HOW TO WATCH A HINDI FILM

The Example of Kuch Kuch Hota Hai

By Sam Joshi

India is the most prolific film-producing country in the world. Of all its film production centers, Mumbai produces more films that are seen nationwide in India. The Mumbai film industry, also known as Bollywood, produces films in the Hindi language. This essay is intended to serve as an aid to teachers who wish to add Hindi cinema to their curriculum. It assumes readers have no prior knowledge of Hindi cinema, and aims to ease their first encounter with a Bollywood product. As a case study, this essay focuses on the 1998 film Kuch Kuch Hota Hai (KKHH), the title of which translates into “A Certain Feeling.” Since this film is one of the biggest commercial successes in recent years, it is readily available in the US as a subtitled DVD. More importantly, this film serves as an excellent illustration of Hindi film’s aesthetic principles.

KKHH begins with the death, in childbirth, of Tina, wife of Rahul. Tina leaves behind eight letters for her new baby, one for each of her first eight birthdays. The scene shifts to Mumbai, eight years later. Rahul is a widower who lives with his daughter, Anjali Jr. It is her eighth birthday, and she gets to read her late mother’s final letter. In it, Tina tells her daughter about her father’s college days, which are shown in flashback. In college, the Casanova Rahul and the tomboy Anjali Senior are best friends. Rahul falls in love with a new student, Tina, whom he will eventually marry. Neither knows that Anjali Sr. has fallen in love with Rahul too. Heartbroken, Anjali Sr. leaves college. This is the end of the flashback, and at the end of her letter, Tina reveals that she had come to realize that Anjali Sr. loved Rahul. She entreats her daughter to bring Anjali Sr. back into a lonely Rahul’s life.

The scene now shifts to Anjali Sr., who has turned into a beautiful young woman. She is shown getting engaged to the handsome Aman. Anjali Jr. finds out that Anjali Sr. is a teacher at a summer camp for children. Anjali Jr. enrolls in this summer camp, and feigns sickness so her father will visit the camp and meet Anjali Sr. This is exactly what happens, and Rahul and Anjali Sr. are romantically drawn to each other. Turn between love for Rahul and her duty towards Aman, Anjali Sr. chooses the latter and promptly leaves summer camp to marry him. Rahul shows up at the wedding, and silently lets Anjali Sr. know that he loves her. Just as the wedding is about to be solemnized, Aman realizes the truth of the situation, and at the end of her letter, Tina reveals that she had come to realize that Anjali Sr. loved Rahul. She entreats her daughter to bring Anjali Sr. back into a lonely Rahul’s life.

The first song of KKHH brings out Hindi cinema’s “affective realism.” Making up after a quarrel, college students Rahul and Anjali Sr. spontaneously break into the song This Boy Is Crazy. Viewers may find it strange that their friends join them in perfectly choreographed movements on the college campus. Other students go about their daily business, unaffected as the singing and dancing start up. This “unreal” aesthetic differs from that of contemporary Hollywood film, which is characterized by what I call a “cognitive realism” that contrasts with Bollywood’s “affective (emotional) realism.” Cognitive realism seeks to make the film viewer’s perception mimic her perception as it operates in real life; the film uses all its techniques to make the viewer believe that what’s seen is really happening, or could quite possibly happen. Events flow in a cause-effect relationship, and the film’s mise-en-scène (stage setting) strives for maximum fidelity to “real life.”

This can take on extremes, as in the shootout scene in The Matrix, where the filmmakers used the sounds of hundreds of bullet shells hitting the floor to portray the shootout as accurately as possible. In contrast, Hindi cinema stresses not the accurate depiction of events but the emotional import of those events. The techniques of filmmaking serve to bring the film to life not in a cognitive, but in an affective sense. If Rahul and Anjali Sr. experience their friendship as exhilarating, the song-and-dance sequence This Boy Is Crazy is performed to express this feeling. The principle of sadharana-rakarana, as I will show later, posits that our perception of art-work is different from our perception of real life, being alaukika—not of the quotidian world. This aesthetic tradition enables Hindi film to depart from cognitive realism and to embrace affect.

Under cognitive realism, the activity of the viewer is geared towards understanding situations, predicting likely outcomes based on available information, and proposing solutions to certain enigmas. These predictions may be then fulfilled or subverted by the narrative. The viewer is constantly asking questions like “What will happen next?” In contrast, the viewer of affective realism is not interested in what will happen next, but in how a particular on-screen event feels. To experience a depicted emotion in as much depth as possible is the reward for a viewer of Hindi cinema. This is the raison d’être of song and dance sequences in Hindi films—which serve to bring out the emotional potential of a given situation. Songs give body to intensely emotional points in the film’s narrative. A song’s lyrics, music, and choreography are custom-made to convey a particular shade of emotion. The function of the songs is not to convey cognitive information about characters or plot; this goal can be achieved more economically through such means as dialogue. The goal of the song and dance sequence is a different one—that of immersing the viewer in an emotional experience.

But not all Bollywood songs are constructed in keeping with affective realism, as they are shown to be either dream sequences or explicit depictions of staged performances. Explicit depictions of staged performances, termed “item songs” by Ganti, are situated firmly within cognitive realism, as their existence is cognitively justified by the presence of the trappings of staged performances and diegetic audiences (on-screen audiences shown to be part of the film’s story). Dream sequence songs and item songs, frequently featured in Bollywood films, do not displace the quintessentially Bollywood song. Even in these songs, which seemingly depart from affective realism, elements of affective realism can be seen (In fact, insofar as dreams are seen to be wish fulfillments, emotions like desire...
are essential to dream sequences.). For example, the song “Something” Happen To Me is a dream song, depicting the fantasies of the three main characters Rahul, Tina, and Anjali Sr. However, instead of showing us three different dreams, the filmmaker has chosen to film all three dreams simultaneously, using the same song and even the same location. The three dreamers even appear in the same frame, even though the song tries to depict the private reverie of each, making it hard to determine just whose daydream we are watching. KKHH also has two “item songs.” The first is a staged performance where Rahul, Anjali Sr., and Tina sing the song I Found Someone at a college revue. Here also, there are elements of instrumental music that seem to have no source on the on-screen stage, signaling a departure from cognitive realism. The same is true for the song The Bridegroom Has Arrived, which Anjali Sr. and Aman sing at their engagement party to entertain the guests.

To understand how Hindi cinema enables an affective experience, we must first understand the principles of Sanskrit drama. Many scholars of Hindi film hold that Sanskrit drama is the aesthetic forebear of Hindi cinema. In Sanskrit drama, the affective reaction of the viewer of an artwork is termed Rasa (pronounced “Rass”). Rasa translates roughly as “sentiment” and occurs in the viewer’s mind. Rasa is evoked when the viewer interacts with Bhaavas, the on-screen actions performed to induce emotional fervor. There are nine rasas, which are evoked by nine corresponding Sthaayibhaavas (static emotions). These are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sthaayibhaava</th>
<th>Rasa</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rati (Love)</td>
<td>Srngara (Erotic Love)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haas (Merriment)</td>
<td>Haasya (Humorous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soka (Sorrow)</td>
<td>Karuna (Pathetic)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krodha (Anger)</td>
<td>Raudra (Furious)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Utsaha (Enthusiasm)</td>
<td>Vira (Valorous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhaya (Terror)</td>
<td>Bhaayaanaka (Horrific)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jugupsa (Disgust)</td>
<td>Bibhatsa (Repugnant)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vismaya (Astonishment)</td>
<td>Adbhuta (Wondrous)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sama (Placidity)</td>
<td>Santa (Blissful)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each rasa has infinite shades; the rasa of love, Srngara (erotic love), for example, has two adisthanas or bases—Sambhooga Srngara (erotic love in union) and Vipralambha Srngara (erotic love in separation). Each base has infinite varieties. Vipralambha, for example, may be pleasant when the lover is shown eagerly anticipating a meeting with her beloved; it may be full of pain when the lover is shown seeing her paramour depart for a long duration. The viewer of affective realism experiences rasa when she sympathetically resonates with the exact shade of the sentiment being expressed by the film. Also, each film, according to the rules of auciyta (propriety) must have one principal rasa only.

KKHH, a love story, has Srngara as its principal sentiment. To be specific, the principal rasa is Vipralambha Srngara, since erotic love-in-separation is the most prominent theme. Let us chart the progression of this rasa by looking at songs, the emotional high points of the film. The first song This Boy Is Crazy is a pleasant variant of Vipralambha. At this point in the story Anjali Sr. loves Rahul, but considers him only her best friend since her love hasn’t reached her conscious awareness. The second song I Found Someone is in the same vein, because while Rahul and Tina are falling for each other, they have not fully realized this fact; who has “found someone” and to what end is not clear. The third song “Something” Happen To Me, develops this shade of the rasa further, because it depicts the three leading characters falling in love, while still being charmingly befuddled by a new, unfamiliar feeling that they are unable to fully articulate; what is this new feeling, this “something” that is happening to the characters? The Vipralambha, however, takes a turn for the painful in the song You Did Not Think Of Me, in which Anjali Sr. realizes that her love for Rahul has remained unfulfilled. The last song There Goes A Strange Girl references the first song of the film, being friendly rather than overtly romantic. Only after this extended spectacle of love in separation does the film allow the lovers to unite at the very end of the story. In this way, the film mainly displays the vicissitudes of a single rasa—Vipralambha Srngara.

However, the supremacy of the principal rasa does not exclude the film’s focus on other rasas. Other rasas are welcome as long as they do not challenge the principal rasa. For example, a rasa considered germane to the principal rasa may be safely presented in a way that makes clear its subordinate, supporting status. Since Haasya (Humorous) is considered germane to Srngara, it is presented in KKHH in the form of humorous antics of minor characters like the English professor Ms. Briganza, the college principal Malhotra, the matron Rifat Bi, and the summer camp manager Colonel Almeida. Rasas antithetical to the principal rasa present a bigger problem. An example would be the use of Raudra (Furious) in a film dealing with Srngara, displayed in, say, a romantic hero’s fistfight with the villain. However, if this film has made it amply and skillfully clear that the hero’s anger toward the villain is motivated by deep love for the heroine, whom the villain has trapped in his lair, then the use of Raudra may be justified as being in the service of Srngara. The primacy of Srngara would then be reinforced rather than challenged by the presentation of the subordinate Raudra.

A film evokes rasa by the action of the bhaavas. The sthaayibhaavas such as Rati presented in the foregoing table are not directly presented; the existence of a sthaayibhaava is inferred after the fact by examining its components. Each sthaayibhaava consists of three components: Vibhaava or determinant, vyabhichaaribhaava or transitory state, and anubhaava or consequent. The vibhaava presents the cause of an emotion, while the anubhaava displays a character’s reaction consequent to the experienced emotion. The vyabhichaaribhaavas are subsidiary on-screen events that support and add color to the emotion being displayed. The Vibhaava further consists of Uddipana (background or circumstances—lighting, décor, setting) and alambana or character. The alambana can be further divided into asraya (locus of emotion) and visaya (object of emotion). For example, if in the film Jurassic Park, the character of Sam Neill is shown running in terror from a dinosaur, then the Sam Neill character is the locus of fear, while the dinosaur is the object of fear. This entire mechanism can be illustrated using the song You Did Not Think Of Me, played when Anjali Sr. realizes that Rahul loves Tina, not her. The sequence of events is as follows: Anjali Sr. goes running to tell Rahul that she loves him, but before she can speak, Rahul tells her that he is in love with Tina. It starts raining, and Anjali returns to her residence hall. She cries, and at the end of the song, is shown taking leave of her matron, as she is leaving college.
In this song, the visaya of Anjali Sr.’s love is Rahul, while she herself is the asraya. The sthaayibhaava being performed here is Rati (Love). The fact of Rahul being in love with Tina instead of Anjali Sr. is the determinant, the vibhaava. As soon as this is revealed, the uddipana changes: it starts raining and Anjali Sr. is shown running home in cold, gray weather. Her actions of grief, crying, looking at an old photo of herself and Rahul, sitting listlessly in a ruined castle, and walking alone through a dark tunnel are abhinayaras, actions aimed at displaying the anubhaava or the emotional consequences of the determinant. A sad song of separation, You Did Not Think Of Me, is sung by some passing folk singers and it constitutes the vyabhichaaribhaava. The vyabhichaaribhaava serves the purpose of burningish the rasa, which is primarily evoked by the vibhaavas and anubhaavas. As time passes during this song, the purpose is played again, this time in Anjali Sr.’s “own” voice, which absorbs it into the anubhaava. Vyabhichaaribhaavas here also include contrasting shots of Tina enjoying the company of Rahul. These serve to throw into relief Anjali Sr.’s misery. The combined effect of these actions on the screen produces in the refined and emotionally sympathetic viewer the rasa of Vipralambha Srngara inflected by pathos and grief. A similar analysis can enhance our understanding of all the songs in KKKH.

The question that now arises is, how do the bhaavas produce in the viewer the experience known as rasa? The mechanism by which this occurs is known as dhvani, which translates as “suggestion.” The concept of dhvani was first articulated by Anandavardhana as he investigated the question of how poetry achieves the effect of emotionally moving the reader. Dhvani, which makes such an emotional experience possible, is of a different order than the standard effects of language—denotation, indication, metaphor, and so on. These are basically cognitive processes; dhvani, on the other hand, is a purely affective process. Abhinavagupta, in describing this process, compares it to a process of “tasting.” When we taste, say, a sweet and spicy drink, we immediately delight in the taste. This process bypasses intellectual and complicated cognitive processes. We do not speculate on the ingredients of the drink, their relative proportion, the recipe, and then arrive at an estimation of the drink’s taste before we render the judgment that the drink tastes good. Our enjoyment of the drink is instead spontaneous and instant; it does not require a time period of reflection because it occurs simultaneously with the act of tasting. Aesthetic enjoyment is of a similar nature; we do not meditate on the number of a painting’s pigments before we find that we are enthralled by the painting. Similarly, in viewing a film, our emotional response is instantaneously evoked by the combination of vibhaavas, vyabhichaaribhaavas, and anubhaavas. The mind contains the ‘seeds’ of rasa, known as vasanas. These seeds are present in the mind due to past emotional experience, in current or previous lifetimes. Upon receiving the stimulus of bhaava, the vasanas are immediately activated as are seeds when they feel the touch of water. These vasanas mature into rasa. In seeing the song You Did Not Think Of Me, the seeds of heartbreak latent in our mind get activated and we experience Vipralambha Srngara. But in order for this to occur, we must be open to emotional suggestion, taking on the role of a sahrrdaya—the refined and sensitive viewer, whose mind ignites with rasa upon receiving a stimulus just like a piece of wood that catches fire as soon as it is set alight. Being open to affective experience means having to put ordinary cognition on the back burner. In the song, a dejected Anjali Sr. is shown walking through a dark tunnel in a ruined castle. This visual aims at delineating her emotional state. A viewer who asks questions like “Well, Anjali was on the college campus a minute ago, why is she in a castle? Is there a castle near the campus? This castle was seen in the dream-song earlier, so is Anjali awake or dreaming? The castle looks Scottish—but isn’t the film set in India?” will miss the point. Such a viewer is not a sahrrdaya and will deprive herself of rasa.

An important aspect of this experience is Sadharanikarana—universalization or departicularization. This concept further illuminates the ways in which an aesthetic object achieves its effects. For example, a viewer watching a play about Joan of Arc feels sad when Joan of Arc is awaiting execution. What is the source of this emotion? The experience does not purely arise in the viewer, as the viewer has not been through the same experience as Joan of Arc. The actress may not be the source, as she is merely going through the motions. The writer may not be the source either, because she might well be describing something dispassionately. As for the character Joan of Arc—nobody can tell with certainty what emotion she was experiencing. And yet, the viewer is pervaded with the experience of grief. How has this come to be? The answer is that this experience occurs in a way independent of purely the character, writer, actor, or viewer in a general, de-particularized, de-individuated way. This process is sadharanikarana. In this way, aesthetic experience allows the viewer to feel intense emotion, but in a detached way that allows him to transcend his specific self, to be free of individuality. This experience of transcendence approximates spiritual experience “and is only comparable to Eternal or Supreme Bliss.” Being thus lifted above the stream of everyday life is an experience free of ordinary cognition. Indeed, ordinary cognition is seen as an obstacle that blocks the process of sadharanikarana. In this way, aesthetic experience is of a different order than ordinary cognition. This detachment allows the viewer to experience an aesthetic “pleasure” even while watching films that espouse rasas like Bhayaanaka (Horrific) or Biibhatsa (Repugnant) which would never evoke enjoyment in real life.

Hindi film songs enable sadharanikarana by divorcing themselves from ordinary cognition within the diegetic world. The songs almost never mention specific names, places, or narrative events. This allows the emotion expressed by the song to transcend the emotions of on-screen characters and to envelop the viewer in the affective experience. Moreover, this aspect of the song lyrics ensures that the songs may be detached from their immediate narrative mooring, so that they can be sung or played at various points throughout the film, in whole or in parts, with the same or different lyrics, all in the interest of delineating the film’s principal rasa. The song You Did Not Think Of Me, for example, is played once again in KKKH when Anjali Sr. has made the difficult decision of leaving the summer camp to marry Aman. The viewer’s memory of the painful moment when this song was first played heightens the grief of Anjali Sr.’s departure.

Besides rasa, the second main preoccupation of Sanskrit drama is dharma. Mishra points out that “The term dharma covers a wide
Thanks to Fernando Arenas, LeRoy Hansen, and Robert Sokol.

NOTES


4. This is not to say that Hollywood films never utilize affective realism or that Hindi films completely take leave of cognitive realism; the point is that the two cinemas place different types of realism in the foreground. The background music and unrealistic soundtracks used by Hollywood film, exemplified by the suspenseful musical effects in horror films, can be seen as an undercurrent of affective realism.

5. Ganti, 281.


10. Abhinavagupta, 99.

11. Ibid., 77.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


SAM JOSHI is a Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Theatre and Film, University of Kansas. His essays have appeared in the journals *South Asian Popular Culture and Sexualities*. Address: Oldfather Studios, 1621 West 9th Street, Lawrence, Kansas 66044. E-mail: sammymuffin@yahoo.com.