The movie “Slumdog Millionaire” portrays a culture and lifestyle that is not commonly viewed by most Americans. This controversial film was either loved or hated by its viewers; but undoubtedly caused a stereotyped self-centered country to think upon the way it views other cultures. These differences made viewing this movie from an intercultural perspective so interesting. Within this paper I have highlighted some key culture clashing points; through folk culture, pop culture, and the personal/contextual dialectic we can see the vast differences of the America dream clash within the Indian lifestyle.

Folk culture is the expression of tradition passed down through generations of a culture. This form of culture is most frequently seen in family systems. For example, in my family every year my grandmother fills a lamb mold with melted butter so that it hardens in the shape of a lamb for Easter. We all have these stories of little rituals and customs we do within our family because it’s something that was done before us. This is the essence of folk culture. Continuing a legacy that would be lost if we did not pass it on to someone else.

Within the United States there typically is not a lot of wide known knowledge of folk culture simply because there are so many different heritages mixed together that we find ways of mixing our traditions. However in many other places there is a higher value on folk culture and preserving the richness of traditions. One place this is specifically prominent is in India. India has clung to its rich traditions throughout many generations.

One of its most visible folk culture traditions are the exquisite dances. These dances are a staple within Bollywood productions. In the movie “Slumdog Millionaire” there is a flash of Indian folk culture in the movies closing scene of dancing. Upon first seeing this movie, it really struck me as strange to see the movie end with that scene because it was not something I was used to seeing. Now however, after better understanding the importance of this tradition within the Indian culture it seemed almost strange that there was not more dance within the movie. Even this small clash of movie tradition highlights how folk culture varies.

Another thing that caused so much culture clash within the movie was the influence of pop culture. Pop culture permeates far deeper into the movie than folk culture did. Pop culture is like a virus, it infects everything it comes in contact with. It quickly becomes widespread, widely known, and is always changing.

One way that we can see how pop culture influenced this movie is through the game show “Who Wants to be a Millionaire.” The game is originally an America game that allows for anyone to try their luck at bettering their socioeconomic status. It works for an America culture because it falls into the cliché of the “American dream” that anyone can do anything. However this game does not translate so well among different cultures, especially within India.

In India there are very laid out societal rules as far as what cast you are a part of. Certain jobs are given to certain people, only people of the same or better casts are allowed to wed, and there are very few opportunities to change your cast. It is a predetermined destiny. However, within the circumstance of the movie, the main character, Jamal, is getting the opportunity of doing just that. Jamal, an Indian of one of the lowest casts, is winning his way up the caste system. A thing
that the movie makes a point to mention that high cast members like doctors cannot seem to accomplish.

Instead of accepting that this young man is extremely bright and resourceful, the producers of the show immediately suspect Jamal for a cheat. They beat and torture Jamal between television rounds to get the answers out of the person they deem a “low life.” It left many conflicting feelings towards what humans are entitled to within different societies.

These conflicting feelings are also connected to the dialectic approaches of studying intercultural communications. The dialectics typically deal with the processes and relations of these intercultural conflicts. These conflicts occur because we want things both ways, and as humans we always want to be able to see the justification of an action.

An example of these dialectics is the personal/contextual dialectic. This dialectic deals with the person changing as the context of the environment required them to, and how they work all of those different personalities. Within this movie Jamal, the main character, is viewed as a hero by an American audience. This is how our society identifies with main characters in movies. As viewers we always want them to find happiness. However if the audience were instead reading about Jamal as a person, perhaps in a news article, it wouldn’t be very hard for most to quickly write him off. His role in society is not heroic; in fact a majority of it involves illegal actions. As a child he was part of an operation that feigned children as beggars, he would steal to get by, there was even a part when he and his brother faked being tour guides to con money from tourists.

The environment dictated the way Jamal was raised and the way he had to survive. Since he is the hero of the story the audience is quick to forgive these looked down upon actions and root for a successful outcome instead. I am not proposing that the story should have been portrayed differently nor that the actions could have been avoided and led to different means, but it is interesting to understand that as viewers we justify the context to like the person playing hero.

Another less dramatic example of the personal/contextual dialectic is through the thought process of Jamal. Jamal faces the challenge of thinking in a very Americanized form with the cultural values and thoughts of India. He believes in changing his fate, pursuing his love, using his wits and ultimately bettering his status. This is very much the personal essence of Jamal, however contextually he must deal with the traditions and thought processes of India. He must find a way to combine both ways to create his own success. This highlights the premise of the whole movie.