

Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad (कभी खुशी कभी ग़म, Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham, 2001)

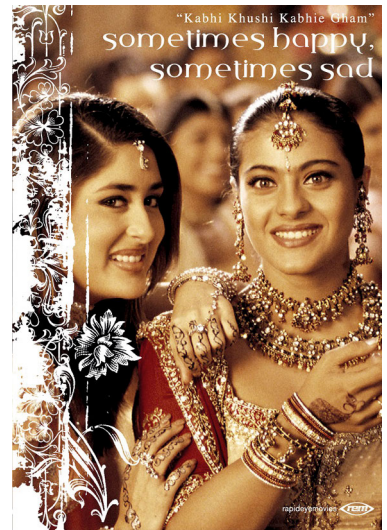
Mita Banerjee

dir. Karan Johar; prod. Yash Johar; screenplay Karan Johar, Sheena Parikh; photography Kiran Deohans; music Babloo Chakravarty. color, 211 mins. Dharma Productions, distrib. Twentieth Century Fox, Yash Raj Films.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham has all the ingredients of a Bollywood blockbuster. It stars Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol, who have been termed Bollywood's »golden pair« for their iconic embodiment of star-crossed lovers. The film also features Amitabh Bachchan, who has been termed the »godfather« of Bollywood film. Directed by Karan Johar, one of the most renowned and commercially successful Bollywood directors, the film generated \$29 million in revenue.

When it emerged in the 1990s, Bollywood film was derided for its melodramatic form and overt sentimentalism. To Western audiences, in particular, it seemed to be the epitome of *kitsch*, not the least due to its elaborate song-and-dance sequences, reminiscent of 1950s Hollywood musicals. Based in Mumbai, Bollywood is generally equated with Indian popular cinema, in contrast to art film with avant-garde filmmakers such as Satyajit Ray, the emblematic director of India's cinematic neorealism.

Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham has all the markers of melodrama, which are mapped onto an Indian cultural imaginary. From the very beginning, the film engages the topic of family lineage, kinship, and reproduction. Yash Raichand (Amitabh Bachchan), the owner of a global business empire, and his wife, Nandini (Jaya Bachchan), have been happily married for years. Theirs is a traditional Hindu marriage with the husband's patriarchal authority ruling supreme. The only thing that is missing for Yash's personal happiness is an heir for the family business. The failure of biological reproduction is not explicitly thematized by the film; it is hinted at only in a series of black-and-white family photographs in the introductory sequence. The filmic narrative opens with a scene of personal fulfillment: Yash comes home with a baby boy in his arms, whom he and Nandini adopt as their child.



Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Their son, Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), grows up to follow in his father's footsteps: He is Western-educated, handsome, and completely devoted to his parents. He obeys his father's every wish and command. The reproduction of the familial status quo seems complete when Rahul is about to become engaged to the daughter of his father's business partner, a woman who is attractive, educated, and modern, and who seems to be Rahul's ideal match in social terms.

However, this line of the filmic narrative, which is defined by Hindu tradition, economic success, and absolute loyalty to the patriarch's wishes, is disrupted by a second narrative strand within the film. This second story line is incongruent with the first, in both content and style. The daughter of the family servant, Anjali (Kajol), is introduced as performing a breach of aesthetic style and moral tradition. Not only is she lower class, but she has grown up with her widowed father. To make matters worse, Anjali is a tomboy, unwilling to comply with traditional ideals of femininity. This defiance of etiquette is mirrored by the slapstick style that marks the sequences in which Anjali appears. A boyish character, who breaks whatever she touches and who constantly puts her foot in her mouth, she is all together unsuitable as a love interest for the family heir.

The pivot of the film emerges when both storylines meet. It is here that slapstick turns into melodrama. What results is an inner turmoil for Rahul, which is personal and socially disruptive. Unexpectedly both for himself and for others, Rahul falls in love with this tomboy, who he realizes is in fact a beautiful young woman. The melodramatic mode is particularly apt here. In Aristotelian tragedy, the hero's fate was seen as God-given and immutable. In melodrama, by contrast, individual fulfillment is possible, and there is at least the potential of a happy ending. Similarly, in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, inner conflict emerges as the gap between social expectations and individual fulfillment. In Hindu tradition, belonging to a particular caste is seen as ordained by fate; it cannot be changed. The film proceeds to challenge this dichotomy between fate and individual agency. Through the melodramatic mode, the film also engages the contrast between an arranged marriage and a love match.

For Rahul, this dilemma assumes both a biographical and a social dimension. A potential marriage to Anjali seems unthinkable because he would not only have to defy his father's wishes but would also have to rebel against the boundaries of caste. This inner conflict is exacerbated by his biography. As an adopted son, he has constantly tried to prove himself worthy of his father's love. In a dramatic plot twist, Anjali's father dies and leaves her orphaned. At this juncture, Rahul does what is ethically right but socially disruptive: He marries Anjali without his father's consent. In a scene ripe with melodrama, the young couple seeks the patriarch's blessing after the fact. They meet Yash and Nandini in their home at night, with a thunderstorm roaring in the background. The patriarch's verdict is both devastating and unsurprising: »Today,« he tells Rahul, »you have proven that you are not my son.«

In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, melodrama serves as a catalyst for action; climax and catastrophe are reached with the patriarch's verdict. However, it is tribute to the productiveness of the melodramatic mode that this outward climax gives rise to multiple internal conflicts. With Yash's verdict, the couple has been exiled. In the film, this is portrayed as the ultimate punishment within Hindu imagination. Rahul and Anjali have been forbidden from living with their family: the epitome of personal, social, and cultural stability. In the filmic narrative, this punishment is both personal and geographical. The couple has been banned not only from their family, but also from their country.

From now on, they will have to live in Britain. In this instance, the melodramatic mode can be seen as a form of postcolonial revenge. Traditionally, Bollywood film has often taken up concepts from Indian mythology. In its depiction of banishment, the film plays on the Hindu epic of the *Mahabharata*, in which the protagonist is banished to live in the jungle. In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, however, the jungle turns out to be Great Britain, India's former colonizer.

It is during Rahul and Anjali's exile that the melodramatic mode unfolds its full potential. Significantly for the social dynamics that this genre can generate, the site of conflict has now changed. It is the patriarch, not his son, who is tormented by conflicting emotions. Moreover, his verdict and banishment of his son threaten to disrupt the stability of his marriage. Torn between her loyalty to her husband and her love for her son, Nandini starts questioning the soundness of her husband's judgment. At this juncture, the filmic mode highlights the forcefulness of social disruption as Nandini defies Yash for the first time in their marriage: »My mother told me that a husband was God. Today, you have proven that you are just a man.« Here, the film touches the core of Indian traditional values and points to Hindu religion as the basis of patriarchal order. In this understanding of marriage, the wife's duty to her husband is likened to religious devotion. It is her moral obligation to abide by her husband's wishes and to trust his judgment.

Through the motor of the melodramatic mode, the film weighs Hindu tradition against individual fulfillment and personal happiness. When relatives devise a plan for father and son to meet once more, the patriarch is at the height of his dilemma. His embodiment of the role of the Hindu patriarch clashes with his love for his adopted son. In a scene which is both melodramatic and shocking in its deliberate disruption of Hindu tradition, the patriarch proceeds to apologize to his son for his own error in judgment. In a gesture which for Indian audiences is disquieting in its symbolism, the father bends down to touch his son's feet, the utmost gesture of respect in Hindu religious tradition.

In Bollywood cinema, the melodramatic mode functions to navigate the tension between private and public spheres (Dudrah; Vasudevan). *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is emblematic of this tension. All characters are torn between social expectations and individual fulfillment. In the end, the resolution of personal conflict—the father's eventual acceptance of his son's inter-caste marriage—serves as an approval of social change. With the final approval of the patriarch, the film conveys to the nation that inter-caste marriage may indeed have come to be acceptable.

However, it is important to note that the film simultaneously disrupts and upholds the patriarchal order. It is to the patriarch, not to his wife, that Rahul looks for acceptance. Moreover, the film never mentions that Anjali, too, may struggle with an internal dilemma. As a filmic melodrama, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* focuses on the internal conflict of the middle class, not the lower castes. Anjali may have been a servant, but she has now been elevated to middle class status through her marriage to the family heir. In the filmic imaginary, the lower classes continue to be associated with slapstick, and neither poverty nor social immobility are dwelled upon. Social stability and cultural tradition may be challenged, but they are ultimately confirmed. In the same vein, the film is clearly rooted in heteronormative structures, with heterosexual marriage functioning as the ultimate resolution of all social conflict. In this sense, Bollywood may have come to accept inter-caste marriage, but same-sex relationships are still an »impossible de-

sire« (Gopinath). Finally, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is deeply rooted in Hindu culture, the tradition of India's religious majority. If the melodramatic mode serves to challenge some elements of this tradition, the tradition itself is ultimately upheld.

It is in another film where, almost a decade after the release of *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, director Karan Johar would challenge this social status quo (Banerjee). In *My Name is Khan* (2010), Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol co-star once more, but this time, they defy cultural, religious, and social borders much more fundamentally: in a marriage between a Muslim man and a divorced Hindu woman, which also happens to be a union between a protagonist with autism and a woman who loves him against all odds.

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