Weakened Women Make the Hero

A Feminist Reading of the Protagonist in *Slumdog Millionaire*

Försvagade kvinnor skapar hjälten
En feministisk läsning av protagonisten i *Slumdog Millionaire*

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Date *2018-01-08*
Abstract

This essay explores and problematizes the relationship between the protagonist Ram and the female characters of Vikas Swarup’s novel *Slumdog Millionaire*. In order to analyse Ram in relation to women, feminist theory is used together with discussions of patriarchy, India and Bollywood. The analysis shows that the protagonist weakens and degrades women by focusing on their appearances, forcing them to conform to traditional gender roles, diminishing their abilities and strength and, most importantly, by saving them. Throughout the novel, women are depicted as weak victims, while Ram portrays himself as a strong, masculine, hero. This analysis suggests that his actions are due to influence from patriarchy, Indian society and Bollywood cinema.

Key words: Vikas Swarup, Slumdog Millionaire, Feminist Criticism, Literature

Sammanfattning

Denna uppsats problematiserar och utforskar relationen mellan huvudkaraktären Ram och de kvinnliga karaktärerna i Vikas Swarups roman *Slumdog Millionaire*. För att kunna analysera huvudkaraktären i relation till kvinnor, används feministisk teori, tillsammans med diskussioner om patriarkatet, Indien och Bollywood. Denna analys visar att Ram försvagar och nedvärderar kvinnor genom att fokusera på deras utseende, tvinga dem att anpassa sig till traditionella könsroller, förminska deras förmågor och styrka och, framförallt, genom att rädda dem. Genom hela romanen är kvinnor framställda som svaga offer, medan Ram porträtterar sig själv som en stark, maskulin hjälte. Denna analys hävdar att han agerar på detta sätt på grund av influenser från patriarkatet, det Indiska samhället och Bollywoodfilmer.

Key words: Vikas Swarup, Slumdog Millionaire, Feminist Criticism, Literature
Nobody is a villain in their own story. We're all the heroes of our own stories

-George R.R. Martin

Vikas Swarup’s *Slumdog Millionaire* from 2005 is a novel that received much criticism when it was published, as it depicts India as a nation of violence and sexual transgressions. However, when looking at the novel from a feminist perspective, violence and sexual transgressions are not the only problematic elements. Despite being seen by the scholar Ajay Gehlawat as a moral character, the protagonist portrays women as weak and stereotypical characters who need a man to save them (16). The protagonist does defend and rescue women throughout the novel, but his motif seems to be to strengthen his own position as the hero of the story, rather than actually helping the female characters. Drawing on feminist theory, I argue that influences from Bollywood movies and the harsh version of patriarchy in India provide Ram with an objectifying and stereotypical view of women, and in order to strengthen his position as the hero, he constructs women as weak victims in need of rescue.

For the sake of the analysis, definitions of some key terms and a note on narration is included, as well as research and discussions about women’s position in India. The notion of ‘the woman in need’ is also explored, as it is highly relevant to my reading of the novel. The essay also includes examples of events, topics and characters that might have influenced Ram’s view of women. With this information at hand, the reader of this essay will hopefully not only see how Ram degrades women, but also why he does it.

First, I define some key terms that are used throughout the essay. ‘Patriarchy’ is defined by Sylvia Walby in *Theorizing Patriarchy* as a system of domination where “men as

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1 *Slumdog Millionaire* was first published under the title *Q&A*, but after the film adaption was released in 2008 under the name *Slumdog Millionaire*, the title of the novel was changed accordingly.
a group dominate women as a group and are the main beneficiaries of the subordination of women” (3). In a patriarchal society, women are subordinate while men are dominant. Walby suggests that the patriarchy is present in all aspects of life, not only in sexuality and violence but also in everyday chores and conversations (3). Another key term in this essay is ‘gender stereotype’. Michelle Veenstra’s idea of gender stereotypes or, also called traditional gender roles, is that “feminine traits include being emotional, submissive, weak, cooperative, artistic, and home-focused; masculine traits include being rational, unemotional, aggressive, competitive, strong, scientifically or mathematically skilled, and career-focused” (622). It is clear that such a division of feminine and masculine traits supports the patriarchal hierarchy where men, as Walby expresses, dominate women (3). The terms ‘sexualisation’ and ‘objectification’ are also used and here understood as two ways of dominating women. Walby suggests that sexuality is male-dominated in patriarchal societies and that men sexualize and dominate women simultaneously and force their sexuality on women through “rape, prostitution, pornography and other cultural practices” (121). Some more terms and definitions are provided when needed later in the essay.

*Slumdog Millionaire* is the story of Ram, a poor orphan who is arrested for winning the Indian equivalent of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire”. He is left at the door of a church as an infant and therefore grows up on the church compound, only to be sent to a juvenile home when his guardian, the priest, is killed. He is then adopted by criminals and barely escapes physical mutilation. He ends up at the door of a famous Bollywood actress, only to be sent to the streets again when she kills herself. All of these events occur before his fourteenth birthday, meaning that Ram lives through many tragic events already as a child, and his life continues on this sad path for a long time. Eventually, he ends up at a quiz show. Despite not having any formal education, he manages to answer all twelve questions
correctly, and thus wins “the world’s biggest jackpot” (Swarup 312). His experiences appears, however, to have left him with a problematic view of women. It seems like Ram’s view of women derives partly from the stereotypical female characters in his beloved Bollywood movies, and partly from living in the harsh version of patriarchy that India represents. Ram promotes this view because it puts him in a position where he can be the powerful hero who saves women.

Ram’s meeting with his lawyer Smita constitutes the frame narrative of Slumdog Millionaire. Ram is accused of cheating on the quiz show, and it seems like his jackpot might turn into a long prison sentence. In order to clear his name, Ram tells Smita the story of how he came to know the answers of the quiz show, and the main body of the novel is thus narrated through Ram’s recollections. Ram’s stories are told non-chronologically as analepses in the order they appear on the quiz show. Only the prologue and epilogue are depictions from the present time of the story. The prologue and epilogue have no diegetic audience. Instead, it seems like Ram is talking directly to the reader. In the rest of the novel, Smita is the audience. The whole novel is written in first person, and therefore all events of the novel, including his meeting with Smita, are filtered through Ram. He is a highly unreliable narrator, both because he is trying to convince Smita that the criminal charges that he is facing are false, and because he has a strong wish to be the hero of his own story, which might motivate him to alter the story to put himself in a better light.

Ram’s unreliability of course affects the analysis of him in relation to the female characters. It is impossible to know if the events of the novel are retold correctly or not and he also has the power to omit events or details of stories that might portray him as the villain. His reliability is however addressed in the epilogue, where he has found out that his lawyer Smita is actually Gudiya, his childhood friend:
‘That evening, when you saved me from the police station, why didn’t you tell me straightaway that you were Gudiya?’ ‘Because I wanted to hear your stories and find out the truth. Only when you narrated my own story, without realizing that I was in front of you, did I know for sure that you were telling me the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.’ (Swarup 317)

To say that Ram, by telling Gudiya’s story correctly, shows that he is a reliable narrator is however an overstatement. Her story is one that portrays him as a hero, and therefore he has no reason to alter it. More importantly, Ram is the first-person narrator of his dialogues with Smita, and he can alter her validation of his stories as well.

The world of *Slumdog Millionaire* is that of a patriarchal society where traditional gender roles are favored, which puts the female characters in a controlled and subordinate position. Indian society is a particularly harsh version of patriarchy, as demonstrated by the fact that “each year thousands of wives in India are maimed or murdered, many of them doused with kerosene and set ablaze by husbands dissatisfied by their spouses’ behaviors or the sizes of their dowries” (Banoum 1549). Also, Bandana Purkayastha states in *The Study of Gender in India*..., that single women in India are victims of “social and economic distress” and have to work hard to “live a life of dignity, free from social stigma and with financial and social security” (512). With this in mind, it is easy to see that women in India are exposed to a version of patriarchy that is incredibly ruthless and in some cases even deadly. Furthermore, all ideas of women, gender roles and femininity presented in the narrative are filtered through Ram, and align well with Veensta’s traditional gender roles. Many of the female characters of *Slumdog Millionaire* adhere to these gender roles, and they are often weakened and dominated by men. Women who do not adhere to the gender roles offered by the patriarchal society are positioned as problematic by other men and women, which is yet another way to
weaken the position of women in society as well as the female characters in the novel. As described by Banoum, Purkayastha and Veenstra, women in India are more vulnerable than most women in other societies as they face a particularly harsh version of patriarchy and are obliged to follow stereotypical gender roles. The vulnerable position of the women is often used by Ram to promote his own masculinity and position in the story.

Sexualisation and domination of women are elements present in many of the stories in *Slumdog Millionaire*, and it is exercised by Ram and other male characters in multiple ways, from rape to commenting on their looks. In a patriarchal society, “men sexually objectify women, reducing them to mere sexual objects,” which is exactly what Ram does in *Slumdog Millionaire* by focusing on the female characters’ appearances instead of their talents or behavior (Walby 118). Furthermore, Catherine MacKinnon suggests in *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State...*, that women are defined by what “turns men on” (531). Ram evaluates all female characters based on their looks, and through the first-person narration he has the power to define them, like MacKinnon says, through what turns him on. Nita, Neelima, Meenakshi, Swapna, Maggie, Lajwanti and Gudiya/Smita are the seven main female characters in *Slumdog Millionaire*. Out of the seven characters, Ram describes five as beautiful or good-looking: Swapna “might have been beautiful in her youth” (Swarup 248) and Smita is slim built, with “nice teeth and lovely arched eyebrows” (Swarup 13). His comments on their looks reveal an objectifying view of women, that, like Walby expresses, reduces them to sexual objects. As Walby also writes, “men sexualize and dominate women simultaneously” which suggests that Ram’s objectification is also a means for him to dominate the female characters and thereby improve his own position in the story (121). Ram’s objectification and sexualisation of women are clear signs of the patriarchal norms he upholds and, even though he might not appear to do so at first glance, reinforces.
Another example of Ram’s objectifying view of women is found in the chapter “The Death of a Hero,” where he watches a Bollywood movie with his favorite actress Priya as the female lead. Priya is portrayed as the perfect woman: “She is a tall, good-looking actress who won the Miss World title a few years ago. Her body is sculpted like that of a classical beauty, with heavy breasts and a slim waist. She is my favorite actress these days” (Swarup 23). Through Ram’s eyes, Priya is defined and sexualised by her appearance rather than by her personality or acting skills. Ram also compares other female characters to Priya: “There is no chance of my falling in love with any girl in the chawl. They are all fat and ugly, not even remotely like my favorite actress, Priya Kapoor” (Swarup 56). Priya becomes a paragon of beauty for Ram, and he compares women he meets in real life to an actress he has only seen on screen. Priya is a fictional and mediated beauty following the patriarchal norms, and to compare her to women in real life is problematic, especially since Priya’s role in the movies is first and foremost to be a woman for the hero to lust and be inspired by, and not important outside of her relation to the male hero. In a similar fashion, Ram defines and evaluates all women he meets based on their looks rather than their actions, very much in line with MacKinnon’s statement that women are defined by what “turns men on” (531).

It is difficult to talk about the portrayal of women in *Slumdog Millionaire* without mentioning Bollywood movies and the concept of the hero and heroine. In the novel, the movies Ram watches are referred to as Hindi movies rather than Bollywood movies. But as Rajinder Dudrah writes in *Bollywood: Sociology Goes To the Movies*, Bollywood is “the moniker for popular Hindi cinema”, and as ‘Bollywood movies’ is the term used in the majority of secondary sources, this term is used here (6). The hero and heroine are common terms in Bollywood movies. In the *Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus* the hero and heroine are defined as “a person who is admired for having done something very
brave or having achieved something great” or “the main male/female character in a book or film who is usually good”. In the Bollywood genre, the protagonist is often a hero who fights to gain the love and trust of the main female character, the heroine. When mentioning the hero and heroine and what differentiates them, it is crucial to mention that the heroes are supposed to save the heroine. As Veenstra’s definition of stereotypical gender roles indicates, men should be strong and women should be weak, which creates a market for male rescue missions. Once a man saves a woman, the difference between them has increased, as the man has gained strength while the woman has grown weaker by knowing that she cannot save herself. On the same note, Jigna Desai writes in Beyond Bollywood…, that “most often, the heroine provides the mechanism for inspiring and reasserting his [the hero’s] Indianness”, which suggests that Bollywood heroes save women to boost their own status, rather than for the woman’s sake (194). Ram, being a huge fan of Bollywood movies, internalizes the behavior of the heroes, and projects the role of the heroine who needs saving on the female characters he meets.

When Ram meets women that fit his own assumptions about what a heroine should be like, he projects the heroine role on to her, strengthening his own position as the hero of the story. According to Ram, a heroine should be beautiful, as noted when he assesses his employer Neelima as “tall and beautiful, just like a heroine, only older” (Swarup 211). A heroine should be ‘good’ and follow the patriarchal gender roles. Therefore, the perfect heroine is beautiful and feminine, if femininity equals weakness and submission, as Veenstra suggests. As mentioned earlier, Ram calls all of the main female characters beautiful. Most of them also follow the stereotypical gender roles, meaning that many of the female characters fit the role of the heroine. Priya is Ram’s paragon of beauty, and as the male hero always saves her in the movies, Ram is probably inspired by the behaviour of these heroes when he
meets other beautiful women. He presumably hopes that his rescue missions will lead to him marrying the heroine and a happy ending of the story, like it always does in the movies.

Ram’s fascination with Bollywood cinema seems to derive from his stay with Neelima Kumari. Although he seems to be familiar with the concept already when he meets her, given that he says that she looks “like a heroine,” it seems like his love for the genre is intensified by his stay with her (Swarup 211). Neelima is a retired actress and shows Ram many of her movies. She is the only mother figure Ram has ever had in his life, and he is very fond of her: “for the first time I felt as though I was not an orphan anymore. That I had a real mother, one whose face I could see, one whose flesh I could touch” (Swarup 230). Neelima has trouble separating fiction from reality, which becomes clear when she tells Ram that: “when he tortures me with cigarette butts, I don’t want to scream. I want to recite those memorable lines from my film Woman” (Swarup 225). Ram begins to imitate this behavior and comments on real life events by using movie references. For example, when Neelima is robbed but invites the robber for tea, because he is a fan of hers, Ram comments: “what started as a thriller has turned out to be a family drama” (Swarup 223). Ram’s difficulties to separate fiction from reality then seems to stick with him throughout his life. On another note, Neelima is very depressed and eventually commits suicide, which seems to affect Ram deeply. Actually, Ram’s rescue missions, which are the focus of this essay, do not appear until after Neelima’s death, which suggests that his stay with the former actress is what inspired him to take on the role of the hero. Furthermore, Ram comments that Neelima’s abusive relationships makes him feel “pained and angry, and powerless to protect her” and his powerlessness in this situation also seems to be a factor that inspires him to save other women later (Swarup 225).
Ram is not only heavily influenced by Bollywood movies but also has trouble separating fiction from reality. This is particularly evident in his relationship to women and especially when he is about to meet the prostitute Nita for the first time. At the time, Ram works as a tour guide of the Taj Mahal, and some of his rich customers bring him to the red light district and buy him a prostitute. Already before Ram meets Nita, he imagines his coming relationship to her by narrating it like a Bollywood movie: “I wonder whether I have been brought to this whorehouse with a purpose. Whether there is a heroine waiting for me behind this door. Whether I am her hero, who is supposed to rescue her. And whether I can alter the ending and prevent her death” (Swarup 260). The hero and heroine are clear examples of movie references, and the question whether he can “alter the ending” is yet another indication that Ram uses the fictional worlds of Bollywood movies as a pattern for his actions. When Ram envisions his meeting with Nita, he wants to be her hero and alter the ending of the story, exposing Ram’s difficulties to separate the plots of his beloved Bollywood movies from real life. Heroes, heroines and “altering the ending” are all elements that are also present when Ram describes one of his favorite Bollywood movies: “Armaan and Priya will now sing a song in Switzerland, before Priya is murdered by a rival gang. Then Armaan will kill hundreds of bad guys in revenge, expose corrupt politicians and police officers, and finally die a hero’s death” (Swarup 25). In this movie, it is clear that the hero should rescue, or at least avenge, the heroine to keep his hero-status. Furthermore, that Ram calls the actors Armaan and Priya by their real names instead of the names of the characters in the movie is yet another indication of his difficulty to separate fiction from reality.

As highlighted in the previous paragraph, Ram portrays Nita as a victim he needs to save even before he meets her. But when he actually meets her, she seems quite rude and cold: “Prostitutes don’t have surnames. Like pet cats and dogs, we are called only by our
first names. Nita, Rita, Asha, Champa, Meena, Leena, take your pick’. She says this in a matter-of-fact-tone, without any rancor or regret” (Swarup 261). Consequently, Ram seems to see her as rational and unemotional, which are defined as stereotypical male traits by Veenstra, and thus he assumes that she is not a heroine that needs saving. Nonetheless, Ram likes both Nita and the sex, and makes it a weekly habit to go to the red light district and pay for her services. That Ram has sex with a prostitute is problematic because, as Walby indicates, prostitution is merely another way of sexually dominating women. Therefore, having sex with Nita can be seen as a way for Ram to dominate her and push her towards the traditional female gender role.

Once Ram gets to know Nita personally, he recognizes that she, despite her tough surface, is also a victim: “Perhaps if I had been plain-looking, like my sister, I would not have been sent here. I might have gone to school, married, and had children. Now I am in this brothel. So don’t call me beautiful” (Swarup 267). This quote reveals her feminine side, she is emotional and weak, like a woman is supposed to be according to Veenstra’s gender roles. The quote also suggests that Nita’s beauty is a curse for her, preventing her from living a traditional life. Women are, as Veenstra writes, supposed to be “home-focused” in a patriarchal system, and Nita’s inability to live a traditional, home-focused life, together with her weak and emotional side turns her into a victim in Ram’s eyes (622). As he recognizes that she is in fact a heroine in need of saving, he immediately tries to be the hero and save her from a life of prostitution. Nita becomes yet another example of a victimized female character Ram believes is in need of a man to save her.

For a long time it seems like Ram will not be able to save Nita, but by winning the quiz show, he also ends up winning her. From the beginning, Ram’s plan for saving Nita is to take her away from the red light district and marry her. Nita’s pimp will however not allow
Ram’s dream to come true, as he would then lose her as a source of income. When Nita is severely abused by one of her customers and ends up in hospital, Ram is deeply affected and tries to pay for her freedom, but once again her pimp refuses. It then seems as if Ram’s rescue mission has failed, and that he will end up empty-handed and heart broken. However, in the last chapter the reader finds out that Ram in fact applies to the quiz show to avenge both Nita and Neelima. Ram has figured out that the show host, Prem Kumar, is the man who abused both Neelima and Nita, and Ram’s plan is to avenge them by killing him. Prem, scared for his life, promises to help Ram with the last question of the show if he gets to live. Ram lets Prem help him, as he finds that he is not able to go through with the murder. Ram wins the quiz show, and except for avenging the women he loves, he gains a fortune and is able to pay off Nita’s pimp and marry her.

Another example of Ram’s heroic rescue missions is provided in the chapter “A Brother’s Promise”. Gudiya, Ram’s neighbor, suffers from her father’s abusive behavior and fears that he will rape her: ‘‘I will not live much longer, Ram Mohammad Thomas’’ she sobs. ‘‘I will commit suicide rather than submit to my father”’ (Swarup 68). Ram, who is only a child at this point, sees Gudiya’s suffering and pushes her father down the stairs, to what Ram believes is his death. He thereby saves Gudiya from her father and becomes the hero of yet another story. Gudiya is both older and more educated than Ram, but still Ram perceives himself to be more capable of saving her than she is herself. This perceived incapability seems to be related to gender. As indicated by Walby, Banoum and Purkayastha, the harsh version of patriarchy present in India place women in a weak and vulnerable position and Ram’s conclusion that Gudiya cannot save herself is thus well-established in their society.

Also, Peter Glick writes in “Sexism, Role of Power In” that “affectionate but condescending attitudes toward women promote patronizing behavior (often couched as “chivalry”)” that
butresses men's greater power and influence” (3). Ram is very affectionate towards Gudiya, he calls her sister and his pity for her seems genuine. However, he patronizes her by thinking that she cannot take care of herself, and thereby, as Glick indicates, increases his own power. Patronizing is yet another strategy for Ram to establish himself as the male hero of the story.

Ram also forces a strong, masculine woman to conform to the traditional gender roles. Swapna is rich and cold. She disregards her mentally challenged son Shankar, and does not even acknowledge him as her son. Ram lives together with Shankar in one of Swapna’s outhouses, without knowing that the poor, mute boy, is actually the heir of Swapna’s fortune. She is “probably the richest woman in Agra,” but when Shankar needs a rabies treatment she refuses to pay for it (Swarup 250). Instead of being a caring mother she is cold and angry and does therefore not fit the traditional role of a woman or mother. Judith Roof et al. writes in “Gender Roles,” that “it is widely assumed that women have a ‘maternal instinct’, which makes it natural for them to want children and want to be primary in caring for them,” but this is obviously not true for Swapna who instead leaves her son to die (620). Shankar eventually dies because of Swapna’s lack of care. She seems to have what Veenstra calls traditional masculine traits, like “being rational, unemotional, aggressive” (622). Ram is so infuriated by her lack of maternal instincts that he interrupts one of her big parties by putting Shankar’s dead body on a table for all of her guests to see. She is punished by Ram for her unmotherliness instead of saved like the other female characters, who adhere more closely to Ram’s stereotypical view of women.

By punishing Swapna, Ram reasserts his own masculinity at the same time as he weakens her position in society. Swapna seems to be an immoral but strong character. She is strong even though she is a single woman living in India, which Purkayastha indicates should make Swapna a victim of “social and economic distress” (512). Nonetheless, she succeeds in
staying strong and independent until Ram’s action makes her weak. By exposing Shankar’s dead body during her party, Ram weakens Swapna’s position in society and she is thereby pushed into the weak, feminine gender role. How she deals with this degradation of her character is impossible to know, given that she is never allowed to take part in the story again. Her absence from the rest of the story can be seen as yet another way of weakening her position, as Ram, through the first-person narration, has the power to not give her, a strong female character, a voice. Ram’s power over the narration makes it easy for him to control all characters, and as his patriarchal agenda is explored, it seems likely that he uses this power to control female characters and perhaps omit those who do not strengthen his position. In the end, Ram has improved his masculinity and hero-status by avenging Shankar and by constructing Swapna, a strong female character, as weak.

Ram does not only downgrade weak or masculine women, but also the heroic ones, as in the case of Smita. In the frame narrative, unlike the stories within the frame, a female character is the hero. Ram’s lawyer Smita helps him out of prison and also helps him to obtain the money he wins at the quiz show. In many of the stories told in the frame narrative Ram plays the part of the hero and saves women, but in the frame narrative, Smita is the hero and saves a man, Ram. Ram comments on this by saying that “she fought for me like a mother fights for her children,” so even though she saves him, which Ram seems grateful for, she is positioned as a “mother” rather than “hero” (Swarup 315). According to Judith Roof et al. “the structural binarism of gender roles produces an artificial opposition in the qualities imagined to belong to each gender. If males are smart, females must be less smart. If males are strong, females are weak,” which when applied to the story means that, if Ram, being a man, cannot be the hero of this particular story, Smita cannot be the hero either, and instead she is reduced to a mother (617).
In *Slumdog Millionaire* Ram focuses on saving women, but he also tries to depict himself as a moral character by saving his male friends. For example, when Ram and Salim live together at an orphanage, a man who works there tries to rape Salim. Fortunately, Ram prevents the assault and Salim is unharmed. Further on, they are adopted by criminals who want to blind them in order to make them good beggars. At the last minute, Ram saves both himself and Salim by running away. Ram also tries to help Shankar when he contracts rabies, but fails. He later tries to compensate for this failure by paying for an unknown boy’s rabies treatment. As mentioned, Gehlawat states that “Ram Mohammad Thomas radiates moral clarity”, and given that Ram does not only save potential heroines, this seems to ring true (16). Ram’s morality should however not be taken for granted, as he repeatedly depicts women as weak, and also abuses them himself. Alpana Sharma writes in *Slumdog Millionaire: The film, the reception, the book, the global* that “in the Dickensian world of *Q&A*, children and the marginalized (women and the poor) live with the knowledge that they are the toys that adults and rich men play with” (210). Ram, Shankar and Salim, being poor children, are part of “the marginalized,” but they still have an advantage because of their gender. As mentioned before, Roof claims that: “If males are strong, females are weak”, which also suggests that if males are weak, females must be weaker (617). The male victims are abused in various ways, and therefore they are weak in some respect. Salim, for example, is saved from sexual abuse. He is however a very young child at the time, meaning that he is more vulnerable and weak than men are supposed to be according Veenstra’s gender stereotypes. Salim and the other male characters’ weaknesses are always due to special circumstances, such as mental disability or immaturity, whereas the female characters are portrayed perfunctorily as weak. So to say, like Gehlawat, that Ram “radiates moral clarity”
is an overstatement, and even more so if one considers the fact that Ram spends his life trying to save women from male predators, but still sleeps with a prostitute (16).

To conclude, one can say that Ram’s position in *Slumdog Millionaire* is more complex than it might seem to be at first glance. India, with its harsh version of patriarchy, puts the female characters of the novel in a strikingly vulnerable position, as the society depicted in the novel favors men and promotes male domination. Ram objectifies and dominates women by commenting on their appearances but also by saving them. By focusing on their looks he tells the reader that their actions are less important and by constantly defending and rescuing them he indicates that they are not capable of taking care of themselves. Both of these actions are however defended by patriarchy, and are instead classed as compliments or acts of chivalry. Bollywood cinema, with its problematic portrayal of gender roles, appears to have a strong influence on Ram. It seems like his stay with the actress Neelima Kumari, and especially her death, prompts him to mimic his Bollywood heroes. They, like Ram, save weak and beautiful women to reassert their own masculinity and strength. When Ram in his turn is saved by a woman, he dismisses the act by calling it an act of a mother instead of that of a hero. Taking all of this into account, it is safe to say that Ram has acquired an objectifying and stereotypical view of women through living under the influence Bollywood movies and the harsh version of patriarchy present in India. Throughout the novel, women are depicted as weak victims, while Ram portrays himself as a strong, masculine, hero and therefore weakened women make the hero.
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