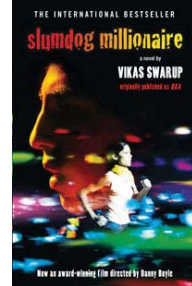




RANDOM HOUSE AUSTRALIA

Q&A: Slumdog Millionaire (Film Tie In)
by Vikas Swarup

Format: Paperback
ISBN: 9780552775359
Imprint: Black Swan
Released in December, 2008



Chapter 1

1,000 Rupees

The Death of a Hero

The third bell has sounded. The purple velvet curtain is about to be raised. The lights are progressively dimming, till only the red signs showing EXIT remain, glowing like embers in the darkened hall. Popcorn sellers and cold-drinks vendors begin to leave. Salim and I settle down in our seats.

The first thing you must know about Salim is that he is my best friend. The second is that he is crazy about Hindi films. But not all Hindi films. Just the ones featuring Armaan Ali.

They say that first there was Amitabh Bachchan. Then there was Shahrukh Khan. Now there is Armaan Ali. The ultimate action hero. The Indian Greek god. The heartthrob of millions.

Salim loves Armaan. Or, more accurately, he worships Armaan. His tiny room in the chawl is a shrine. It is lined with posters of all kinds depicting the hero in various poses. Armaan in a leather jacket. Armaan on a motorbike. Armaan with his shirt off, baring his hairy chest. Armaan with a gun. Armaan on a horse. Armaan in a pool, surrounded by a bevy of beauties.

We are occupying seats A21 and A22 in the very first row of the dress circle in Regal Talkies in Bandra. We shouldn't really be sitting here. The tickets in my front pocket do not say DRESS CIRCLE RS. 150. They say FRONT STALL RS. 25. The usher was in a good mood today and did us a favor. He told us to go and enjoy the balcony because the stalls were practically deserted. Even the balcony is almost empty. Apart from Salim and me, there are no more than two dozen people in the rows ahead of us.

When Salim and I go to the movies, we usually sit in the front stalls, where we can make catcalls and whistle. Salim believes the nearer you sit to the screen, the closer you are to the action. He says he can lean forward and almost touch Armaan. He can count the veins on Armaan's biceps, he can see the whites of Armaan's hazel-green eyes, the fine stubble on Armaan's cleft chin, the little black mole on Armaan's chiseled nose.

I am not particularly fond of Armaan Ali. I think he acts the same way in every movie. But I, too, like to sit in the front rows, as close to the giant screen as possible. The heroine's breasts appear more voluptuous from there.



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The curtain has now lifted, and the screen flickers to life. First we have the advertisements. Four sponsored by private companies and one by the government. We are told how to come first at school and become champions in cricket by eating cornflakes for breakfast. How to drive fast cars and win gorgeous girls by using Spice cologne. ("That's the perfume used by Armaan," exclaims Salim.) How to get a promotion and have shiny white clothes by using Roma soap. How to live life like a king by drinking Red & White whisky. And how to die of lung cancer by smoking cigarettes.

After the adverts, there is a little pause while the reels are changed. We cough and clear our throats. And then the censor certificate appears on the CinemaScope screen. It tells us that the film has been certified U/A, has seventeen reels and a length of 4,639.15 meters. The certificate is signed by one Mrs. M. Kane, chairman of the Censor Board. She is the one who signs all censor certificates. Salim has often asked me about this lady. He really envies her job. She gets to see Armaan's pictures before anyone else.

The opening credits begin to roll. Salim knows everyone in this film. He knows who is the wardrobe man, who is the hairstylist, who is the makeup man. He knows the names of the production manager, the finance controller, the sound recordist, and all the assistants. He doesn't speak English very well, but he can read names, even the ones in really small print. He has watched this film eight times already, and every time he memorizes a new name. But if you were to see the concentration on his face right now, you would think he was watching the First Day First Show with black-market tickets.

Within two minutes, Armaan Ali makes his grand entrance by jumping down from a blue-and-white helicopter. Salim's eyes light up. I see the same innocent excitement on his face as when he first saw Armaan, a year ago. In person.

Salim comes running through the door and collapses facedown on the bed.

I am alarmed. "Salim!...Salim!" I shout. "What's happened to you? How come you are back so early?" I turn him on his back. He is laughing.

"The most amazing thing has happened today. This is the happiest day of my life," he declares.

"What is it? Have you won a lottery?"

"No. Something even better than winning a lottery. I have seen Armaan Ali."

Bit by breathless bit, the whole story comes out. How Salim caught a glimpse of Armaan Ali while doing his daily round in Ghatkopar. The star was alighting from his Mercedes-Benz to enter a five-star hotel. Salim was traveling on a bus to deliver his last tiffin box to a customer. The moment he spotted Armaan, he jumped down from the speeding vehicle, narrowly missing being run down by a car, and ran toward the actor, who was passing through the hotel's revolving door. He was stopped by the tall, strapping uniformed guard and prevented from entering the hotel. "Armaan!" Salim called, trying desperately to catch the star's attention. Armaan heard the cry, stopped in his tracks, and turned around. His eyes made contact with Salim's. He gave a faint smile, a barely perceptible nod of acknowledgment, and continued walking into the lobby. Salim forgot all about the tiffin and came racing home to

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give me the news of his dream having come true. A customer of Gawli Tiffin Carriers went hungry that afternoon.

"Does Armaan look different from the way he appears on-screen?" I ask.

"No. He is even better in real life," says Salim. "He is taller and more handsome. My ambition in life is to shake his hand, at least once. I probably won't wash it for a month after that."

I reflect on how good it is to have simple, uncomplicated ambitions. Like shaking a film star's hand.

Meanwhile, on-screen, that hand is holding a gun and pointing it at a group of three policemen. Armaan plays a gangster in this movie. A gangster with a good heart. He loots the rich and distributes money to the poor. In between he falls in love with the heroine, Priya Kapoor, an up-and-coming actress, sings six songs, and fulfills his beloved mother's wish by taking her on a pilgrimage to the shrine of Vaishno Devi. At least, that's the story till the interval.

Priya Kapoor's entry in the film is greeted with catcalls from the stalls. 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. She pouts a lot in the film and keeps on saying "Shut up" to the comedian. We laugh.

"Your ambition is to shake Armaan's hand," I say to Salim. "But what do you think is Armaan's ambition in life? He seems to have it all -- face, fame, and fortune."

"You are wrong," Salim replies solemnly. "He does not have Urvashi."

The papers are full of the Armaan-Urvashi breakup, after a whirlwind romance lasting nine months. There is speculation that Armaan is completely heartbroken. That he has stopped eating and drinking. That he might be suicidal. Urvashi Randhawa has returned to her modeling career.

I see Salim crying. His eyes are red and wet with tears. He has not eaten all day. The heart-shaped glass frame containing a picture of Armaan and Urvashi, on which he had spent almost half his meager salary, lies on the ground, shattered into a hundred pieces.

"Look, Salim, you are being childish. There is nothing you can do about it," I tell him.

"If only I could meet Armaan. I want to comfort him. To hold his hand and let him cry on my shoulder. They say crying makes the heart lighter."

"And what good will that do? Urvashi will not come back to Armaan."

Suddenly Salim looks up. "Do you think I could speak to her? Maybe I could persuade her to come back to Armaan. Tell her that it was all a mistake. Tell her how sad and contrite he is."

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I shake my head. I don't want Salim tramping all over Mumbai looking for Urvashi Randhawa. "It's not a good idea to poke your nose into other people's affairs, or make other people's troubles your own, Salim. Armaan Ali is a mature man. He will deal with his troubles in his own way."

"At least I will send him a gift," says Salim.

He goes and buys a large bottle of Fevicol glue and sets about sticking the shattered pieces of the heart-shaped frame back together again. It takes him a week, but finally the heart is whole, a grid of crisscrossing black streaks the only reminder of the fault lines on which it broke.

"I will now send it to Armaan," he says. "It is a symbol that even a broken heart can be put together again."

"With Fevicol?" I ask.

"No. With love and care."

Salim wraps it up in cloth and sends it to Armaan Ali's home address.

I don't know whether it reached Armaan or not. Whether it was broken by the postal department, smashed by the security guards, or trashed by Armaan's secretary. The important thing is that Salim believes it reached his hero and helped to heal his wound. It made Armaan whole again and enabled him to resume giving blockbusters, such as this one. Which I am seeing for the first time and Salim for the ninth.

A devotional song is playing on the screen. Armaan and his mother are climbing toward the shrine of Vaishno Devi.

"They say if you ask Mata Vaishno Devi sincerely for anything, she grants your wish. Tell me, what would you ask?" I say to Salim.

"What would you ask?" he counters.

"I guess I would ask for money," I say.

"I would ask for Armaan to be reunited with Urvashi," he says, without thinking for even a second.

The screen says INTERVAL in bold red letters.

Salim and I stand up and stretch our arms and legs. We buy two soggy samosas from the food vendor. The boy selling soft drinks looks at the empty seats mournfully. He will not make a good profit today. We decide to go to the toilet. It has nice white tiles, banks of urinals, and clean washbasins. We each have a designated stall. Salim always goes to the one on the extreme right, and I always take the sole urinal on the left side wall. I empty my bladder and



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read the graffiti on the wall. FUCK ME...TINU PISSED HERE...SHEENA IS A WHORE...I LOVE PRIYANKA.

Priyanka? I rail against the graffiti artist who has defaced the last inscription. I spit into my hand and try to remove the extra letters, but they have been written with permanent black marker and refuse to budge. Eventually I use my nails to scratch them off the wall and succeed in restoring the graffiti to its original state, just as I had inscribed it four months ago: I LOVE PRIYA.

The second bell sounds. The interval is over. The film is about to resume. Salim has already briefed me on the remaining plot. 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.

We return to A21 and A22. The hall goes dark again. Suddenly, a tall man enters through the balcony door and takes the seat next to Salim. A20. He has two hundred seats to choose from, but he selects A20. It is impossible to see his face, but I can make out that he is an old man with a long, flowing beard. He is wearing what appears to be a pathan suit.

I am curious about this man. Why is he joining the film halfway through? Did he pay half price for his ticket? Salim is not bothered. He is craning forward in anticipation of the love scene between Armaan and Priya which is about to begin.

Armaan has come to Switzerland, ostensibly to locate a contact but actually to romance Priya and sing a song, in which he is joined by twenty white female dancers wearing traditional costumes that are rather skimpy for a cold, mountainous country. The song and dance over, he is now sitting in his hotel room, where a crackling fire burns in the fireplace.

Priya is taking a bath. We hear the sound of running water and Priya humming a tune, and then we see her in the bath. She applies soap to her legs and back. She raises a leg covered in bubbles and uses the showerhead to wash it clean. I hope she will also use it on her ample chest and make all the bubbles disappear, but she disappoints me.

Finally, she emerges from the bath with just a pink towel around her body. Her jet-black hair hangs loose behind her shoulders, glistening with moisture. Her long legs are smooth and hairless. Armaan takes her in his arms and smothers her face with kisses. His lips move down to the hollow of her neck. Soft romantic music begins to play. Priya undoes the buttons on his shirt, and Armaan slips out of it languidly, exposing his manly chest. The glow of the fire envelops the two lovers in a golden tint. Priya makes soft moaning noises. She arches her back and allows Armaan to caress her throat. His hand snakes to her back and tugs at her towel. The pink fabric loosens and falls at her feet. There is a tantalizing glimpse of thigh and back, but no shot of breasts. Salim believes this is where the censors inserted a cut. And why he envies Mrs. Kane.

Armaan has now locked Priya in his embrace. We are shown the swell of her breasts, her heavy breathing, the perspiration forming on her forehead. There are catcalls and whistles from the stalls. The old man sitting next to Salim shifts uncomfortably in his seat, crossing his legs. I am not sure, but I think his hand is massaging his crotch.

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"The oldie next to you is getting frisky," I whisper to Salim. But he is oblivious to the old man and me. He is gaping at the intertwined bodies thrusting in synchronized rhythm to the music in the background. The camera pans over Armaan's heaving back and zooms in on the fireplace, where golden yellow flames are licking the logs with increasing abandon. Fade to black.

There is a fire of similar proportions in our kitchen when I enter the chawl, but instead of logs, Salim is using paper. "Bastards!...Dogs!" he mutters while tearing a thick sheaf of glossy paper into pieces.

"What are you doing, Salim?" I ask in alarm.

"I am taking revenge on the bastards who have maligned Armaan," he says as he tosses more sheets of paper into the pyre.

I notice that Salim is tearing pages from a magazine.

"Which magazine is this? It looks new."

"It is the latest issue of *Starburst*. I will destroy as many copies as I can lay my hands on. I could buy only ten from the newsstand."

I grab a copy that has not yet been mangled. It has Armaan Ali on the cover, with a screaming headline: "The Naked Truth About This Man."

"But it has your idol on the cover. Why are you destroying it?" I cry.

"Because of what they say inside about Armaan."

"But you can't read."

"I read enough and I can hear. I overheard Mrs. Barve and Mrs. Shirke discussing the scurrilous accusations made against Armaan in this issue."

"Like what?"

"That Urvashi left him because he could not satisfy her. That he is gay."

"So?"

"You think they can abuse my hero in this fashion and get away with it? I know this report is a load of nonsense. Armaan's rivals in the industry are jealous of his success. They have hatched this plot to destroy his reputation. I will not allow them to succeed. I will go to the *Starburst* office and set fire to it."

Salim's anger is white hot. And I know why. He hates gays. To tarnish his idol with the brush of homosexuality is the ultimate insult in his book.



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I, too, know of perverts and what they do to unsuspecting boys. In dark halls. In public toilets. In municipal gardens. In juvenile homes.

Luckily, *Starburst* retracts its allegation in the next issue. And saves a *dabbawallah* from becoming an arsonist.

Meanwhile, things are hotting up offscreen, in seat A20. The old man slides closer to Salim. His leg casually brushes against Salim's. The first time, Salim thinks it is his own fault. The second time, he thinks it is an accident. The third time, he is convinced it is deliberate.

"Mohammad," he whispers to me, "I am going to give a tight kick to the bastard sitting next to me if he doesn't stop his wandering leg."

"Look how old he is, Salim. It's probably just tremors in his leg," I counsel.

The fight sequence has started and Salim is busy watching the action. Armaan has entered the villain's den and all hell is breaking loose. The hero uses all manner of feints and tackles - boxing, karate, kung fu -- to give his opponents a licking.

The old man's hands are also getting into action. He presses his elbow against the common armrest and lets his arm slide next to Salim's, touching it ever so lightly. Salim hardly notices this. He is engrossed in the film, which is reaching its climax.

The most famous scene of the movie is about to happen. The one in which Armaan Ali dies after killing all the bad guys. His vest is soaked in blood. There are bullet wounds all over his body. His trousers are coated with dust and grime. He drags himself along the ground toward his mother, who has just arrived on the scene.

Salim is in tears. He leans forward and says poignantly, "Mother, I hope I have been a good son. Don't cry for me. Remember, dying an honorable death is better than living a coward's life."

Armaan's head is in his mother's lap. He is mimicking Salim: "Mother, I hope I have been a good son. Don't cry for me. Remember, dying an honorable death is better than living a coward's life." The mother is crying too as she cradles his bleeding head in her lap. Tears fall from her eyes on Armaan Ali's face. He grips her hand. His chest convulses.

Tears fall into my lap. I see another mother who kisses her baby many times on his forehead before placing him in a clothes bin, rearranging the clothes around him. In the background the wind howls. Sirens sound. The police have arrived, as usual, too late. After the hero has done all the work for them. They cannot do anything for him now.

I see that the bearded man's left hand has moved. It is now placed in Salim's lap and rests there gently. Salim is so engrossed in the death scene he does not register it. The old man is emboldened. He rubs his palm against Salim's jeans. As Armaan takes his last few breaths, the man increases his pressure on Salim's crotch, till he is almost gripping it.

Salim erupts. "You bloody motherfucker! You filthy pervert! I am going to kill you!" he screams and slaps the man's face. Hard.

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The man hastily removes his hand from Salim's lap and tries to get up from his seat. But before he can lift himself completely, Salim makes a grab for him. He fails to catch the man's collar but gets hold of his beard. As Salim tugs, it comes off in his hand. The man leaps out of his seat with a strangled cry and dashes toward the exit, which is hardly twenty feet away.

At that very instant the electrical power in the theater fails and the generator kicks in. The screen goes blank, and the dark hall is dazzled as the emergency lights flick on. The man is caught unawares, like a deer in a car's headlamps. He whirls around, unsure of himself.

Just as suddenly, the power comes back. It was only a momentary interruption. The film resumes on the screen, the emergency lights are extinguished. The man rushes past the black curtains to the red EXIT sign, slams open the door, and disappears.

But in that split second Salim and I have seen a flash of hazel-green eyes. A chiseled nose. A cleft chin.

As the credits begin to roll over the screen, Salim is left holding a mass of tangled gray hair smelling vaguely of cologne and spirit gum. This time he does not see the names of the publicity designer and the PRO, the light men and the spot boys, the fight director and the cameraman. He is weeping.

Armaan Ali, his hero, has died.

Smita is staring at me with skeptical eyes. "When exactly did this incident happen?"

"About six years ago. When Salim and I used to live in a chawl in Ghatkopar."

"And do you realize the significance of what you have just recounted to me?"

"What?"

"That if this incident was made public, it could destroy Armaan Ali, end his film career. Of course, that will happen only if what you just told me is true."

"So you still don't believe me?"

"I didn't say that."

"I can see the doubt in your eyes. If you still don't believe me, you do so at your own peril. But you cannot disregard the evidence on this DVD. Should we see the first question?"

Smita nods her head and presses PLAY on the remote.

The studio lights have been dimmed. I can hardly see the audience sitting around me in a circle. The hall is illuminated by one spotlight in the center, where I sit in a leather revolving chair opposite Prem Kumar. We are separated by a semicircular table. There is a large



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screen in front of me on which the questions will be projected. The studio sign is lit up. It says SILENCE.

"Cameras rolling. Three, two, one, you're on."

The signature tune comes on, and Prem Kumar's booming voice fills the hall. "Here we are once again, ready to find out who will make history today by winning the biggest prize ever offered on earth. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, we are ready to find out Who Will Win a Billion!"

The studio sign changes to APPLAUSE. The audience begins clapping. There are some cheers and whistles, too.

The signature tune fades out. Prem Kumar says, "We have three lucky contestants with us tonight, who have been selected at random by our computer. Contestant number three is Kapil Chowdhary from Malda in West Bengal. Contestant number two is Professor Hari Parikh from Ahmedabad, but our first contestant tonight is eighteen-year-old Ram Mohammad Thomas from our very own Mumbai. Ladies and gentlemen, please give him a big round of applause."

Everyone claps. After the applause dies down, Prem Kumar turns to me. "Ram Mohammad Thomas, now that's a very interesting name, expressing the richness and diversity of India. What do you do, Mr. Thomas?"

"I am a waiter in Jimmy's Bar and Restaurant in Colaba."

"A waiter! Now, isn't that interesting! Tell me, how much do you make every month?"

"Around nine hundred rupees."

"That's all? And what will you do if you win today?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"No."

Prem Kumar scowls at me. I am not following the script. I am supposed to "vibe" and be "entertaining" during the "small talk." I should have said I will buy a restaurant, or a plane, or a country. I could have said I will host a big party. Marry Miss India. Travel to Timbuktu.

"Okay. Let me explain the rules to you. You will be asked twelve questions, and if you answer each one correctly, you stand to win the biggest jackpot on earth: one billion rupees! You are free to quit at any point up until question number nine and take whatever you have earned up to then, but you cannot quit beyond question number nine. After that, it is either Play or Pay. But let's talk about that when we come to that stage. If you don't know the answer to a question, don't panic, because you have two Lifeboats available to you -- a Friendly Tip and Half-and-Half. So I think we are all set for the first question, for one thousand rupees. Are you ready?"



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"Yes, I am ready," I reply.

"Okay, here comes question number one. A nice easy one on popular cinema, I am sure everyone in the audience can answer. Now we all know that Armaan Ali and Priya Kapoor have formed one of the most successful screen pairings of recent times. But can you name the blockbusting film in which Armaan Ali starred with Priya Kapoor for the very first time? Was it (a) *Fire*, (b) *Hero*, (c) *Hunger*, or (d) *Betrayal*?"

The music in the background changes to a suspense tune, with the sound of a ticking time bomb superimposed over it.

"D. *Betrayal*," I reply.

"Do you go to the movies?"

"Yes."

"And did you see *Betrayal*?"

"Yes."

"Are you absolutely, one hundred percent sure of your answer?"

"Yes."

There is a crescendo of drums. The correct answer flashes on the screen.

"Absolutely, one hundred percent correct! You've just won one thousand rupees! We will now take a quick commercial break," declares Prem Kumar.

The studio sign changes to APPLAUSE. The audience claps. Prem Kumar smiles. I don't.

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