

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),¹ 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 Junior. 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. Torn 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 to be solemnized, Aman realizes the truth of the situation, and graciously asks Anjali Sr. to be true to her feelings by marrying Rahul instead. Anjali Sr. and Rahul get married.

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.”² 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 *sadharanikarana*, as I will show later, posits that our perception of artwork 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.³ 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.⁴

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).⁵ 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 “*Some-things*” *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.⁶ In Sanskrit drama, the affective reaction of the viewer of an artwork is termed *Rasa* (pronounced “Russ”). *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:

Sthaayibhaava	Rasa
Rati (Love)	Srngara (Erotic Love)
Haas (Merriment)	Haasya (Humorous)
Soka (Sorrow)	Karuna (Pathetic)
Krodha (Anger)	Raudra (Furious)
Utsaha (Enthusiasm)	Viira (Valorous)
Bhaya (Terror)	Bhayaanaka (Horrific)
Jugupsa (Disgust)	Biibhatsa (Repugnant)
Vismaya (Astonishment)	Adbhuta (Wondrous)
Sama (Placidity)	Santa (Blissful)

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 *aucitya* (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 “*Some-things*” *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 *abhinayas*, 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 burnishing the rasa, which is primarily evoked by the vibhaavas and anubhaavas. As time passes during this song, the song 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 Anandavardhana⁷ 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*,⁸ 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 *sahrdaya*—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 backburner. 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 *sahrdaya* and will deprive herself of rasa.

An important aspect of this experience is Sadharanikarana—universalization or deparicularization. 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-individualized 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."⁹ Being thus lifted above the stream of everyday life is an experience free of ordinary cognition.¹⁰ Indeed, ordinary cognition is seen as an obstacle that blocks the process of *sadharanikarana*.¹¹ 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

semantic field including morality, religion, duty, justice, virtue, and so on.”¹² Sanskrit drama took on a didactic function in this respect: The *Natyasastra* of Bharatamuni, an early treatise on drama, mentions that Brahma, the Creator, in instituting dramatic art, decided that such an art would be “conducive to righteousness” with “a succinct collection of didactic material,” to “serve as a guide in all (human) activities of future generations.”¹³ Rao translates dharma as “righteousness,” which must be shown to prevail at the end of a Sanskrit play, in the interest of the play’s mandatory didacticism.¹⁴ In Hindi film, a state of dharma portrays a feeling of respect for family duties and kinship obligations. According to Thomas, “Order, or equilibrium, is presented as a state in which humans live in harmony with fate, respecting social obligations and ties of friendship or family.”¹⁵ Kasbekar agrees in saying that “Family relationships are crucial to popular Hindi film regardless of its genre. Often, it is an individual character’s response to family duties and responsibilities that defines his or her virtue or villainy.”¹⁶

The characters in KKHH act according to dharma. They always place the happiness of someone else ahead of their own, putting decorum in familial dealings above their personal happiness. For example, Rahul does not tell Anjali Sr. to leave Aman, respecting family obligations which require that Anjali Sr. marry Aman since she is engaged to him. Anjali Sr., similarly, does not break off her engagement with Aman out of concern for him and out of a sense of duty. At the end of the film, it is Aman who emerges as the most righteous character—a *dharmaviira*, who steps out of the picture so that Rahul and Anjali Sr. can marry. Whereas Hollywood films feature a goal-seeking protagonist who achieves his goal due to his individual struggle, Bollywood films like KKHH stress sacrifice and fidelity to social and familial dharma over individual desire, inculcating the moral that those who respect dharma are always victorious.

Of course, a Hindi film’s stress on dharma does not mean that the values it propagates are universal; a film merely purveys only that notion of dharma which matches its ideology. In KKHH, this ideology is one of patriarchy and sexism. The motivating crisis in the film is Anjali Sr.’s refusal to conform to traditional femininity. The film punishes her for this, as she is shown losing Rahul. Dharmic resolution is made possible only when Anjali Sr. has learned to exchange basketball for childcare, and sportswear for chiffon sarees, thereby molding herself into acceptable “wife material” from a traditional patriarchal point of view.

In this essay, I have used the example of KKHH to illustrate *rasa* and dharma, the aesthetic principles of Hindi cinema. Readers may use this introductory essay as a starting point on their way to broadening their Hindi film viewing experience, given that Hindi films are increasingly available in the US from various stores and Web sites. Further, the scholarly literature on Hindi cinema has seen an explosion in recent years, and I hope that this essay will spur the reader to take advantage of this literature as a pedagogical resource.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to Fernando Arenas, LeRoy Hansen, and Robert Sokol. □

NOTES

1. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, prod. Yash Johar and dir. Karan Johar, 185 min., Dharma Productions, 1998, DVD.
2. In my discussion of Hollywood cinema, I draw upon David Bordwell’s and Kristin Thompson’s, *Film Art: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003). This is a widely used undergraduate textbook in film studies.
3. Tejaswini Ganti, “Casting Culture: The Social Life of Hindi Film Production in Contemporary India” (PhD dissertation, New York University, 2000), 270–271.

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.
6. M. C. Byrski, “Hindi Phillum—The Kaliyugi Avatara of Sanskrit Drama,” *Pushpanjali* 4, 4 (November 1981): 111–8. M. C. Byrski, “Traditional Aesthetic Criteria and Contemporary Indian Culture” in *Proceedings of the Fourth International Conference on the Theoretical problems of Asian and African Literatures*, edited by M. Galik (Bratislava: Literary Institute of the Slovak Academy of Sciences, 1983), 192. Asha Kasbekar, “An Introduction to Indian Cinema,” in *An Introduction to Film Studies*, edited by Jill Nelmes (London: Routledge, 1996), 368. Paul Willemen, “Notes/Arguments/Hypotheses” in *BFI Dossier Number 5: Indian Cinema*, edited by Paul Willemen and Behroze Gandhi (London: British Film Institute, 1982), 37.
7. Anandavardhana, *Dhvanyaloka* (Dharwar: Karnatak University Press, 1974).
8. Abhinavagupta, *The Aesthetic Experience According to Abhinavagupta* (Rome: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1956).
9. P. S. R. Appa Rao, *A Monograph on Bharata’s Naatya Saastra: Indian Dramatology* (Hyderabad: Naatya Maalaa, 1967), 30.
10. Abhinavagupta, 99.
11. *Ibid.*, 77.
12. Vijay Mishra, “Towards a Theoretical Critique of Bombay Cinema,” *Screen* 26, 3, 4 (May–August 1985): 142.
13. Bharatamuni, *The Natya Sastra* (Delhi: Sri Satguru Publications, 1987), 2.
14. Rao, 33.
15. Rosie Thomas, “Indian Cinema: Pleasures and Popularity,” *Screen* 26, 3, 4 (May–August 1985): 126.
16. Kasbekar, 367.

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