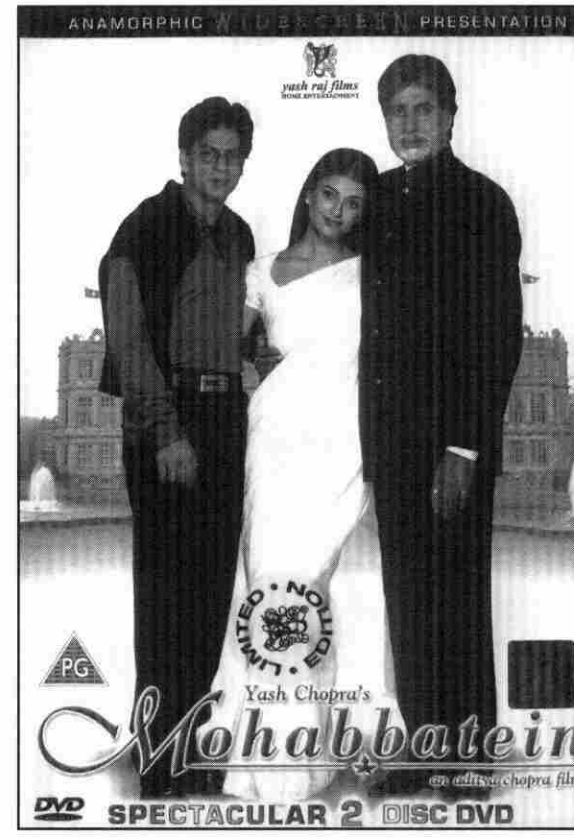
DREAMS, AND *Dharma, Mrs. Doubtfire*

By SHEILA J. NAYAR

Exploring Hindi Popular Cinema via Its "Chutneyed" Western Scripts



***Dead Poets Society* has been crafted into an odd sort of romance, almost of a father-son variety, in Bollywood's *Mohabbatein*.**

Abstract: The author introduces the popular films of Bombay—or of Bollywood, as it is familiarly known—via that industry's odd but practical proclivity for reworking Western film scripts. The article assesses several recent Hindi film socials (i.e., romance and family dramas) adapted from Western storylines to highlight the differing expectations and values at work and at play within the Hindi film (particularly as regards family and gender roles), and to illustrate the culturally unique and obligatory incorporation of *dharma*, or sacred duty.

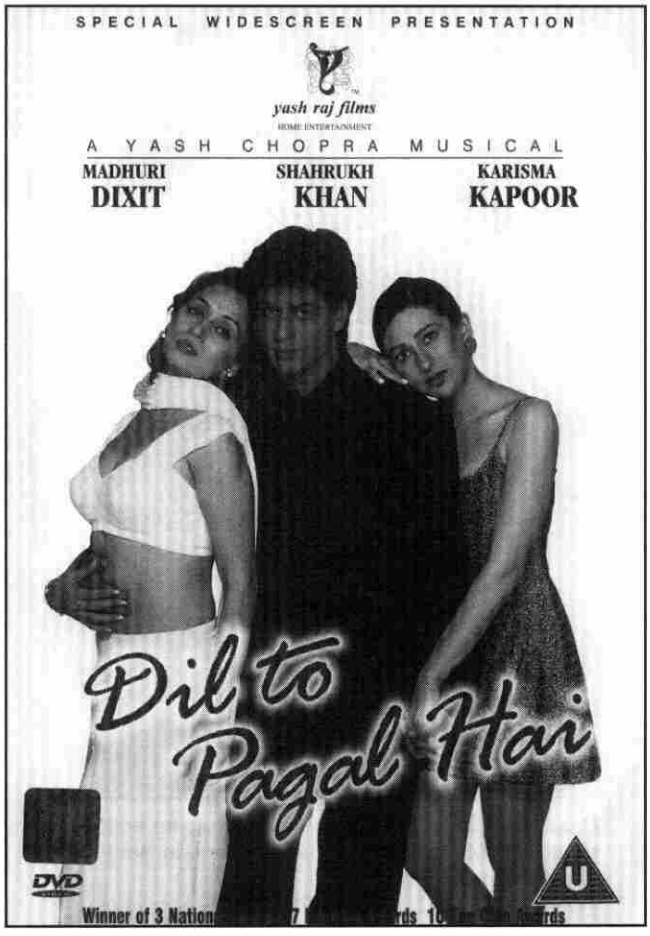
Key words: Bollywood, Bombay cinema, Hindi popular cinema, Indian popular film, romance films

See if you can identify the titles of the following films:

1. A chauffeur's daughter finds herself unexpectedly falling for the dour, elder son of her father's employer.
2. A young couple's marriage lands on the rocks after husband and wife agree to a millionaire's financially generous, but indecent, proposal.
3. A ne'er-do-well actor estranged from his wife masquerades as a nanny in order to obtain a job in his own children's home.
4. An endearing but unremittingly phobic patient obsessed with "baby steps" shows up uninvited at his psychiatrist's vacation residence, convinced that only his doctor can cure him of his ailments.

True, they are *Sabrina*, *Indecent Proposal*, Robin Williams's comedy *Mrs. Doubtfire*, and the ostensibly inimitable farce *What about Bob?* But they are also the plot lines of four other features, namely *Yeh Dillagi*, *Judaii*, *Chachi 420*, and *Deewana Mastana*, four films produced by Bollywood (the self-proclaimed Hollywood of Bombay) and only a few of the scores of Hindi hits whose stories have been pilfered from Hollywood. There has been an Indian *Houseboat* and an *On the Waterfront*, a *French Kiss*, and *A Kiss before Dying*, not to mention three versions of *Sleeping with the Enemy*. One billion people (in a country that possesses the world's largest film industry) have selected from Indian adaptations or admixtures of *The Silence of the Lambs*, *Dead Calm*, *Jagged Edge*, *Lethal Weapon*, *It Happened One Night*, *Fatal Attraction*, from a pseudo-*Sleepless in Seattle*, a replicated *Hand That Rocks the Cradle*, and even a relocated *Taxi Driver*.

This article introduces readers to the popular films of Bombay—or Bollywood, as it is familiarly known—via that industry's peculiar (but practical) proclivity for reworking Western film scripts into ostensibly Indian ones. I assess several recent Bollywood socials (i.e., romance and family drama films) that have been adapted from Western storylines, illustrating and analyzing how they have been transmuted narratively—"chutneyed," so to speak—so as to render them acceptably Indian. In this way, I introduce the differing expectations and values at work (and at play) within the



Dil to Pagal Hai* draws its lovelorn core from *Sleepless in Seattle.

Hindi film, particularly as regards family and gender roles, as well as the culturally unique and obligatory incorporation of *dharma*, or "sacred duty," into all foreign storylines. First, however, a brief introduction as to just what constitutes a Bollywood film.

The Bollywood Formula

India, with a population almost quadruple that of the United States, is a nation with a vast and complex composite of different ethnic, linguistic, religious, and regional groups. As such, the profit-motivated Bombay film industry, with the legal "assistance" of the national government, effortlessly works to celebrate an all-India identity, assuaging, bleaching, and sometimes atoning for ingrown tensions (while still appealing to the 80 percent Hindu majority). Minorities are typically represented via supporting roles, while a film's protagonists are almost always portrayed as generically high-caste, light-skinned Hindus, even when the majority of male superstars are Muslim (as is currently the case). The Bombay film is, in other words, as *pan*-Indian as possible (hence the frequent reference to a "national cinema"). As a result, one often ends up viewing a somewhat bland, generic, safely fantastical (in that it is only superficially reflective of the extant world), populist, pronationalistic, status quo–buttressing product—one that cannot help but strive for and satisfy sameness, even as it attempts to be original and unique. Most likely, though, the novice viewer would miss these aspects of the typical Hindi film, for what is most striking the first time one encounters a Bollywood movie is its unusual, delirious, strung-together, all-inclusive form, and especially its propensity for being at once "a night club and a temple, a circus and a concert, a pizza and a poetic symposium."[1]

A remake in Bollywood (even of a Hollywood classic like *On the Waterfront*) can never literally imply a *remake*, for the popular Hindi film is heavily circumscribed by the expectations and demands of its audience. A romantic comedy like *Sabrina* will, in its Indian metamorphosis as *Yeh Dillagi* (*This Attained Heart*, 1994), have added to its narrative recipe several stunts and fight sequences (heavily inspired by Hong Kong Kung Fu movies), tangential subplots (permitting trips to dance clubs, accidental encounters with villains or vamps, etc.), slapstick relief (in the form of regionally stereotyped characters), and of course the requisite six, seven, or eight song-and-dance sequences (anything from cotton-candy love songs and lewd, campy disco dance numbers to earnest, sentimental ballads). Even an unusually sober and gritty film like *Ghulam* (*Slave*, 1997)—the chutneyed *On the Waterfront*—will incorporate into its storyline a handful of songs, utilizing all manner of ghazals, bhangra, qawwali, pop, poetry, synthesizer music, and a twenty-piece orchestra. In fact, so integral are these musical numbers to the average Hindi film that, since as far back as the 1930s, professional "playback artists" have been recording the vocal parts, with actors simply lip-synching to the melodies.

As the repeated mention of love songs might suggest, all Hindi films must inevitably incorporate *pyar* ("love") into their storylines, even where it does not readily belong. As a result, the average Hindi film, which is three hours long and broken by an intermission, often feels narratively split, as well—with the first half devoted to the development of the love story, and the latter half to a crisis, more often than not one instigated by love's being threatened by some outside force (the family, another suitor, a call to war).

Heroes in Bollywood are typically superheroes, and enemies generally supernemeses (whose significance to Hindi films is so well recognized that an award analogous to the Oscar is given annually for Best Villain). Of course, the consequence of such Uberness is that characters are locked into a kind of simplistic, anti-psychological *cell*uloid—one that eschews reality in deference to the average viewer's preference for fantasy—for "fairy tales," as psychoanalyst Sudhir Kakar contends.

There are, however, "genres" within the Hindi film industry, lest anyone think the Bombay formula possesses utterly no pliancy. One can fairly accurately categorize movies as social films, comedy films, and action films. But even given the action film's penchant for unsubtle tension and barbaric showdowns that feed and foster nationalistic tendencies, or the comedy's preference for vaudevillian ridiculousness and the narratively improbable, it is true that for the most part each

film in the end will house a bit o' everything (hence rendering them *masala*, or "spice mix" movies). To the foreigner, these casual intersections can often feel cursory and dizzyingly discordant—a little like watching a scantily clad Mariah Carey gyrate her way through a John Ford film, or Jackie Chan tumble animatedly onto the set of *Gone with the Wind*, or Ma Joad observe from the sidelines as her son Rambo decimates the opposition in a flurry of Uzi gunfire and vermilion smoke.

Although all the films are widescreen, shot in 70mm and Technicolor, the attention to sets and properties, to star power and script, and certainly to the levels of violence, badinage, slapstick and vulgarity can vary tremendously. Films are, in fact, unromantically divided by producers into As, Bs, and Cs, with the filmmaking (and purported audience) declining in quality with each letter grade. In other words, the films, like much else in India, are overtly cleaved by both industry and consumer into a socioeconomic pecking order. There are actors aligned in the collective imagination with the glossy, more urbane "A" pictures, and others more racy and raunchy who are commonly referred to as being "for the masses" (i.e., for the uneducated, working-class male youths who make up the largest segment of the moviegoing population). Typically, the "A" films prove the most profitable and obtain "superhit" status, as they tend to appeal to audiences across the socioeconomic spectrum—including the latest audience of import (via export): the wistful Indian abroad (Vij). But no matter what grade or genre of film one is watching, Bollywood remains the harvester and hustler of an entertainment where the constraints of the real world are fairly liberally (and avidly) relinquished at the ticket counter, and one through which a spectator actively anticipates a full, fantastical, and ultimately emotionally and socially self-buttressing cinematic experience.

There are various theories as to how the Bollywood formula film evolved. Some scholars highlight its "flight from poverty" purpose, whereas others emphasize its utility as a conscripted "homogenizing agent," given India's highly charged divisions of caste, region, community, and such. Still others claim that the Bombay film works as a conscious fantasy where a spectator's deeper psychological stresses, especially as regards family relations and the tradition-modernity conflict, are enacted on the screen. And, finally, there are some who attribute its peculiar formula and *masala* nature to its imitation of indigenous storytelling practices, such as those found in the *Mahabharata* epic or the Parsi theater.[2]

Regardless of what has engendered this formula (most likely it is some combination of all of these), by now the reader no doubt discerns that a Bollywood film adapted from a Western script cannot possibly resemble fully its antecedent. To be sure, pure duplication is not the industry's intent. As the *Times of India* (June 11, 2001) only mildly defended in an article lamenting the Bombay industry's reliance on other people's movies, "[M]any directors boldly claim they use plots of American films as starting points and then totally adapt them to Indian tastes." What this expropriating tendency provides, though, is a unique vehicle for examining just what constitutes "Indian tastes." In other words, I am less interested in determining how Bombay reformulates the West in *form* than in what it does with the *content* of the scripts from which it heavily borrows its plots and storylines. What aspects of the original stories does Bollywood *consistently* discard? What elements are *repeatedly* incorporated? How need relationships be reconceived or characters rewritten to satisfy a culturally distinct ethos? By charting such additions, alterations, and deletions made to various superhits (i.e., films thoroughly endorsed by the moviegoing public), we can learn something about the moral parameters of the Indian filmgoer's world. I pay particular attention to the differing *resolutions* of stories. Although Bollywood may provide a celluloid *fantasy* world—one of "unrestrained imagination," as a standard dictionary might say—and although Hindi film directors may bluntly concede that the masses "like to be transported to a dream world [and] forget their worries for the duration of the film" (Gopal 11), these are *collective* reveries. In other words, they are *publicly* shared experiences—even as they may unfold in a darkened theater. So that the spectator can leave the cinema chastely—that is, without a conflict born of ambivalence (or shame)—these fantasies cannot run amok. They must in the end prove *moral at their core*. Fantasies such as these prove satisfying precisely because they permit an otherworldly experience from which viewers can safely depart once a film is over—that is, from which they can walk away with an untroubled, fully intact, affirming sense of themselves as they are *within* the world. We might ask: How must a Hindi film end in order to buttress the status quo? With whom must protagonists resolve all tensions? To

So that the spectator can leave the cinema chastely—that is, without a conflict born of ambivalence (or shame)—these fantasies cannot run amok.

whom must they defer? What is the *ultimate* duty, the noblest virtue, of a hero or heroine? As we shall see, some values have proven to be quite unstable in Bollywood, whereas others appear fixed, permanently etched into the Indian spectator ethos.

Resolving Romance, or How to Be *Sleepless in Seattle* (in India)

I have limited my focus to romance and family dramas, to the social films. This is because, in recent years, the prevalence and popularity of revenge-action dramas have noticeably waned, with romance films skyrocketing to prominence and profitability. Perhaps this is due to a general fatigue with a genre grown cruder and more mindless, or to a return to the theaters of middle-class Indians with thicker wallets and more sophisticated palates; or

Two of a triangle: Rani Mukherjee with Shah Rukh Khan in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

maybe it is the byproduct of a swelling Non-Resident Indian (NRI) audience with a decidedly nostalgic hunger for the homeland. But most Hindi social films today still filter their stories through a traditional love triangle scenario of some type: that of two smitten sisters and a single suitor, perhaps; or of college sweethearts and the girl's disapproving father; or even of an engaged couple and the sudden, shocking appearance of an illegitimate son on the fiancé's doorstep. In other words, the Indian love triangle is less two youths vying for the other sex's attention than a couple and the human, habitually familial forces that destabilize or try intentionally to prevent that union. More often than not, the guilty party comes in the form of a noncompliant parent—as *Mohabbatein* (*Loves*, 2000) demonstrates in an interesting, and certainly unusual fashion, given that one of its romantic leads is already dead.

In this blockbuster "inspired" (as the industry calls it) by *Dead Poets Society*, Shah Rukh Khan reconstitutes with honeyed esprit Robin Williams's role of a youthful, inspirational schoolteacher who arouses in his students a deep passion for the arts, for self-assertion, and ultimately, indirectly, for filial loyalty. In the Indian version of this tale, though—conservatively upgraded from a private boy's high school to a college so that romance can bloom in an age-acceptable milieu—Khan's social intercourse rests only partly with the boys he tutors in music (rather than poetry), and ultimately, indirectly, on the value and beauty of romantic love. Instead, here, a new and primary emphasis is placed on Khan's philosophically-at-odds relationship with the school's principal, played by Amitabh Bachchan. Hence, a *Dead Poets Society* subplot, regarding a student who commits suicide because of his parents' unwillingness to accept his love of theater, is here commuted into Bachchan's suicided daughter Aishwarya Ray, whom we see repeatedly via flashback and as a ghost of sorts. Eventually, we learn that Ray's death several years before was the unfortunate byproduct of her father's unwillingness to accept her love for a student at the school, who, unbeknownst to Bachchan, was Khan himself. Khan, it seems, has *really* returned to his alma mater in order to tutor Bachchan on the merit of love, indeed to convince Bachchan that his romantic love for Ray was a noble and uncorrupt thing. In other words, Mr. Khan's opus, if you will, is his teaching a stern, unyielding father-in-law *manqué* staunchly resistant to change about the pleasure and value of embracing both love and life. *Dead Poets Society* has thus been crafted into an odd sort of romance, almost of a father-son variety, albeit with various love satellites orbiting it (in the form of flashbacks to Khan and Ray's evolving romance, and the unfolding of three separate boy-meets-girl stories as they pertain to three of Khan's current students). To a degree, the film is a progressive commentary on, and endorsement of, the desire to break with flinty tradition, with an unsunny, senseless commitment to the past, especially as propagated by the older generation. Then again, *Dead Poets Society* concludes somewhat open-endedly: with students standing at atop their desks with defiant, but principled resolution in protest to Williams's being fired from school. But, in *Mohabbatein*, the gains of Khan's good teachings come in Bachchan's acknowledging the isolation (as opposed to integrity) inherent in one's incapacity to change, and in stepping down so that his joy-promoting "son" can take over as college principal.[3] In the final shot, father and son figures (not to mention Ray, who walks between them, holding their hands) are united, soldered into a familial whole. Unlike Williams, who in *Dead Poets Society* is cast as a loner, as a man absent of community or family ties, Khan is rather firmly embedded within a family unit—even if it is one that is ultimately too late to stitch officially together.

Admittedly, there has been a recent spate of romance films in which there appears virtually *no* tension between the generations, between that which children desire and which parents anticipate and expect. In films like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something Happens*, 1998) and *Dil to Pagal Hai* (*The Heart Is Crazy*, 1997), parents voice their support for all their children's choices, otherwise remaining on the periphery of the film.

Kuch Kuch Hota Hai, or *KKHH* as it is often referred to in print, is a sugary revamp of *Jack and Sarah*, a British feature about an anguished neophyte widower who finds himself falling in

***Jack and Sarah*, *masala*-style: Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.**

love with his infant son's *au pair*. In the chutneyed adaptation of this quiet, somewhat astringent drama, however, the unsavory emotional and material aspects of the story have been abandoned (the economic discrepancies between Jack and his son's nanny, for example; the despair, guilt, and self-imposed social quarantining he endures in light of his fresh widowhood). Instead, *KKHH* is reconceived as a cute, artificial, iridescent, and bathos-saturated bubble-of-a-world, somewhat like that of the Archie comics. Although in the parent film, family members constantly hover around Jack—interfering, imposing on his privacy, offering advice, and in the end poignantly reconciling him to the futility of eternal mourning—in *KKHH*, no such interpositions exist. This is not to suggest, however, that our Sarah-substitute, Kajol (who is here recast as a former college buddy), blithely follows her heart when the widower comes calling. Whereas in *Jack and Sarah*, a fight ensues between boss and babysitter and Sarah leaves of her own accord, in *KKHH* no such event occurs. Rather, Kajol and Shah Rukh Khan (yes, again) are reunited at a children's camp, where Kajol works as a counselor; and we must watch their sweet, if not overripe, reconciliation knowing that Kajol is engaged to *someone else*. She walks out on Khan, not out of disappointment or rage, as does Sarah, but because she must attend her own wedding. Duty has written her a different destiny and, unlike Jack and Sarah who will *mutually* come together at the film's end, Kajol's preference for Khan will only be realized through her fiancé's patent willingness to step aside. That is, it is only on his realizing the extent of his bride's long-held attachment to Khan, and in his literally giving her over to him, that Kajol accepts partnership with the man she actually loves. (Not by accident, this fiancé is played by actor Salman Khan, who shares the protagonists' same mega-star status. Although Salman's is a brief supporting role—a "guest appearance," as it is called—such shoes could only be filled by a man of his iconic stature: someone the audience immediately perceives as legitimate competition for the hero, and whose sacrificial gesture is thus rendered doubly potent.)

Unlike its British counterpart, tacit distinctions are made in *KKHH* between the love of a girl and that of a woman. Kajol cannot be conceived by Khan as anything but a friend during college, at which time she is depicted (via extended flashback) as pure tomboy: feisty, competitive, with a short bob, and clad forever in baseball cap and rugby shirts. (Khan instead sets his sights on a feminine and cosmopolitan NRI from Oxford.) By the time the duo meet years later, however, Kajol has mutated into the quintessential image of traditional womanhood, perpetually clothed in chiffon saris and polite diffidence. It is important to be aware, however, that this emergence of friendship between the sexes "without any feelings of guilt or undercurrent of sex" (Chowdhury 78) is a very new feature of Hindi popular cinema. For the first time, females and males can possess legitimate friendships that do not lead *sine qua non* into marriage (owing in large part, no doubt, to the changing mores of today's India's urban middle-class youth and India's increasingly gender-mixed work environment).

Strikingly similar discriminations between girls and women can be found in *Dil to Pagal Hai* (or, acronymically, *DTPH*).[4] More significant, though, is the fact that this movie, which filches its lovelorn core from *Sleepless in Seattle*, resembles *KKHH* almost exactly in terms of both its climax and denouement. Madhuri Dixit, like her *Sleepless* forerunner Meg Ryan, has become engaged to another—in Madhuri's case, Akshay Kumar, the son of the foster parents who raised her. But her heart finds itself helplessly wed to Shah Rukh Khan (yes, for a third time), whom she meets halfway through the film, after numerous almost-encounters that, as in *Sleepless*, hint at the predestination of their union. Although in *Sleepless* the first and only meeting between Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks occurs in the last scene of the film, here we are shown the flowering of love between hero and heroine and the subsequent tensions that challenge that union. By all means, these tensions derive more from an internal struggle endured by our heroine regarding her feelings for Khan *vis-à-vis* her engagement to Kumar; but, again, it is only after Kumar physically signals her to "go to him"—only after he has, of his own volition, provided her his consent to marry Khan instead—that she permits herself to follow her heart.

The buoyant, saccharine, tradition-embracing blockbuster *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (*Who Am I to You?* 1994), or *HAHK*, perhaps underscores best just how significant these group-sanctioned endings are. Although this film is frequently touted as a wholesome, distinctly Indian celebration of family values, it is also an indigenized (and to some degree Hinduized) version of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*—a *Four Functions and a Funeral*, if you will, given its merging of two families through the (1) engagement, (2) wedding, and (3) baby shower of a young couple, followed by the (4) tragic death and funeral of the recent bride (now mother), culminating finally with (5) another wedding affair, in which the widower is to marry his dead wife's younger sister (Madhuri Dixit, again) as per their parents' wishes. But seconds before the marital rites are to take place, the widower surrenders his second betrothed, insisting that she wed his younger brother

India is reduced to an essence; a state of mind, really; an ethical act.

instead. The reason? He has since learned—in veritable *deus-ex-machina* fashion—of his younger brother's love for Dixit, indeed their mutual love for each other, which, out of deference to parents, these younger siblings had vowed to keep secret. If not for an implied, intervening hand of the god Krishna, both lovers would have silently endured their fate. In the end, then, *HAHK* keenly celebrates both arranged marriage and love marriages, although, of course, this is rather illusory, given that both marriages are situated within the confines of an "all in the family" ensemble.

To be sure, the existential dilemma that inhabits these romance films most prominently is the desire for love, for unions with those who are inaccessible to us (either because our hearts are attached to others, or because we are too accountable to our immediate families). That the real world in all these movies has been altogether eliminated, replaced by a painlessly material wonderland, certainly brings this dilemma straight to the fore. The India of everyday in no way impinges on the fostered dreams and theatrical sets upon which the characters play. India, rather, is reduced to an essence; a state of mind, really; an ethical act. It may be a woman's loyalty to her family that prevents her from following her heart, as in *DTPH*, or a renunciation tied more directly to her fiancé, as in *KKHH*, or two suitors' gracious willingness to sacrifice personal desire for the sake of their beloveds' contentment, as transpires in both. But ultimately what we see is that two Western films about finding love in unexpected places become "something happening" precisely *because of* youngsters deferentially acknowledging their *place*. And in the case of the ethical act lingering in a more risky territory, one where youth must impress on age the need for personal reformation, as in *Mohabbatein*, success comes not in full-fledged rebellion and detachment from the previous generation but in being taken joyously under its wing—once one has successfully modified it.

Reformulating Family, or How to Make an *Indecent Proposal* Decent

As a regular feature of Hindi films, the Indian from overseas is only a very recent phenomenon. In fact, the NRI is currently something of an obsession in Bollywood, and a plethora of current releases even unfolds in part on foreign soil, before the inevitable return to India, where Indianness can be properly affirmed.[5]

Female chastity is a celluloid must, promiscuity perceived as a thoroughly Western lack of morality.

No doubt the lifestyles of such overseas Indians are compelling to, if not obliquely coveted by, the average Indian spectator. This is because the NRI of the Hindi film screen is typically of the millionaire-nabob variety. Now, instead of residing in Bombay, the purchase-powerful (and oft most libertine bad guys) come from London, Switzerland, Los Angeles, or the like. To be sure, this speaks to a sentiment on the part of the viewer that material wealth and success can always be found abroad, but the hazards of the Western world can also lead to a despicable corruption of Indian values—not to mention of Indians, both at home and abroad.[6] This is certainly the case of the film *Judaii* (*Separation*, 1996), whose NRI from America is quite the opposite of the treacherously overmodern vamp of stereotype. To some degree, this character, played by Urmila Matondkar, is projected as the good, even enviable, immigrant, whose initial hypermodernity (displayed more via dress than disposition) will eventually be tempered, discarded in preference for modest apparel and the inevitable disclosure of a gentle, traditional core. The threat, in other words, is not Matondkar's overseas urbanity. (After all, the point is clearly made that she is a teetotaler who rejects the advances of libidinous men.) But what is to fear are her deep pockets—for Matondkar is, in effect, Robert Redford of *Indecent Proposal*. And like Redford, who, insisting that wealth can buy anything, offered a million dollars to Woody Harrelson in exchange for one night with his wife, Demi Moore, Matondkar too is a millionaire with a proposition. In *Judaii*, though, we find, by way of narrative alchemy, a much-altered indecent proposal and a distinctly different trio of principals. In this chutneyed story, Matondkar becomes helplessly infatuated with the married Anil Kapoor. It is to his spouse, Sridevi, that she offers a handsome two crore rupees—for permission to become Anil's *second wife*. Of course, Sridevi—whose aspirations to belong to a better class and whose obsessions with the material have already been well depicted—succumbs; and, much as in the Hollywood original, we watch as a marriage splinters.

In many ways, these two dramas are not dissimilar, both playing out the tensions of wealth versus love, both in the end convincing themselves and their audiences that money holds only a tenuous and temporary power over the greater force of love. But, whereas the tensions that creep into the marriage in *Indecent Proposal* are those of jealousy and betrayal springing from a sexual liaison, in *Judaii* the scenario must run a different course. They are transmuted into the familial. While sudden fortune turns Sridevi into a self-absorbed spouse and negligent mother, all Matondkar desires is to give (and receive) love—no more. She becomes the "perfect wife": plain, reserved, devoted to her stepchildren,

revering of her husband. How can we not be swayed by her? Even Sridevi's own aunt approves of the interloper, contending that her own niece has all but given up her conjugal duties. Invariably, Sridevi comes to recognize the magnitude of her error: The loss of one's children's affections and one's husband's love in no way compensates for an opulent lifestyle. But then how to get rid of the icon of domesticity, so that familial reconciliation and marital accord can prevail? Matondkar, in a magnanimous move, removes herself from the scene, returning to New York (alone, but pregnant), having learned a valuable lesson: Purchasing love is no way to obtain love at all.

From *Indecent Proposal* one might conjecture a fascination (and fear) on the part of the West regarding sex, loosening sexual mores, and their impact on the traditional marital relationship. However, in the India of popular cinema, sex must be subsumed by the issue of family, made unadulterous by way of marriage—and redirected into a male enterprise. For a wife to resign herself willingly to sleeping with another, for *any* purpose or end, would be completely unacceptable (and no doubt rejected by the audience).[7] Certainly, such a stray would not permit her reintegration into the family. Female chastity is a celluloid must, such promiscuity perceived as a thoroughly Western lack of morality (which does not mean to say that watching it happen in *Indecent Proposal* isn't all right).[8]

No doubt, though, the most salient aspect of *Judaii* is its thematic avowal of family as an institution at risk. Society here becomes a repository of parasitic forces in danger of crippling traditional relations. Whether it is the hankering for wealth that threatens stability or the gnawing fear of growing female independence, the caveat is clear: Insouciance, greed, and a lack of fidelity can result in personal demise—the loss of one's position or, worse yet, expulsion from the familial unit. (Although this may seem a contradiction in light of the well-heeled heroes of the romance films, in Bollywood a sharp distinction is made between happening to be rich and actively, ardently *coveting* wealth.) Thus, *Indecent Proposal* in its Indian form remains a morality tale, only one whose anxiety is now touched off not by sex but by improper conduct as it relates to familial obligation.

Finding some vital way to weave several generations of family into a narrative is obviously of import, if not implicitly mandated, in Bollywood. (Even the Indian *On the Waterfront* incorporates a deceased—and hence flashback—father to provide his "I-coulda-been-a-contender" son rousing

Life may be dull, unjust, even a straitjacket, but it is a life to which we must return—feeling good about who we are.

dictums on the importance of taking a stand.) As a result, Hollywood films that lend themselves easily to such inclusions, or that already have such themes in place, find themselves most regularly translated to the Indian screen—even when this entails a major reworking of their social or ethical underpinnings. Certainly this is so with Hollywood's *Mrs. Doubtfire*, which finds itself pickled into the impressive, indeed comically refined and more realistic, 1995 hit *Chachi 420* (*Auntie 420*).[9] True, there is the slo-mo martial arts sequence in which elderly Auntie fights off hoodlums in the local bazaar; but this notwithstanding, *Chachi 420*'s story also projects the most verisimilitude of the films discussed thus far, unfolding in a recognizable India where traffic jams and living quarters are tight, married couples are physically intimate, and people dress sans frippery. Caste, region, and religion are issues and lifestyles, and not merely relegated to the safely symbolic. In fact, this film contains not a single song-and-dance sequence (although our hero, being a choreographer's assistant, is seen directing several such routines, the purpose being to humorously mock the incongruity of the filmed world apropos the "real" India).

The premise of the original film is kept intact: A sympathetic, but irresponsible husband denied access to his children (here, a sole daughter) masquerades as a nanny in order to infiltrate the family home. The relationships that force him into his disguise, however, and the comical escapades that arise from his deceit, are here substantially altered. In the Hollywood version, Robin Williams and Sally Field separate because they are, as she puts it, two parents who are "better people alone." But in *Chachi 420*, Kamal Hassan's split from his wife, Tabu, is by and large due to her father—a wealthy Brahmin businessman who disapproves of Hassan's lower status. (Even as India is authentically portrayed, heroes must still prove their moral mettle to millionaire in-laws, and daughters remain resigned to their fathers' better judgment.) The love triangle in *Mrs. Doubtfire*—between Williams, his wife, and a low-key Lothario who usurps Williams's place—is here abandoned (or, if one will, replaced by that of husband-wife-father), as is the film's reliance on physical comedy. In their place we find a sharp, complicated comedy-of-errors between adults, one in which mix-ups, crossed wires, and cultural drag involve not only gender but caste, religion, and region as well. Tabu's own father falls in love

with Hassan-as-nanny, as does the household's Muslim chef (masquerading as a Hindu); by the time Hassan discards his caretaker costume, he has subtly rewritten the social dynamics of the Brahmin's home, won back his wife, and convinced his cantankerous snob-of-a-father-in-law that Tabu's rightful place is with him.

How these two films conclude reveals much about the stresses (and inferable hopes) peculiar to their respective societies. At the end of *Mrs. Doubtfire*, husband and wife do *not* get back together. The coup for Robin Williams is simply this: Having demonstrated probity and economic stability (not to mention fame), he is granted several hours a day to spend freely with his children. As he, and thus the film, earnestly explains, parents may prove better people once separated, but that doesn't mean children are any less valued; besides, in this exceptional era of foster parents, one-father and even two-father households, the traditional definition of family no longer applies. Love is the tie that binds—even broken families. The happy ending for *Mrs. Doubtfire* is people learning to be together separately—a notion no doubt crucial to the West, where the frequency of divorce necessitates its social sanctioning. In *Chachi 420* and India, however, where divorce is less common or accepted, and differences of caste and community are of a much more explicitly divisive nature, social prosperity comes from learning to be together *in spite* of being separate.

The Values of Fantasy, the *Dharma* of Denouements

On the surface of things, the Hindi popular film can seem quite a contradiction in terms. How can a celluloid text that purports to be so moral contain fight sequences of such distended, savage, slo-mo vengefulness? And how can our heroine, now so chaste and docile, have only two hours ago been writhing meretriciously across the screen in song?

The reason for this narrative oxymoron is that fantasy cannot remain fantasy to the end. Life may be dull, unjust, even a straitjacket, but it is a life to which we must return—feeling good about who we are. The cinematic fantasy is not only indirect wish fulfillment; it is, as has been previously suggested, also the ability to depart from that wish fulfillment with a sense of worth. Thus, the "dream" must be resolved in a way that washes away the less-savory elements of our desires as they have been played out on the screen but also, concurrently, excites those aspects of ourselves that we consider to be noble, commendable, and salutary. Lust, passion, romantic gamboling, even buffoonery, are swept away at some point after intermission to expose a path inclining toward duty, sacrifice, and renunciation. In other words, the value

All films are seasoned with song and dance: Kajol in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*.

of fantasy (as an escapist, liberating ride) must inevitably yield to values *within* fantasy.

I have alluded here to some of the changes in values that have taken place recently within the movies. These include, for instance, the novel appearance of males and females who can fraternize and be chums, *without* needing to be years apart in age or inevitably destined for marriage; or, elsewhere, the subtle shift of celluloid parents to the decision-making sidelines, their sway over their children often *electively* tenuous because they trust their offspring to make intelligent, conscientious choices on their own. Such values are flexible, protean in nature, varying even from film to film. They percolate into the movies as the country's values mutate into the more liberal (or more conservative) or more willingly material, or because certain ethical or moral scenarios, though not necessarily liked, require address given their social relevancy. As such, it might be appropriate to label them *situational* values, as they reflect behaviors, morals, and principles that are apparent or emerging in contemporary society.

But in the Hindi film world, there is clear evidence of another set of values—one of a conspicuously inflexible and static nature. As such, we might best describe these values as eternal or, less presumptuously, as *foundational*, because they mirror a tradition that is steady and unchanging, regardless of the situational values in flux. They are the moral sutures, so to speak, that bind the theatergoer to a past and provide him or her with a sense of the assuagingly stable. In this way, they render each film palliative. Whereas the situational values are scattered throughout a film, these foundational values are more specifically linked to the Hindi film's resolution, to a "purification" process in some ways suggestive of Aristotle's cathartic resolution, in that needs and fears that have been touched off must be carefully sluiced away (Durant 3).

After all, although Kajol's mother in *KKHH* may permit her daughter independence of mind, Kajol's mind—as in her decisions, her intentions—is clearly *not* independent, for no Indian in a film's resolution would ever think solely and exclusively of his or her own needs. Kajol resigns herself to marriage without Khan out of deference to her fiancé, just as Matondkar in *Judaii* gives up her idyllic family life for the sake of her husband's first marriage. Admittedly, these denouements of sacrifice are more conspicuous in Bollywood's melodramas, but they are unquestionably present, in some form or other, in every Hindi film genre. Protagonists will endure humiliation, scorn, self-mutilation, crushed bones, a planned lifetime of forbearance, the willingness to walk away—all in the humble pursuit of another's well-being. And always, incontrovertibly, that well-being, that concern is, at its deepest, linked to the protection of family (or, as the case may be, of prospective family). In the Hindi film, as in the *Bhagavad-Gita*, it is *this* that defines true heroism.

According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, valor is not characterized by physical

prowess but by those feats of "sacrifice, penance, devotion to divine authority, and spiritual victory over evil" (Miller 3)—in other words, the fulfillment of one's *dharma*. *Dharma*, more expressly, is one's "sacred duty," a code of conduct that is appropriate to (and expected of) each individual depending on his or her social rank, stage in life, or kinship ties. Although by origin a Hindu concept, it is important to recognize that its underlying principle transcends its religious roots. Much like American utilitarianism, which sprang from the Puritan ethos, *dharma* has by and large become a secular concept.

Because *dharma* incorporates the relativity of obligation and values, it is not always something easily grasped by the Westerner raised on the ideals of egalitarianism (Miller 3). No doubt, he or she understands the concept of duty at the personal level but probably *not* as a concept that can—and often does—supersede regulated systems of justice and law. Sons must follow the sacred duty of Sons, Mothers of Mothers; in the Bombay movies, the former habitually avenges, while the latter provides sustenance. Thus, myth and principle find space in which to solidify as stereotype.

Every film ultimately evolves (sometimes devolves) into family relations being established, mended, soldered, or avenged via the performance of *dharma*. Not only is the audience's commitment to family thus cathartically affirmed, any residual anxiety that may remain in having lusted for a heroine, wished a father dead, desired another man's bride, or simply sat for three hours luxuriating in a theater's air conditioning is extinguished by way of the admirable performance of *dharma*.

Of course, in the real Indian world, ties and commitment to family can often be strained, even resented. In the real world, parents may prove judgmental and prone to apportioning blame; huge demands may be made on children; social and economic barriers are so inflexible and expectations so high that even a remote departure from the norm may result in upbraiding, even violence. In addition, the conjoined family, still very much a part of India's social fabric, comes with its own particular set of pressures—not the least of which is its dissolution as urbanization takes hold. But Bollywood is neither the real nor everyday; it is the abode of the ideal. And the ideal, even as morality changes around the edges, remains rooted to the past, to tradition. In fact, often in these movies, as we are spirited away from the everyday, the mundane, the expected, the cinematic exodus is directly into a (musically staged) ritual of tradition, some binding event, such as a wedding dance, engagement ceremony, or the like. Even as we disappear into a fantasy festivity, we are acknowledging, indeed celebrating, and sometimes emphatically stressing our connections to each other—but also subconsciously presaging what we are in danger of losing should we follow our hearts instead of our *dharma*.

In this way the NRI's recent induction into Indian movies is not only to attract that wealthier segment of viewers (although, no doubt, it likes to see itself represented) but because the celluloid Indian abroad has come to personify a geographically and spiritually hazardous terrain that pertains directly to *dharma*. The NRI holds a position idealized, coveted, and thus a little frightening. "Abroad" symbolizes both acquisition and loss—much as the native urban center (traditionally Bombay) did in the films of the 1950s. It is a place where imagined freedom, escape, and fortune lie, but there is also a kind of anarchy, a place separate from one's own. In some ways, this has become the new battlefield for the Indian soul; as we have seen, Indian is not simply something to *be*, it is something to be *proven*. At the same time that the NRI lifestyle is relished in all its plastic excess and seductive finery, it must also be tamed in the end. Emigrants too must acknowledge their deference to the parent, India—as a heroine must to her hero, and a hero to his prospective father-in-law (or elder brother, or foster father). In other words, the family hierarchy, even as it has been challenged, remains perfectly intact.[10]

Of course, movies like the Indian version of *Indecent Proposal* betray a fear of women abandoning their intended, traditional roles; but at the end of such films, the heroines always prove themselves to be morally upstanding—or at least reconciled to standing by their men. Much as the song-and-dance number becomes a symbol of abandon—to love, to lust, to freedom from a hectic, repressed world (Prakash)—so too this roller coaster/temple/soapbox/confessional/frat/disco-of-a-universe abandons itself to an adherence to the pre-existent familial order. Of course, this presents a bit of a problem on the societal level. How can a film about getting an irascible millionaire to recognize the archaic nature of his caste biases (as in *Chachi 420*) not be subliminally conceding that no triumph over prejudice is really a triumph *unless* it comes hand-in-hand with familial reconciliation?[11] Even *Mohabbatein*, which somewhat avant-gardely (by Bollywood standards) resists several relationship stereotypes, ultimately falls prey to this paradoxical scenario. Although the film is a love story cum entreaty against emotional rigidity—a plea for letting the sun shine in—it is hard to determine which we come away feeling more strongly: that it is the characters' admirable openness to a world of love and to following one's heart that accounts for a successful end, or the clear indication of parental *acceptance* of these soft insurgencies. The willingness to cast off tradition is, in the end, valuable only insofar as there is parental approval, simply by virtue of parental approval being there.

But it is not only parental approval; more often than not, it is *God*'s approval too. This is because frequently the moral or physical battle that leads to the serendipitous reversal of a hero's fortune will unfold in a kind of sacred space: in view of the flames of a wedding fire (as in *KKHH* and *DTPH*), or even sometimes at the very *behest* of a deity, as through Krishna in *HAHK*. In this way, the act of protecting or acting in the name of one's family becomes not only a tribute to God but an occurrence seemingly *sanctified* by the gods. Although such restorative tyings-up of

a Hindi film story may appear to come out of left field (and, granted, often do as a result of shoddy storytelling), they always, imperatively, arise from the recognition of someone's *dharma* properly performed: because the bride was respectfully willing to forego marriage to the man she really loved; because the bad guy (or girl) was swayed by the hero's righteous demeanor. And not only that. The average Hindi film, given its set-up, has tacitly promised that it is *precisely through* performance of one's *dharma* that a person is granted the love (and, more often than not, wealth) that he or she deserves:[12] as Dixit garners in both *HAHK* and *DTPH* by not running off with her respective sweethearts; or as Sridevi in *Judaii* almost loses in her mania for high-society living. The viewer is being told, in other words, that—*particularly* with regard to one's family—commitment to righteousness is the direct means, the *very route*, to other earthly rewards.[13]

The intimation here is certainly not that desire for familial approval is something unnatural or inappropriate. Although it may strike the Western viewer as ludicrous to see Ma Joad on the sidelines of a Rambo showdown, is it really any less absurd than the West's complete denial that its Rambos ever have mothers at all? While one culture frequently mythologizes the individual, the other mythologizes the collective unit—although not without concurrently shadowing its own myth (as Matondkar does to some degree in *Judaii*), or attempting cryptically to dodge it (as the current romance films seem to do). At every end, though, Bollywood succumbs, acknowledging finally that, without pleasing our relations (whether spouse, parents, one's in-laws or even a flashback father), without assurances that we will not be rejected by them for the choices we make, the things we covet are too risky.

NOTES

1. Attributed to Sehdev Kumar Gupta, Venice Film Festival <cs-www.bu.edu>.

2. References here are to Sara Dickey, Ashis Nandy, Sudhir Kakar, and Vijay Mishra, respectively.

3. There are also multiple, intriguing allusions throughout the film to the 1970s blockbuster *Sholay* (*Flames*, 1975) in which Amitabh Bachchan starred. These include a conscious playing on Bachchan's earlier character type and borrowed themes played out in new and "modern" ways (such as permitting a young widow to remarry).

4. Here, it is a less fecund, sisterly sidekick Karisma Kapoor whose affections for Shah Rukh Khan are not returned but with whom Khan willingly shares a "buddy" bond.

5. Indeed, films such as the Indian adaptation of the romantic comedy *French Kiss—Pyar To Hona Hi Tha* (*Love Had to Happen*, 1998)—are careful to rework their storylines to ensure they are a paean to India and Indianness. In the original, Meg Ryan falls in love with a French thief she befriends in France; in the Indian version, Meg's parallel is an NRI (from France) who meets an Indian thief while en route to Bombay. In other words, India, not France, becomes the terrain traveled, and Indians, not the French, become people to gradually be cherished, prized, even esteemed.

6. Despite mention by some analysts that these are diasporic representations, it is important to note that these depictions of "abroad" are decidedly *Western*—one might even say *white*. South Asian emigrants scattered across other parts of the world, such as Southeast Asia or the Middle East, are rarely, if ever, represented.

7. A similar deletion of sexual liaisons occurs in *Pyar To Hona Hi Tha*, the chutneyed *French Kiss*, where a sequence involving an exchange of romantic partners for the night is discarded and replaced by a subplot in which a man is led to believe that the fiancée he dumped is actually rich. Thus, a sought-after partner is actively revealed to be a money-seeker, patently highlighting his inappropriateness for the leading lady, whose sexual purity remains intact. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (*The Suitor Will Take Away the Bride*, 1995), the subject of sex is, quite remarkably, tackled head on. When the film's NRI heroine fears that an unremembered night of drinking with her (accidental) male traveling companion might have led to something too intimate, her fellow NRI assures her that, knowing she is an Indian woman who values her chastity, he would never think of taking advantage.

8. In today's non-mainstream cinema, films like *Fire* are receiving a lot of attention (and heat) because of their sexually explicit content (in *Fire*'s case, a lesbian relationship, the wellspring of which is two women's emotional isolation from their husbands). This small-budget, sometimes foreign-financed "Indiapendent" cinema is something quite new to the country. Catering to a young MTV-savvy gentry that shuns much Bollywood fare, these films are embracing new, more complex, cityslicker themes: NRIs enduring culture shock on returning to India (*Hyderabad Blues*), homosexuality (*Bombay Boys*), and the Bombay underworld (*Satya*—incidentally, one of the top-ten grossers of 1998). As for the "parallel cinema," which for many decades produced films of a socially minded, neo-realist nature, its presence theatrically has waned, having made an unofficial move to television.

9. "420" is a reference to the section in the Indian criminal code for cheating

10. There are exceptions to every rule. In *Jab Pyar Kisseese Hota Hai* (*When Love Happens to Someone*, 1998), it is the female who makes the final decision regarding her betrothal to another. (Of course, this is due to her learning, on her wedding day, about her fiancé's illegitimate child, conceived during his former playboy days in London.) And in *Ghulam*, permission for marriage is never sought, the heroine's rakish, inattentive father given little screen attention except to relay his impotence as a father (thus reflecting the excesses and iniquities of the previous generation).

11. Certainly, movies condemning society (and the sour family relations it sparks) have been made. In the recent *Hu Tu Tu* (1999), for example, the contemporary political/corporate landscape is depicted as so corrupt that only annihilation of its venal members can save it. However, these films have not done well at the box office. My conjecture would be that the message is too direct, too contemporarily grounded, not permitting viewers to leave the theater feeling any better about their environment than they did upon entering it.

12. *Kama* (romantic or erotic love) and *aartha* (wealth) are two of the four legitimate life goals in Hinduism, the others being *dharma* and *moksha* (liberation).

13. Of course, the viewer never departs the theater believing *he* is expected to replicate the earlier actions of the heroes: to demand the right to marry whomever he chooses, to act against his parents' better judgment, to pummel transgressors. After all, he possesses a *dharma* distinct from that of these hero-gods. But he does emerge from the theater with a refreshing sense of the moral world intact and of his own self-worth confirmed, because he *too* believes in sacred duty.

WORKS CITED

Chowdhury, Alpana. "Buddies First, Lovers Later." *CineBlitz* Feb. 15, 1999: 74–78.

Durant, Will. *The Story of Philosophy*. New York: Washington Square, 1961.

Gopal, B. "When the Going Gets Tough." Interview with B. V. S. Prekash. *Screen* Feb. 26, 1999: 11.

Miller, Barbara Stoler. *The Bhagavad-Gita: Krishna's Counsel in Time of War*. New York: Bantam, 1986.

Prakash, Sanjeev. "Music, Dance and Popular Films: Indian Fantasies, Indian Repressions." *India Cinema Superbazaar*. Ed. Aruna Vasudev and Philippe Lenglet. Delhi: Viking, 1983. 114–18.

Times of India June 11, 2001.

Vij, Gauri. "Wealth and Distribution." *Business India* Dec. 14-27, 1998: 119–25.

SHEILA J. NAYAR is an assistant professor of English and communication studies at Greensboro College, North Carolina. She is currently completing a book on the impact of orality on Indian popular film and other visual media.