country is predominantly Catholic with the exception of the southern Muslim region of Mindanao, whose independence struggle led to the creation of the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao in 1990 (soon to be superseded by the proposed autonomous political entity, Bangsamoro). The government has also had to deal with internal violence from various groups including the Islamist Abu Sayyaf and the communist New People's Army (NPA).

British presence in southern Asia formally began in the seventeenth century with the East India Company. Following the Indian rebellion of 1857, Britain took direct control of the region and it became known as the British Raj, with the British monarch, Victoria, also serving as the first Empress of India. Independence finally came in 1947 following the efforts of Mahatma Gandhi and the Indian National Congress, and the Muslim league. The price of independence was the partition of the subcontinent into what would become the Republic of India and the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, with India catering to a Sikh and Hindu majority, and Pakistan to a Muslim one. Thus, once the new borders were drawn in 1947 many people found themselves on the wrong side of these religious divisions, which led to mass migration in both directions and extremely violent clashes resulting in hundreds of thousands of deaths. Religious tensions have left their mark on independent India, resulting in hostile relations with Pakistan, exacerbated by the territorial conflict over Kashmir and both countries' development of nuclear weapons. Within India, Muslim-Hindu violence followed the destruction of the Babri Mosque at Ayodhya, and tension came to the fore with the Mumbai riots in December 1992 and January 1993,<sup>1</sup> as depicted in Boyle's film.

## 2. ABJECT SLUMS IN THE GLOBAL MEGALOPOLIS

*The Solemn Lantern Maker* begins at a busy intersection in Manila. Amid the mayhem of stalled traffic, an American tourist, Cate Burns steps out of her taxi to buy a paper lantern from 10-year-old Noland and his older friend Elvis. As she marvels at the

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<sup>1</sup> Mani Ratnam's Tamil film *Bombay* (1995) offers a detailed cinematic account of the controversy and religious tensions surrounding the destruction of the Babri Mosque, and the subsequent Mumbai riots.

beauty of the *paroles*, just as Noland marvels at her golden hair and white face, a Pizza Hut motorcycle arrives, three shots are fired, a man slumps over the wheel of his car, before the motorcycle revs past Cate knocking her to the ground. Without hesitation, Noland picks her up and takes her in his shopping cart back to a hut, his home in the slums of Manila. In a way this busy intersection is the gateway to the slums of the megalopolis. On one side of the speeding cars there are office buildings, the power of capital in this city, but on the other side behind the stalls of hanging, colourful lanterns are railroad tracks, symbolic of the physical division they create between one world and another. Crossing these tracks brings the reader into the other side of Manila, the slums which are home to the poorest and most vulnerable. This is where Noland lives with his crippled mother Nena. The abject conditions of their homestead are described by the author as “a box, the poorest in the slums. It’s scraps of corrugated iron, wood, cardboard, and plastic, and a hole for a door, set apart from the rest of the huts, because here’s where all the sewage flows. The creek of fetid water is everyone’s toilet, everyone’s dump” (Bobis 2008a, 12).

Inside his hut, as Cate lies recovering, Noland feels ashamed that he does not have anything better to offer her. He observes that “she’s too long for the mat, this blanket, her feet stick out! It worries him. Should he find something to cover her feet? But it will be only some old towel or rag, even more shameful than these worn bedclothes, which never bothered him before” (2008a, 25). Noland is perplexed by the sensation in his gut, “He does not know that it is shame, this squirming inside for the first time because he cannot offer more” (2008a, 25). He knows this woman is an “Amerikana” and assumes she is rich, but little else. It is enough to make him feel self-conscious in her presence, to become aware of the difference between them. Thus he turns towards his prized television set, which makes him feel better, “All rich people have televisions – look we have a TV too!” (2008a, 25).

Bobis does not try to disguise the poverty that exists among the slum dwellers and Noland’s family in particular. The scale of this poverty is exemplified through Elvis, whose only recourse is to prostitute himself within Manila’s sex tourism industry, a topic that will be discussed later in this article. A rare visit to a shopping mall, a symbol of global capitalism and their most recent coloniser, the United States, serves to highlight the different worlds that exist within the city of Manila: those who have and those who have not. The sight of shoppers buying designer perfume confuses Noland: “Why buy empty boxes that cost a dozen kilos of rice each? Why have a lady spray you for the price of more than a year’s supply of rice?” (2008a, 68). Noland is puzzled by the very concept of this consumption; for the reader, the innocence and naivety of Noland’s point of view serves to highlight the obscenity of the situation. Likewise Noland is confused by the sight of an interior design book, *101 Bathrooms*; the narrator ruefully observes, “Good thing Noland can’t read. How to imagine a hundred and one bathroom options when for him it’s the creek behind the hut” (2008a, 69). However, such wealth must exist among certain people; the very presence of these items in the

shopping mall is proof of the fact. The gap between rich and poor has been exacerbated through years of the Marcos dictatorship, marked by infrastructural development, but also massive institutional corruption and embezzlement of public money. The Star City amusement park in the novel is a testament to this, and to the country's investment priorities, as the narrator reveals:

The Star City stands on a vast reclaimed area first developed under the Marcos dictatorship, when, as a journalist remarked, the first lady waved her hand and said, "Let there be land," and there was land. On it grew an imposing building devoted to the arts. Close by, an international convention centre also sprang up a stone's throw from a five-star hotel. Some years later the largest shopping centre in Asia will follow. How absurd that poverty exists where even the sea can be made solid with the flick of a hand. (2008a, 105)

Bobis's depiction of the slums of Manila is harsh, gritty and unforgiving, with little time for sugar-coating the difficulties the residents face. There is no escape for the reader, who is forced into seeing the life that poverty has brought these people. It must be said that she also gives an insight into the resilience and solidarity that exists among the residents, as displayed through the women's singing of Christmas carols with alternative, humorous lyrics. Their continued use of the oral tradition in their native Filipino language, a common pre-colonial literary form, offers a form of resistance to the powers of the postcolonial, globalised country where they find themselves. These powers would later threaten their very existence, when the military await orders to bulldoze the slum in search of the missing American woman, Cate Burns.

At first glance Danny Boyle's vision of the Mumbai slums in *Slumdog Millionaire* ([2008] 2009) is altogether different. The opening prologue features a young man being beaten, tortured and electrocuted during a police interrogation, cut with shots of the same man on the television quiz show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* The police want to find out how he cheated, Jamal replies he knew the answers. Music sounds, the opening credits roll and the first stylish shots of Mumbai slums drip with golden sunshine, giving the Western viewer the impression of warmth and something very exotic indeed. A group of children play cricket on a runway before the police break up the game and chase them over a rubbish dump, through the narrow passages back into the slum. This scene introduces the viewers to *slumdogs* Jamal and his older brother Salim. The music beats quickly as they evade an infuriated officer, thumping with excitement and energy, with vocals from British rapper and hip hop artist M.I.A.<sup>2</sup> A

2 The choice of M.I.A here is interesting as she is British born to Sri Lankan Tamil parents. She grew up in Sri Lanka, where her father was an activist campaigning for a separate Tamil state. Eventually she had to move back to Britain as a refugee because her father's activism had made it unsafe for her family to remain in Sri Lanka. One could consider M.I.A.'s inclusion as giving Western audiences someone familiar to associate with this foreign place they know little about. The fact that M.I.A is not actually Indian does not matter; being from Sri Lanka is close enough in this case. On the other hand, her Sri Lankan Tamil origin could be seen as a subtle way for Boyle to remind audiences of India's part in the Sri Lankan civil war. Another of her songs—"Paper Planes"—features during

variety of unusual camera angles, cutting between stationary and tracking shots, follow the children, adding to the vibrancy and colour of the scene. A series of shots, each one higher than the last, show the mass of corrugated tin roofs overlapping and stitched together, creating an impressive aesthetic that could have come from a coffee-table book of aerial photography. Less appealing shots of a flea ridden dog, and a man wading through a river collecting rubbish, flash between the action as a reminder of where they are. For the spectators taking a closer look, life in the slums of Mumbai is not so different from that of Bobis's Manila. It is dirty, cramped and impoverished; children in rags run barefoot, police crash through people's lives with little regard for their homes or property. The difference is that through his direction, Boyle manages, to a certain degree, to glamorise, even fetishise this existence, making it look appealingly exotic and exciting for Western movie audiences.

All is not glamorous and appealing though, abjection is also a constituent of these slums. Just as Noland's toilet is the creek behind his hut, the river flowing next to the slum in Mumbai is also its central sewer line, wooden huts on stilts with a hole in the floor serving as cubicles. Jamal finds himself locked inside one of these just as India's biggest film star arrives by helicopter. In order to escape and meet his hero, he jumps into the pool of human waste below. Anything but glamorous, though the seriousness and indeed tragedy of the scene is undermined by the comic element of the crowd parting with noses held, as this stinking boy makes for the film star and shouts with delight once he gets the all-important autograph.

Another scene from the slum sees Jamal and Salim splash and play in a washing pool, while their mother and many other residents wash their colourful clothes and leave them to dry in the hot sun, the grand expanse of colourful saris creating another attractive aesthetic pattern when viewed from above. It is, however, tinged with a sense of foreboding, as seen in their mother's face. A crowd of men appears wielding sticks, catches the residents off guard and proceeds to run riot through the slum. The boys' mother is beaten before their eyes, and left for dead in the washing pool. Another chase through the slums ensues, this time with men beating the predominantly Muslim residents and setting fire to their houses. Religious tensions have not gone away since partition in 1947, with these scenes mirroring the Mumbai riots already mentioned. The now orphaned Jamal and Salim escape, left to contemplate their future as smoke rises from the slum that had been their home.

Boyle's portrayal of the slum represents a sort of exotic misery. It seems he wants to show the difficulty and penury that those living in the slum face, while at the same time making it look aesthetically appealing, exotic and a dangerously exciting place to be. Michael Wood, writing in *London Review of Books*, observes that in the early sections of the film "everything happens too fast and is too brightly lit: it feels like tourism in

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a montage of the boys selling goods on a train and eventually being thrown off. It contains a distinct sample from The Clash's "Straight to Hell" from their 1982 album *Combat Rock*, a British hymn of rebellion, immigration and racial injustice, clearly identifiable as such to Western audiences. This is hardly an accident on Boyle's part.



poverty, and perhaps reflects a tension between Danny Boyle and Loveleen Tandan, his Indian co-director” (2009, 12). Such tension perhaps results from a British director looking in, and an Indian director conscious of the image sent out to meet a Western gaze. In the article “*Slumdog* Celebrities,” Priya Jaikumar points out how “[t]he cosmically mobile camera is not rooted in any singular subjective experience but offers an exhilarated objectification of its surroundings. This vision has boosted ‘reality’ or ‘slum tourism’ in India, with foreign tourists eager to see Dharavi” (2010, 23-24). It is fair to assume that the majority of Western audiences have not seen Mumbai slums first hand, but have developed their own idea of what India is like from its representations in literature and film. In the past these ideas might have come from films about the British Raj such as *A Passage to India* (1984), *Heat and Dust* (1983) and television series such as *The Jewel in the Crown* (1984). In an article on film adaptations,<sup>3</sup> Salman Rushdie argues that most films about India used to follow this style, with plots involving a blond woman and a maharajah, but that this is no longer the case: “Now that sort of exoticism has lost its appeal; people want, instead, enough grit and violence to convince themselves that what they are seeing is authentic; but it’s still tourism. If the earlier films were raj tourism, maharajah-tourism, then we, today, have slum tourism instead” (2009). *Los Angeles Times* film critic Mark Magnier cites Mumbai-based film professor Shyamal Sengupta, who claims *Slumdog Millionaire* is “a white man’s imagined India, it’s not quite snake charmers, but it’s close. It’s a poverty tour” (2009). The film does comment self-reflexively on this sort of tourism when Jamal works as an illegal tour guide at the Taj Mahal. Two American tourists, who wander off the traditional tourist trail with Jamal in search of the *real* India, only find police brutality towards the guides and their rented car ransacked. Boyle’s slum tourism leads Naomi Orton, writing in the *Rio Times*, to question the benefit of tourists getting closer to the slums—as is commonplace in Rio’s “Favela tours” (2009). She wonders whether it is simply voyeurism or “poverty porn,” as Alice Miles wrote in *The Sunday Times* (2009), offering viewers a cheap thrill, taking a superficial, unreflective look at life in Mumbai’s slums.<sup>4</sup>

Rushdie also criticises an interview Boyle gave at the Telluride film festival in which he revealed that he had never been to India and knew nothing about it before making the film, so he thought this film was a great opportunity. Rushdie’s observation is caustic but fair:

I imagined an Indian film director making a movie about New York low-life and saying that he had done so because he knew nothing about New York and had indeed never been

<sup>3</sup> Rushdie’s article, “A Fine Pickle,” first appeared in *The Guardian* on 28 February 2009. It is no longer available on their website because the copyright has expired (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/feb/28/salman-rushdie-novels-film-adaptations>). It can now be found on the blog *Bookrabbitt.com* (<http://www.bookrabbitt.com/blog/a-fine-pickle/>).

<sup>4</sup> Evan Selinger and Kevin Outterson from Boston University School of Law provide an interesting discussion on this topic in their article “The Ethics of Poverty Tourism” (2009). They refer directly to *Slumdog Millionaire* and Alice Miles’s article “Shocked by Slumdog’s Poverty Porn” (2009).



there. He would have been torn limb from limb by critical opinion. But for a first world director to say that about the third world is considered praiseworthy, an indication of his artistic daring. The double standards of post-colonial attitudes have not yet wholly faded away. (2009)

Edward Said claimed that “[t]he Orient was almost a European invention, and has been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences” ([1978] 1995, 1). The Orient was therefore a creation of an exotic Western ideal, based on something imagined. Considering Rushdie’s comments above, it could be argued that Boyle has fallen into the trap of Orientalism by projecting an idea onto the slums of Mumbai before his arrival, which plays to Western ideas of what one should find there. Boyle’s slum tourism helps to create new stereotypes, through its stylised portrayal of what is essentially abject poverty for the viewing pleasure of Western audiences. Boyle may have taken his cue from Indian director Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* ([1988] 2002), an earlier film chronicling the lives of children living on the Mumbai streets, though he lacks the credibility that Nair’s *native informant* status endows.

Bobis is saved from similar criticism because she actually grew up in the Philippines. The fact that she is a *native informant* can go some way to legitimising her narrative, but of course simply being Philippine does not necessarily grant her an insider perspective. In an interview on *ABC Radio National* (Australia) Bobis explained that she used to live next to the busy intersection in Manila, just across the street from the huts and railroad tracks, the site of the opening scene of the novel where children sold lanterns (2008b). During a lecture at the University of Vigo, she showed photos of the two street children she met during her research, who inspired the characters of Noland and Elvis (2009). Bobis now lives in Australia, thus, according to Dolores Herrero, she has been “carried across different cultures, and is consequently endowed with a multiple and privileged perspective” (2013, 107). This perspective permits her to write from a safe distance, which gives her freedom to criticise the state of Philippine society (something which may be dangerous for a slum resident, or which coming from a resident, may never be heard), while at the same time being close enough to see and articulate the effects on poorer people’s lives. The downside of this safe writing distance comes when a Philippine publisher is sought. Nonetheless, as a consequence of the realities of slum poverty and hardship that inspired her to write the novel, she chooses to offer a far more sobering view of essentially the same problems faced by the poor in Mumbai. Her direct language forces an emotional response from the reader. However, she risks becoming over sentimental, especially with her decision to set the novel in the week before Christmas. This allows for further Dickensian empathy as it is a time of the year when people seem to be more sensitive to the hardship of others. Bobis’s decision to juxtapose the Christmas preparations with the abject poverty, the hardship and

the exploitation of Noland and his mother, plays on the reader's emotions, while also contributing to a more intense contrast of extravagant consumption and dire poverty.

The scenes of child molestation, most notably when Elvis is raped in a hotel shower (2008a, 145), force the reader to be moved by the trauma and suffering involved. If *Slumdog Millionaire* could be called *poverty porn*, one could argue that there is an element of *emotional porn* in these scenes from *The Solemn Lantern Maker*. The harsh realities make readers sigh uncomfortably at the lives of these poor people, perhaps even moving them to tears; a momentary emotional outburst that provides a brief reprieve from the numbness of contemporary Western society. The grief is short lived as the reader need not digest these scenes nor consider their implications any further. Such criticisms parallel those meted out to Boyle that suggest his view of the Mumbai slums is superficial and unreflective.

### 3. COLONIAL LEGACIES AND NEO-IMPERIAL PRACTICES

Whether one is talking about Mumbai or Manila, the issues in question remain the same. The same groups of people face exploitation within their respective communities. In his essay "The Postcolonial State and the Protection of Human Rights," Henry F. Carey (2002) considers to what extent colonial legacies explain human rights violations. Carey's analysis considers a wide range of countries, among them India and the Philippines. The causes of human rights violations in these countries are complex, Carey admits, as it is not always clear whether a cause is direct or indirect. He cites poverty as an obvious example of this; a problem that is clearly evident in Mumbai and Manila as both *Slumdog Millionaire* and *The Solemn Lantern Maker* testify to. He explains:

Postcolonialism is not the only condition for human rights difficulties. It is associated with other causes of human rights violations, such as polarization, ethnic or class conflict, geopolitical competition, leaders choosing to eliminate or reduce political opposition or pluralism, realist or neo-imperial practices of foreign states and their proxies, the weakness of international institutions or liberal foreign states to promote human rights norms, ethnic domination, etc. These other causes are associated with postcolonialism . . . because of the nondemocratic institutions and norms established under colonialism. (2002, 61)

*The Solemn Lantern Maker* and *Slumdog Millionaire* collectively touch on all these issues associated with human rights violations. During Jamal's interrogation, in *Slumdog Millionaire*, the police chief worries that the electric shock may have been too strong, and the possibility of "Amnesty International pissing in their pants about human rights" ([2008] 2009). It sounds like a common problem for the police. They wonder how a *slumdog* could know the answers to the questions on the show, since doctors and lawyers have failed where he has succeeded. It is not acceptable for someone of Jamal's class to do this well. Prem, the sinister host of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*,

tries to ensure Jamal will not succeed by feeding him the wrong answer. What is more, Prem constantly ridicules Jamal's humble job as a *chai wallah* ("tea boy"). In *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, the issues of class conflict in Manila are played out at the intersection where Noland and Elvis sell their lanterns, in the shopping malls for the consumer classes, and at the theme park which refuses entry to the boys, their old shopping trolley betraying a life of poverty. The riots in the Mumbai slums reveal a legacy of ethnic and religious conflict in independent, postcolonial India. Both texts make the issue of state corruption explicit. In the essay quoted above, Carey observes that "[t]he Philippine elite is indeed postcolonial, accepting democracy and human rights in principle, except where their interests are confronted. Repression is more or less as common as in India; both countries are marked by more than one-third of the population remaining in poverty in part because of the continuous oligarchic economy, which independence has been unable to reform" (2002, 62).

Such a high level of poverty inevitably leads to exploitation of some form or another, with each text illustrating child exploitation in the respective slums of Manila and Mumbai. In *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Noland and Elvis start selling paper lanterns at the intersection in order to earn enough money to survive. They work under the watchful eye of Bobby Cool, who has lent them some money for their business, and Noland worries about being unable to repay. Unfortunately, Bobby Cool's influence does not end there. Elvis also subsidises his meagre earnings by working as a child prostitute; Bobby Cool is his pimp, organising visits to foreign male tourists in expensive hotels. He provides Elvis with the necessary brands (Nike, Lacoste, Rolex—albeit counterfeits) to satisfy the specific desires of his foreign clients: they have come to the Philippines willing to pay for sex with children who are clean and suitably dressed, they do not want to see the reality of their impoverished victims' existence. At one stage Bobby considers Noland could also be of some use to him in the trade after a Japanese sex-tourist specified his desire for a younger child: "Bobby watches his charges, intent on the smaller one. A weak debate goes on in his heart, under the gold cross that swings each time he moves. He's too young, but Elvis was even younger when he—and he's mute, his life's wretched, his mother's sick. All the more reason to rise to this occasion" (2008a, 98). When Noland returns, smelling of hotel soap and wearing new clothes, he is traumatised, dizzy, confused and ashamed.

Elvis's prostitution affords him the luxuries (as he sees them) of McDonalds hamburgers or KFC. In his Manila, McDonalds is the "best joint" because he "isn't called 'sir' anywhere else" (2008a, 132). The irony here is that because of his background and life in the slums, Elvis would be held in low esteem were he to enter a local Philippine restaurant. However, globalisation is not interested in your social origin; its only interest is capital. McDonalds, in so many ways a paradigm of globalisation, is the only institution that shows Elvis the slightest respect. It is not respect for the person however, merely respect for the consumer and the purchasing power of his recently earned dollars. The influence of American global enterprises in

the Philippines is highlighted by their presence throughout the novel, indeed from the very beginning when the drive-by shooting is carried out by a man on a Pizza Hut delivery motorbike.

In Mumbai, following the death of their mother, Jamal and Salim are left impoverished and suffer exploitation of a different sort, albeit with some parallels. Now in the company of Latika, who will later become Jamal's love interest, they survive on what they can find in the landfill. One day, as they shelter from the sun, they are tempted away by the apparent benevolence of the unnervingly sinister Maman who offers them bottles of Coke (another icon of American globalisation whose appeal is as great to the boys as McDonalds is to Elvis). Believing him to be a good man, and having no better prospects, the children leave with him to a camp outside the city. Like Bobby Cool, Maman takes on the deceiving role of their protector. He feeds them, gives them shelter and teaches them songs so they can be part of his ring of singing beggars. Salim rapidly understands the business and Maman puts him in charge of the others, telling him that if he follows the right path he will earn money, and no longer be a *slumdog* but a man. A promise of economic wealth acts as a cover for exploitation, once again in the same vein as Bobby Cool's. After seeing their protector burn another child's eyes with acid (because blind beggars make more) Salim and Jamal escape, leaving behind their friend Latika. Jamal's quest to be reunited with her will define his future. The extent of the exploitation and of Maman's cruelty is later revealed when their paths again cross during Jamal's search for Latika. Maman comments on the monetary value of a young virgin like Latika, reminiscent of Bobby Cool's contemplation of Noland's potential. Salim shoots him and then finds himself working for rival gangster Javed, while Latika's fortune does not improve, as we see when the narrative jumps to her present life as a young adult. She has become the wife of this same violent and abusive Javed, enslaved and imprisoned in his mansion.

Postcolonial scholars Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin observe that "the ways in which local communities engage the focus of globalization bear some resemblance to the ways in which colonized societies have historically engaged and appropriated the forces of imperial dominance" (2000, 112). It is evident from both book and film that state oppression, embodied by police and military forces, remains an issue in the Philippines and in India. The tragic irony is that both countries were for years under colonial control, and then gained independence only to see certain colonial structures persist. Postcolonial theory argues that Western influences did not end with colonialism. Accordingly, Henry F. Carey maintains that "[t]he responsibilities of local leaders are perceived [by their own people] as persistent, elite collaboration or moderation vis-à-vis colonial powers or their heirs, as well as ongoing postcolonial interference and collaboration with repressive, pro-Western regimes" (2002, 62). This case applies to relations between the United States and the Philippines, where successive governments have maintained strong ties, with the United States being especially supportive of the Marcos regime. They have also

maintained a military presence in the Philippines following 9/11, which is exposed in Bobis's novel. Renato Cruz de Castro outlines the extent of the alliance as follows:

On the heels of the 11 September 2001 Al Qaeda attacks in the United States, the two allies further revitalized their security relationship to address transnational terrorism. In the process, Manila was able to secure vital US military and economic assistance for its counter-terrorism/insurgency campaign against domestic insurgents, i.e., Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), the New People's Army (NPA) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). (2009, 400)

In Bobis's novel the character of Miss Fuentebella (a journalist who appears with the US Colonel David Lane in a television debate,<sup>5</sup> brought about by the suspected kidnapping of Cate Burns) offers the following colourful summary of colonial rule in the Philippines: "Listen to this. The Philippines: nearly four hundred years under Spain, forty years under *your* America, three years under Japan—passed from hand to hand like chattel! And of course, forever under governments run by Filipinos who have terrorized their own people. Please, Colonel, don't dare lecture us on terrorism" (2008a, 170).

The end of colonialism did not bring the freedom that might have been expected. In fact, it seems that one oppressive force has been replaced by another. Instead of being under the control of a coloniser, the Philippines now suffers at the behest of American neo-imperialism and the forces of globalisation.<sup>6</sup> The Philippine government springs into action to help the United States in their search for Cate Burns. They are prepared to bulldoze the slums, demolishing the lives of their poorest citizens, offering full support in an effort to find and terminate the suspected *terrorist* who is responsible for her kidnapping; a consequence of their allegiance to the United States in fighting its *War on Terror*. Bobis uses the character of Miss Fuentebella as a political voice of explicit anti-imperial discourse in the novel. She tries to expose the injustices that American neo-imperialism has brought to the Philippines and is extremely critical of her government's role in this affair, although not surprised: "But what's new? All these years we've kissed the ass of the imperialist" (2008a, 171). Her assessment of the state of her nation is damning:

The reality is that no one's safe in this country, not our children, not our journalists, or our tourists, because of the political machinations of a rotten system. Why do you think Germinio de Vera was shot? Why do you think we have street children? Why are we murdered if we expose the stink of the system – tell me if this is not terrorism. Filipinos know terror in their own homes, in their own streets. (2008a, 169)

<sup>5</sup> The television debate serves as a narrative a strategy to expose the political thesis in Bobis's novel. Mira Nair makes use of a similar strategy at the beginning of her film, *Monsoon Wedding* (2003), where invited studio guests debate the issue of whether censorship is necessary in order to protect modern India from embracing Western global values and rejecting its ancient culture and traditions.

<sup>6</sup> A point highlighted by Belén Martín Lucas and Ana Bringas López in their introduction to *Global Neo-Imperialism and National Resistance. Approaches from Postcolonial Studies*, where they ask, "Why do they call it global when they mean American?" (2004, 7).

The assassination of the investigative journalist Germinio de Vera sets off the tragic chain of events that affect so many. News reporters speculate that he was killed for exposing the connection between an influential politician, Senator G.B. “Good Boy” Buracher, and *Juetueng* King, the godfather of illegal gambling (2008a, 59). De Vera’s death brings the level of state oppression, helped by corruption and violence in public life, into focus. The corrupt Senator and underground kingpin are illustrations of neo-imperialism reinforced by both official and unofficial powers.

In India, the oppressive force of the former imperial masters might have left in a hurry, but state oppression certainly remained. On the streets of Mumbai the police are all too willing to wield their batons at the slum children. *Slumdog Millionaire* opens with a scene of torture and extreme police brutality. Jamal is being held by the police, who are trying to beat a confession out of him. He is connected to a car battery to see if running bolts of electricity through him will “loosen his tongue” ([2008] 2009). The police show little interest as the slum burns following the riots mentioned earlier, and tellingly an officer apologetically doffs his cap and backs away when he runs into the car of the criminal gangster Javed. It transpires that Prem, the host of *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, had ordered the police to take Jamal away. Thus unofficial power colludes with official authority to keep everyone under control.

Money and global capital have taken over India when Jamal and Salim are reunited as young adults in Mumbai. The slums where they once lived are now undergoing the process of gentrification, converted into construction sites for new buildings and businesses, fuelling India’s economic growth while forcing the poorest out of their homes. India is becoming a world economic power, although here the infrastructural advances are funded and controlled by wealthy gangsters such as Javed.<sup>7</sup>

Jamal’s success on the television show is the structural spine of Danny Boyle’s horror-fairy tale since all the film’s events are connected to it. The very presence in India of this American show, adapted for an Indian audience, is indicative of the way American neo-imperialism, via neoliberal capitalism, has become the new coloniser. The show exists in India to make money (advertising, call charges, etc.) and in return offers contestants the dream of capitalist self-realisation, *making it* in the American sense. This prevailing attitude is evident when Jamal asks Latika why everyone loves this programme. She replies, “Its job is to escape, isn’t it? Walk into another life” ([2008] 2009). Jamal wants Latika to leave her tyrannical husband and run away with him. She sends him away, pouring scorn on this fanciful idea, rather unromantically asking how they would survive without any money. Jamal then enters the show, becomes a national hero by winning the money, and of course, Latika’s heart. Boyle proceeds to wrap up his tale with an exotic, colourful, uplifting, Bollywood-style dance routine, to send everyone away feeling good.

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<sup>7</sup> Vikram Chandra’s epic novel *Sacred Games* (2007) provides an excellent account of Mumbai’s dark underworld of organised crime and corrupt local politics associated with India’s economic growth.



A similar type of television quiz show called *Wowoee* exists in the Philippines and such is its popularity that in Bobis's novel Elvis sings its catch-cry as he shakes his arms and hips in delight: "Pitched towards the poorest, the show promises cash, a car, even a house. 'Cash or basket?' Hope is dangled before the most desperate" (2008, 100). The narrator reveals that the same catch call would inspire a stampede of more than twenty-five thousand vying for a change of luck on a TV show: "Seventy-four will be killed, one of them a four-year-old. How is it that hope grows too fully too soon, even before a full set of teeth?" (2008a, 100). Once again capital toys with the hopes of the most vulnerable in society, for the entertainment and profits of others.

The wheels of global capital continue to turn in the postcolonial megalopolises of Mumbai and Manila. Little has changed through independence for the poorest citizens of either country, the *slumdogs* of these worlds. Others have been more fortunate as the spoils of globalisation are shared. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin offer a working definition of globalisation as the process whereby individual lives and local communities are affected by economic and social forces that operate world-wide. In effect, they consider it to be the process of the world becoming a single place (2000, 110). This fact is exemplified by the existence of the Mumbai call centre where Jamal works as a young adult. It is no longer important that the people who answer the phones are not British or even in Britain. Outsourcing means businesses can move wherever they like and global communication allows the staff to act as if they were calling from down the street. They learn the minimal cultural references they need to claim proximity to the client. In *Slumdog Millionaire* Jamal has become an expert on the lives of the characters from *EastEnders*, a popular London soap opera; we also see the staff learning about the Edinburgh Festival. Similarly in *The Solemn Lantern Maker*, Elvis wears an *I Love New York* baseball cap. He is confused when Cate Burns asks him about this; first admitting that he has never been there, then reassuring her that he does in fact love New York, so as to ensure she buys the paper lantern (2008a, 8). It does not matter that he has never been there, Elvis is perfectly aware of what New York means; the city's fame and influence reaches all over the world. The same can be said regarding Elvis's penchant for McDonalds hamburgers, and large shopping malls that supply the same brands to Manila as one can find anywhere in the world.

The issue of globalisation arises within and without my chosen texts, in terms of their production, and promotion to a global audience. Roland Robertson coined the term *glocalization* referring to how "the major producers of 'global culture' . . . increasingly tailor their products to a differentiated global market (which they partly construct). For example, Hollywood attempts to employ mixed, 'multinational' casts of actors and a variety of 'local' settings when it is particularly concerned, as it increasingly is, to get a global audience" (2006, 479). Producers of global culture have come to realise that *exotic* sells and now global audiences crave it all the more. Graham Huggan has written extensively on this phenomenon in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*. He refers to *Indo-chic*, which could easily be used to classify Boyle's vision



of India, complete with its final Bollywood-style dance routine. Huggan also focuses on the production and promotion of postcolonial literature, and its popularity among Western literary prize judges, most notably the Booker Prize wins for Indian authors Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy:

The success of writers like Rushdie and . . . Roy owes to the skill with which they manipulate commercially viable metropolitan codes. They are conscious that their writing, ostensibly oppositional, is vulnerable to recuperation; in ironically rehearsing a continuing history of imperialist perceptions of an 'othered' India . . . they know their work might still be used as a means of reconfirming an existing imperial gaze. (2001, 81)

Rushdie and Roy portray India as a magical place of mystery, colonial nostalgia and romantic tourist destinations, which is conspicuously consumed in the West as a metonym of India itself. Although Huggan does recognise that while these authors contribute to this phenomenon, they criticise it at the same time by drawing their readers into an awareness of it in their writing.

If one looks at *The Solemn Lantern Maker* in this context it is interesting to note that it has never been published in the Philippines, only in Australia by Murdoch Books and by Random House in the United States. It seems the publishers saw the novel as being more suitable for exclusively Western consumption. Or perhaps Random House in the Philippines thought it would be a hard sell, with commercial viability having the final say. In the ABC radio interview already mentioned, Bobis expressed the hope that the novel would arrive in the Philippines from the United States. The novel's availability in the Philippines therefore depends on its reception and success in the United States market. One could also question whether being published by Random House (one of the world's largest publishing houses, and subsidiary of multinational media corporation Bertelsmann) neutralises the novel's political message regarding neo-colonialism and globalisation. Personally I think Random House is more interested in marketing a new author in the West, than anything else (irrespective of her politics). Random House also published the memoir of one of *Slumdog Millionaire's* child actors, the corporation seemingly eager to take advantage of the film's global success.<sup>8</sup> The opening credits of *Slumdog Millionaire* reveal global entertainment company Celador as one of the film's producers, the same Celador that owns the worldwide rights to *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?*, thereby further highlighting the global (and commercial) nature of Boyle's *Indian story*.

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<sup>8</sup> *Slumgirl Dreaming: My Journey to the Stars* (Ali, Berthod, and Dugar 2009) is the memoir of nine year old Rubina Ali, who plays young Latika in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Jaikummar refers to this book in her article "Slumdog Celebrities" (2010).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study of slum life in the twenty-first century focuses on two different types of text from two countries which share a colonial past but have evolved along significantly different paths, post-independence. Neither country can escape the forces of globalisation, which affect the lives of their poorest and most vulnerable citizens, and neither text can escape the origin and influence of its creator. *Slumdog Millionaire* is beautifully shot, with an exciting narrative technique and sleek editing making it an impressive cinematic experience. Its exotic appeal to distant Western viewers plays on an exciting imagined India. While most will remain at a safe distance, the Western tourist seeking out one of Mumbai's slum tours is the extreme consequence of such exotic appeal. The slum may be an exciting place to be for the duration of either the tour or Boyle's film, but both must come to an end and reality must begin again. *The Solemn Lantern Maker* is fantastically descriptive; with short chapters like scenes from a film, and a complicated plot, slowly revealed through subtle clues that reward the reader's attention. Ironically, it seems ideal for a film adaptation, though one wonders whether Hollywood studios would balk at its politics.

Nevertheless one must be careful with film poster slogans and catchy blurbs that try to unduly influence their audience. Being told one is about to see the "feel good movie of the year" (*Slumdog Millionaire*) or witness one family's journey in a season of wonder and miracles (*The Solemn Lantern Maker*), can soften slightly one's critical eye. Should one really feel good at the sight of abject poverty and corruption? Is there anything wondrous or miraculous about Noland and his crippled mother Nena's struggle to survive in the face of state oppression? Or Elvis's eventual tragic demise, shot by a police force looking for someone to blame? No, would be my answer to these questions.

Looking at the texts from a postcolonial critical perspective, certain issues arise that might otherwise be overlooked, such as how a text is presented and sold to its audience, who that audience is, and who *decides* who that audience is going to be. Ultimately these decisions are made by multinational publishing houses or film studios based on the latest cultural fads; what they believe the public wants, or rather what they believe the public will buy into. Capital dictates, just as it does in Bobis's Manila. It is only when a writer or director is firmly established (having won major literary or film awards) that he or she can begin to exert some control over these issues.

I have looked at both internal and external contexts for the literary and film texts under scrutiny in order to evaluate their degree of implication in the global spectacle of the so-called *poverty tour*. My focus on their representation of the slums in the megalopolises of Manila and Mumbai has attempted to reveal the persistence of colonial legacies at the heart of neo-imperial practices that are widely circulated as the appealing lure of globalisation.

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