

PATTI DUNCAN

## **Saving Other Children from Other Women**

### ***Born Into Brothels***

*In this paper the author explores representations of rescue and motherhood in the 2005 film, *Born Into Brothels*, which won the Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary. Embedded in a colonial history of looking relations, the film embodies white Euro-American fantasies about children in “other” parts of the world. In the film, Indian children are portrayed as innocent, vulnerable, preyed upon for prostitution, and in need of rescue. Indian women, on the other hand—their mothers—are portrayed as impoverished, incompetent, and eager to prostitute their own children. Through its decontextualized portrayal of the sex industry in Calcutta and its cinematic erasure of local efforts to improve the lives of sex workers and their children, *Born Into Brothels* tells a familiar story that appeals to western notions of rescue. The author asks: Why are the children worth saving, but their mothers are not? And, how are contemporary practices of sex work in Calcutta structured by the postcolonial state and its relationship to other social, political, and economic contexts?*

*It is deeply problematic to construct the Afghan woman as someone in need of saving. When you save someone, you imply that you are saving her from something. You are also saving her to something. What violences are entailed in this transformation, and what presumptions are being made about the superiority of that to which you are saving her?*

—Lila Abu-Lughod (“Do Muslim Women”)

*There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze.*

—Michel Foucault

The title of this paper invokes three critical essays in the fields of women’s

studies, cultural studies, and cinematic studies: Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak," Lila Abu-Lughod's "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others" and Erin Addison's "Saving Other Women from Other Men: Disney's *Aladdin*." In these writings, the authors discuss colonialist representations of "other" cultures in which women of said cultures are imagined to require rescue by westerners. Spivak, for example, critiques the colonialist attitudes underlying the practice of westerners "saving brown women from brown men," a process informed by a nexus of racialized, gendered ideas and beliefs about women of color and women of the global South. Addison critiques the Disney animated film, *Aladdin*, in which an Americanized male protagonist saves Jasmine, the Arab princess of "Agrabah," from the violence and "barbarism" of her own (imagined) Middle Eastern culture. The representation of this rescue is both gendered and racialized, shaped by Orientalist tropes that rely on stereotypes of Arab culture, Arab women, and the hijab. In Abu-Lughod's essay ("Do Muslim Women"), she analyzes U.S. justifications made for western intervention and military violence in Afghanistan and in the "war on terrorism" per se, particularly as those justifications have relied on the importance of "liberating" Muslim women from their religious and cultural traditions. Rather than address specific historical and social contexts, as well as the sociopolitical conditions underlying global injustices, such ideologies simply reify colonial relations and stereotypes about women of the global South.

Problematized in this discourse is the common representation of white, western men saving women of color and women of the global South. In this essay, part of a larger study, I examine a related yet distinct representation—that of white and/or western intervention (specifically interventions made by white western *women*) to save children in "other" contexts, often from their families, communities, and cultures. Specifically, I explore this representation in the 2004 documentary film, *Born Into Brothels*, to consider the underlying narrative of the film, in which a white, western woman attempts to save several Indian children from the dangers they encounter as the children of women in the sex industry. At the heart of this study is an investigation of the image of the unfit mother. Hence, I examine ways in which ideas about motherhood circulate within and around such rescue narratives, shaping meanings of kinship, culture, family, and citizenship. Given that representation and documentation are *always* political, and have often been part of the violence of colonialism, I ask, how and why are some women depicted as "good" mothers while others are constructed as "unfit"? How are such determinations made, and what social categories inform them? By exploring narratives and representations of rescue, such as *Born Into Brothels*, I seek to enact an intervention into popular discourse about motherhood, particularly in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality, and

nation. I also examine the relationship between motherhood and the state, within neoliberal and postcolonial contexts, in order to address the production of “good” and “bad” mothers as “good” and “bad” citizens, fulfilling—or undermining—notions of ideal femininity, womanhood, and motherhood.

### *Born Into Brothels*

In 2005, *Born Into Brothels: Calcutta's Red Light Kids* won the U.S. Academy Award for Best Feature Documentary. The film, according to a synopsis by filmmakers Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman, portrays “the amazing transformation of the children they come to know in the red light district.” This “amazing transformation” centers around eight young children in the Calcutta district of Sonagachi, ranging in age from ten to fourteen, all of whom are identified in the film as children of women working in the sex industry. They are also students in Briski’s makeshift photography class. In voiceovers, she explains how she came to know these children. Wanting to learn about the women of the red light district, she states, “I knew I couldn’t do it as a visitor. I wanted to stay with them, live with them, and understand their lives. And of course as soon as I entered the brothels, I met the children.” Later she claims, “There’s no rational, logical reason why I do this, but I feel very connected to the women, and now the children.”

However, it remains unclear exactly *how* Briski feels connected to the mothers of these children. As a young white British/American woman traveling in India, despite her efforts to “stay with them, live with them, and understand their lives,” she remains a visitor, and specifically an English-speaking, white, western visitor. It is this fact that structures her gaze and the looking relations within *Born Into Brothels*. Briski narrates that she wants to see the world through the children’s eyes; however whether or not this occurs—or is even possible—remains an open question, prompting us to ask, who’s perspective, and who’s voice, is centered in the film? In this representation, Indian women are portrayed not as complex individuals negotiating the demands of labor and motherhood within an increasingly globalized patriarchal society that diminishes their options for economic survival. Rather, when they are seen at all through the camera’s lens, they are portrayed as angry, bitter, and even violent. The majority of scenes including mothers and grandmothers of the children in *Born into Brothels* depict the women verbally and physically abusing the children, or neglecting them altogether as they apply heavy makeup and line up in dark, narrow alleys surrounded by images of filth and chaos. For example, early in the film, we see eleven-year-old Tapasi being yelled at by a woman, who calls her a “selfish fucking bitch” and “worthless little cunt.” This scene is followed closely by another image of the women standing in line in

an alley, their faces sullen, as men walk by. Later, Kochi, aged ten, narrates, “My father tried to sell me,” as we see her in a small room with her grandmother and a half-naked toddler shackled by his ankle. Apparently, Kochi’s mother “doesn’t behave normally” since losing her husband and six sons. Other scenes depict similar situations, including one in which a woman beats a small screaming boy, then drags him across the floor. At no point in the film do the filmmakers address the causes of the mothers’ poverty or the emotional and psychological stresses they endure. Regarding Kochi’s mother, for example, there is no compassionate portrayal or explanation offered for what is referred to as her “abnormal” behavior, or discussion of what a normal response to the loss of one’s children might be. Rather, she is stigmatized as mentally ill, and subsequently unfit to parent her children. Notably absent in this film are any images of loving, nurturing, competent parents.

The images that dominate *Born into Brothels* include scenes of women lining up in dirty, crowded streets, and children squatting miserably in filthy, chaotic domestic squalor. Repeatedly, representations of women in the red light district are intercut with close-ups of young girls’ faces, their eyes watching intently, as though they are studying the women and seeing their own futures mapped out for them. The long opening of the film includes such slow and stylized close-ups of young girls’ faces, followed by images of rats eating garbage on the street. The message is obvious. Briski narrates: “I’m not a social worker. I’m not a teacher even. That’s my fear, you know, that I really can’t do anything... But without help they’re doomed.” Here she refers to the future of these eight children, all of whom, she suggests, are “doomed” without (her) help. And the doom they will surely encounter without her help closely resembles the lives of their parents and family members—of impoverished “others” in the global South.

Lighter moments in the film capture the children away from their families and homes. With Briski, they take taxis to the zoo where they snap photos of animals in cages, in what feels like a peculiar replication of Briski’s representation of their lives. Also, we witness them happily riding on a bus chartered by Briski, where they express excitement at seeing the ocean for the first time, sing and dance, and continue to take photos. Yet on the dark ride home, a highly stylized camera focuses on the girls dancing, juxtaposed with a return to the chaotic narrow streets in which men leer at the young girls in a threatening way and a woman in the line grabs at twelve-year-old Avijit’s sleeve, making clear the implication that these girls and boys will also participate in the scripted, gendered roles of their parents and community members, that of sex worker and client. These children, we are reminded, if left with their mothers, are “doomed,” presumably to enter a life of forced prostitution.

While teaching the children about photography, including basics of composition to better understand how information is conveyed through images,

Briski herself seems oblivious to the information she and Kauffman convey through their representation of the children of Sonagachi. Embedded in a history of colonialism, these looking relations, as Foucault demonstrated, structure and are structured by power relations. As such, they are determined by history, tradition, and political economies as well as “[m]ythic or imaginary ideas about nation, national identity and race” (Kaplan, E. A. 4). In her work, *Looking for the Other: Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze*, E. Ann Kaplan suggests that because travel often involves encounters with the “other,” necessitating looking relations, travel may heighten attention to gender and racial difference. Looking relations are never innocent. And these processes of capturing images, documenting others’ lives, and mediating their experiences through film are not neutral. They suggest boundaries and borders—social, political, geographic—even as they highlight transnational flows of capital and neoliberalism.

Deeply rooted in a history of looking relations and the white female traveler, according to E. Ann Kaplan, such portrayals are infused with colonial histories. *Born into Brothels* embodies white Euro-American fantasies about children in “other” parts of the world, in this case India. In the film, Indian children are portrayed as innocent, vulnerable, preyed upon for prostitution, and in need of rescue. Indian women, on the other hand—their mothers—are portrayed as either impoverished and incompetent, or more commonly, as hypersexualized, corrupt, threatening, greedy, abusive, and eager to prostitute their own children. Briski works with the children and eventually attempts to remove them from their homes and place them in English boarding schools to help them escape the presumed inevitability of their forced prostitution. Through its decontextualized portrayal of the sex industry in Calcutta and its near total cinematic erasure of local efforts to improve the lives of sex workers and their children, *Born Into Brothels* tells an all-too-familiar story that appeals to western notions of rescue. Why, in this portrayal, are the children worth saving, but their mothers are not? How are contemporary practices of sex work in Calcutta structured by the postcolonial state and its relationship to other social, political, and economic contexts and hierarchies? What are the processes that shape our understanding of these mothers as unfit to retain custody of their own children? And how do the children in the film come to take on symbolic value, and even exchange value, as Briski battles their mothers, and the Indian government’s bureaucracy to take them out of their homes and communities?

## Representing the Sex Industry

In her discussion of the film, Svati Shah writes, “The film industry’s recognition of *Born into Brothels* should give us all pause. Rather than tell us something new

about prostitutes in India, the filmmakers reiterate a very old story of heroic white westerners saving poor brown children who don't know any better than to persist in their dead-end lives... Unfortunately, this popularity also points to the fact that a very old and palatable tale is being told about prostitution, a tale in which prostitution and violence are synonymous, sex workers are unfit parents, and the only hope for children living in red light districts with their families is to be taken away from them by non-sex worker adults who necessarily know better" (1). Particularly problematic is the almost total erasure of local efforts to improve the lives of sex workers and their children. There is no mention of organizations like the Sanlaap Women's Rights Centre, a non-governmental organization providing resources and services to sex workers in Calcutta, and the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, which at the time of film's release had been working in Sonagachi for more than a decade and had significantly improved the health status of sex workers, reducing the rate of HIV infection to approximately five percent, according to Shah. In fact, Sanlaap workers were (mis)represented in the film as translators or school administrators, and reduced to the background against the "real' story of the filmmakers mounting their rescue" (Shah 3). Thus, "the audience's lasting impression is that, without Briski and Kauffman, the people living in this district are without hope and options" (Shah 3).

Also significant is the film's portrayal of the sex industry in Calcutta. While *Born into Brothels* seems to advocate for the criminalization of prostitution, the filmmakers fail to recognize the ways in which such criminalization further marginalizes sex work—and sex workers and their children—almost always resulting in increased violence and a lack of access to basic resources (Shah). As Kamala Kempadoo suggests, the global sex trade cannot simply be reduced to one monolithic explanation of male violence against women, where women are always already portrayed as victims. Rather, by placing global sex industries within the context of racism, colonialism, Orientalism, and cultural imperialism, as well as specific local cultural histories and traditions, she is able to draw critical linkages between militarism, tourism, migration, labor, the global economy, and ideas about trafficking. The global sex trade relies heavily on the bodies of women of color, and sex work is increasingly embedded in social relations in postcolonial societies, shaped by economic restructuring and neoliberal free-market policies. In fact, "within the international gendered division of labor and the demands of the globalization of capitalism, it presents one of the few income-generating alternatives for Asian, African, Caribbean and Latin American women" (Kempadoo 34). Interrogating these relationships—while problematizing overly simplistic understandings of sex work—requires transnational feminist theorizing cognizant of the ways in which the sexual labor of women of color exists within a matrix of "gendered, racialized, sexualized,

and international relations of power, as well as the experiences and perspectives of women of color in prostitution” (Kempadoo 40). It also necessitates moving away from a “victim approach” to prostitution, in which women working within the sex industry are portrayed as oversexualized, racialized subjects, and subsequently criminalized and perceived to require “rescue” and rehabilitation (Kempadoo 43-44).

Without any context of India’s history of British colonialism (and there is none provided in the film), there is no way for audiences to comprehend the ways in which contemporary practices and processes of sex work in Calcutta are structured by the postcolonial state and its relationship to other social, political, and economic contexts and hierarchies. For example, Patricia Sharpe makes the point that Sonagachi “dates back to colonial days, when it served the ‘needs’ of the lower ranks of the British military, those who couldn’t afford to set up ‘native’ mistresses in private domestic establishments.” Sex workers during that time lived under the constant control and surveillance of the British colonial administration, which both stigmatized and required prostitution. In fact, Briski’s actions in the film represent her advocacy for a removal policy, resonating with the history of British colonialism and the removal of children from their families and communities. Yet, the film’s erasure of history functions itself as a form of colonialism. Uma Narayan, critiquing what she refers to as the “colonialist stance” within Mary Daly’s writings on sati, suggests that ahistorical and apolitical western feminist understandings and representations of women in the global South, particularly surrounding human rights issues, create misrepresentations when they ignore distinctions among Indian communities, blurring contexts and time frames, and failing to adequately contextualize what is represented. Daly’s erasure of local (Indian) responses to sati, Narayan argues, renders Indian women’s voices and political agency invisible, and implies that only western women (such as Katherine Mayo and herself) found such practices objectionable. Narayan writes, “Daly does not seem to see that many Third-World feminists would find the implicit suggestion that only Westerners are capable of naming and challenging patriarchal atrocities committed against Third-World women to be a postcolonial replication, however unintentional, of the ‘missionary position’ of colonial discourses, including that of ‘imperial feminism’” (57). Also, the depiction of the eight Indian children (and their presumed forced prostitution) as a site of conflict between Zana Briski and the children’s mothers and other family members both invokes and reinforces a long history of political struggles and negotiations in India, between colonizers and colonized. According to Narayan and Antoinette Burton, historically such contestations transformed actual people—in this case Indian children and their mothers—into symbols of poverty and destitution, creating a “white woman’s burden” to save them.

“Gender thus played its part in the ideological service of both colonial Empire and of Third-World nationalist movements, helping to position ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ women against each other as competing cultural embodiments of appropriate femininity and virtue” (Narayan, 19).

Describing the insidious portrayal of interactions between Indian children and Indian adults in the film as abusive and violent, Shah asks, “[A]re there no other interactions between adults and children here that are worth seeing? Are the white filmmakers the only adults that these children can rely upon for safety? Are all of the adults in Sonagachi morally corrupt individuals simply seeking to turn a profit through the bodies of their sons and daughters?” (1-2). And Sharpe argues that *Born into Brothels* “has been edited to make it appear that Zana Auntie is the only fairy godmother available to the children she features in her film.” The film fails to include any representation of local clinics, educational programs, women’s rights organizations, or social workers, making it appear that only Briski cares about the welfare of these children, and raising significant questions about the ways in which these depictions—and the issues they represent—travel across national and cultural borders.

### The Imperial Gaze

Briski embodies an updated version of western audiences’ continued fascination with the white woman colonial traveler, a contradictory position in which her subjectivity is “caught between objectification in white patriarchy and white privilege in colonialism—between, that is, the male and the imperial gazes” (Kaplan E. A. 15). Early white travelers, E. Ann Kaplan suggests, including those representing Hollywood, did not travel to “know” the Other or to “be with the Other” (61). They mainly traveled, she contends, “to dominate, exploit and to use the Other for their own ends” (61). And white western women, implicated in the imperial gaze which assumed their own centrality as white westerners, did not necessarily reconfigure the gaze in any significant way, particularly as they, too, occupied positions of privilege in relation to subjects of the global South. In the sense, Zana Briski becomes the true subject of *Born into Brothels*, in that the film centers her experience—and subjectivity—rather than the children and families who never really rise above their status as “others,” victims, and “objects of compassion’ of white Western women” (Narayan 58). Briski’s journey abroad thus comes to represent her own empowerment. Caren Kaplan suggests that colonial expansion brought not only unprecedented gain for the west, but also “a corresponding personal and political gain was won for Western women through the liberating activities and challenges of travel. It is worth exploring the costs and benefits of these gains. Celebratory treatment of Western women’s travel erases or suppresses resistance to colonial discourse” (33).

The “imperial gaze,” defined by E. Ann Kaplan, building on the work of Edward Said, is the gaze structure that assumes the white, western subject is (always) central. It is an objectifying gaze, “one that refuses mutual gazing, mutual subject-to-subject recognition” (E. Kaplan 79). The semiotics of the imperial gaze relies on a set of assumptions and organizing principles, including four common trends within Hollywood representations of Others: 1) The infantilization of people of color, depicting them as helpless and childlike, particularly pronounced in a film centered on the representation of children, like *Born into Brothels*, in which the main subjects are portrayed as helpless, even “doomed” without Briski’s help. 2) The animalization of people of color, and association with nature, where women of color in particular are often assumed to be closer to nature. In this film, the process of animalizing subjects is most explicit in the scene where Briski takes the children to the zoo and their subject positions are rendered parallel to the animals in cages. However, it is also seen, albeit in more subtle ways, throughout the portrayals of their mothers. 3) The sexualization of people of color. In this case the process of racialized sexualization occurs through emphasis of the mothers’ status as sex workers, as well as the implication that their daughters must be rescued from their own eventual forced prostitution. And 4) the debasement and/or vilification of people of color as immoral subjects who do not know right from wrong, in this case, clearly the mothers (and less visibly, fathers and other family members), all of whom collude in the neglect and abuse of the eight children Zana Briski attempts to rescue (E. Kaplan 80). Divested of any social, historical, or political context, the film operates as a form of cultural tourism, in which, as film critic Richard Nilsen writes, “a wealthy woman from the developed world shows us pictures of how the other half lives.”

Similar tropes of the imperial gaze, revolving around a white, western woman traveler, are employed in other, narrative feature films, from the original *King Kong* (1933) to *Black Narcissus* (1946) to *Out of Africa* (1985). More recent mainstream cinematic depictions include *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), *Indochine* (1992), and *The Constant Gardener* (2005). In each of these representations, white, western women are represented as the true subjects, around whom the action of the film takes place. As such, they are depicted in opposition to local (“Third-World”) women, including mothers. In the three more recent films, children become significant sites of struggle. Nalini Natarajan suggests that women function as signifiers for nations, often embodying metaphors for constructions of national identity within postcolonial contexts. Similarly, in *Babies Without Borders*, writing specifically about the politics of transnational adoption, Karen Dubinsky argues that children are central to the histories of nations, often functioning as metaphors for fractured nations. Hence, the struggle between Zana Briski and the mothers and children represented in *Born Into*

*Brothels* take on larger meanings within the contemporary social, political, and economic contexts of the postcolonial state as well as an increasingly neoliberal popular film industry. The rescue narrative which structures the film—and a mainstream audience’s gaze—also shapes meanings and interpretations of racialized gender, sexuality, and motherhood.

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