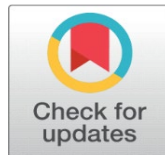
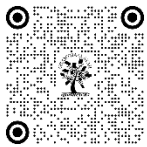


SPATIAL DYNAMICS AND SEXUAL ECONOMIES: DECODING BOLLYWOOD'S ROMANTIC COMEDIES (1989-2002)

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the cinematic period referred to as the "Long 90s", which extends from the release of *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) Dir. Sooraj R. Barjatya to *Ham Tumhare Hain Sanam* (2002) Dir. K. S. Adiyaman. Within this timeframe, a series of films redefined the romantic comedy genre, including *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994) Dir. Sooraj R. Barjatya, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) Dir. Aditya Chopra, *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997) Dir. Yash Chopra, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) Dir. Karan Johar, *Mohabbatein* (2000) Dir. Aditya Chopra, and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) Dir. Karan Johar. These films developed a cinematic language that intricately wove the themes of youthful romance with familial harmony, with *Maine Pyar Kiya* laying the groundwork and *Ham Tumhare Hain Sanam* marking its conclusion. This article identifies seven defining features of these films: romantic love as a societal force, elaborate song-and-dance sequences, the negotiation between modernity and tradition, the presence of star performers, an emphasis on the extended family, spatial power dynamics, and the familial regulation of sexuality. This article attempts to understand the latitude and longitude plausible for a journal article. Drawing upon the insights of political thinkers, film scholars, and cultural theorists, this article situates these developments within broader discussions of nationalism, globalisation, and cultural identity. Additionally, it explores how the advent of multiplexes and streaming platforms has transformed audience demographics and film interpretation. The article posits that the Long 90s Bollywood romantic comedies significantly influenced millions' conceptualisation of love, family, and belonging, thereby illustrating Hindi cinema's capacity to craft narratives that both entertain and codify social hierarchies.

Keywords: Bollywood's Long 90s, Romantic Love, Star System, Spectacle, Sexual Economy, Spatial Dynamics, Diaspora, Audience Demographics, Nostalgia, Gender Roles, Nationalism

1. INTRODUCTION

Bollywood's "Long 90s," encompassing the period from the seminal release of *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) to *Ham Tumhare Hain Sanam* (Adiyaman; 2002), signifies a crucial phase in the development of the Hindi film industry. This era witnessed a remarkable transformation in cinematic storytelling, influenced by factors such as India's liberalising economy, the advent of cable television, the expanding non-Resident Indian (NRI) market, and the globalisation of Bollywood's star system. In particular, the romantic comedy genre emerged as a significant medium for articulating and negotiating cultural aspirations related to love, family, and socioeconomic mobility.

Although the defining features of these films exhibit nuanced variations, they share several interconnected thematic and stylistic elements: the valorisation of romantic love as a cohesive social force, the extensive incorporation of spectacular song-and-dance sequences, a hybridised negotiation of modernity and tradition, the influential presence of star performers, and a steadfast focus on extended family structures as both facilitators and inhibitors of personal desire. To elucidate these attributes, this essay draws upon the perspectives of political thinkers, film studies scholars, space

theorists, and cultural theorists to contextualise these cinematic developments within broader discussions of nationalism, globalisation, and cultural identity.

By undertaking this analysis, we can more accurately position *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) as the main text of the period, which signified a tonal transition from the angst-laden romances of the 1980s, introducing a gentler, more youth-oriented, and music-centric approach that would characterise the 1990s. Similarly, *Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam*, (2002), effectively underscores the obsolescence of a formula that had begun to lose its novelty in India and among the Indian diaspora seeking more innovative narratives. The following is a comprehensive examination of this cinematic landscape, organised through the aforementioned defining qualities of the Long 90s romantic comedies.

2. ROMANTIC LOVE AS SOCIAL EQUILIBRIUM

Romantic love has long been a cornerstone of Hindi cinema; however, the specific expression of love that emerged during this period reflects the broader sociopolitical climate of the late 1980s and the 1990s. Partha Chatterjee, in his examination of postcolonial contexts, contends that “the emergent middle class in India was deeply invested in forging new norms of domestic happiness while simultaneously reasserting certain markers of tradition” (Chatterjee; 1993, 77). In cinematic terms, love stories function not only as personal narratives, but also as allegories for social harmony, where two individuals – often divided by class, caste, or other social barriers – ultimately find unity in the institution of marriage.

Reflecting these socio-political undercurrents, the Long 90s romcoms portrayed romantic love as a means of achieving communal balance and moral integrity. Their protagonists often embody the belief that love transcends being merely a private matter, serving instead as a catalyst for mending family rifts, reconciling class disparities, and, in some instances, reaffirming cultural identity both locally and internationally.

In *Maine Pyar Kiya*, the narrative explores the challenges faced by young lovers Prem (Salman Khan) and Suman (Bhagyashree) as they contend with class-based prejudices and paternal objections. The film places considerable emphasis on depicting romantic love as inherently benevolent and virtuous—a sentiment capable of transcending societal divides. Although it is not a novel concept in Bollywood, what distinguishes the film is its tone, characterised by youthful exuberance, comedic elements, and a focus on the moral dimensions of love. The film's promotional material featured slogans such as “Friendship is the first step to love”, encapsulating an innocent and almost playful approach.

For instance, the renowned scene where Prem presents Suman with *dosti ka tohfa* (friendship's gift), accompanied by a pigeon cooing in the background, exemplifies the cinematic reimagining of romance as gentle, nature-infused, and rooted in emotional transparency. Ravi Vasudevan points out that “the shift to an unblemished romantic hero in '*Maine Pyar Kiya*' signalled a recalibration of normative masculinity in popular cinema, making it more palatable to family audiences” (Vasudevan; 2000, 92).

In addition, the film consistently frames the romantic storyline within the bounds of moral integrity: Suman's father, initially sceptical, alters his viewpoint upon discerning that Prem's affection surpasses materialistic ambitions and is grounded in mutual respect. Madhava Prasad posits that this transformation mirrors “the aspirations of an upwardly mobile middle class that yearned for love to confirm rather than contradict its moral and social ideals” (Prasad; 1998, 89). Consider the emblematic scene where Prem and Suman commemorate the transition of their friendship into love, often encapsulated by the phrase “*Dosti ka ek usool hai madam... no sorry, no thank you.*” Although seemingly light-hearted, this catchphrase highlights the film's underlying ethics: authentic love naturally evolves from sincere friendship and is reinforced by a moral framework. Rather than depicting an unrestrained defiance of tradition, love is portrayed as a principle that must and will gain familial endorsements.

The film's climactic resolution, characterised by a nearly cathartic confrontation involving both families, communicates to audiences that love, when morally upright and selfless, can secure the approval of patriarchal authority. Arjun Appadurai points out that “the production of the ideal familial subject in cinema is simultaneously a production of local consensus about what love, marriage, and tradition should entail” (Appadurai; 1996, 57). *Maine Pyar Kiya* established a cinematic consensus in the ensuing decade.

The theme of love as a mechanism for social equilibrium is not exclusive to *Maine Pyar Kiya*. This motif is similarly emphasised in subsequent films, each contributing to distinct nuances. For instance, *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, which is abundant in marriage rituals and familial celebrations, situates love within the explicitly festive context of the North Indian wedding culture. In this narrative, love, which is essential for social harmony, becomes an integral component of

the extended family's moral framework. The union of Prem (Salman Khan) and Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) is depicted as a communal success, reinforcing the idea that romance and tradition are complementary rather than conflicting. Similarly, *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) introduces a Non-Resident Indian (NRI) perspective, with Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) asserting that he will only marry Simran (Kajol) with her father's consent. Their love is explicitly rooted in bridging generational and geographical divides, a dynamic that resonates across South Asian diasporic communities.

In each iteration, love evolves from a private endeavour to a publicly regulated institution governed by moral principles. This transformation reached its peak in the 1990s, reflecting India's socio-political context: a nation undergoing liberalisation while remaining anchored in patriarchal family structures, increasingly globalised, yet intent to preserve cultural authenticity.

3. CHOREOGRAPHING SPECTACLE, SPACE, AND DESIRE IN BOLLYWOOD'S LONG 1990S

Hindi cinema's incorporation of elaborate song and dance sequences constitutes a fundamental element of cinematic language. However, the 1990s, often termed the "Long 90s", marked a significant transition towards choreographic extravagance. Richard Dyer posits that musical numbers in popular cinema frequently "externalize interior emotions and project them onto an opulent visual canvas" (Dyer; 2012, 34). This theoretical framework is vividly manifested in Bollywood films of the 1990s, particularly through the works of directors such as Yash Chopra and Aditya Chopra. Their films employed musical spectacles not merely as entertainment, but as essential narrative mechanisms that encapsulate both emotional climaxes and socio-cultural aspirations.

In the wake of India's economic liberalisation policies initiated in 1991, Hindi cinema underwent significant geographical and aesthetic transformation, reflecting an evolving national consciousness influenced by globalisation. David Harvey is particularly pertinent in this context, demonstrating how filmmakers strategically utilized global landscapes to depict emerging socio-economic aspirations (Harvey; 1990, 94). Locations such as the Swiss Alps in *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and other picturesque European settings served not merely as scenic backdrops but as symbolic arenas representing India's shifting cultural identity and aspirations for upward mobility. These cinematic choices underscored India's integration into a broader global narrative where travel and transnational mobility emerged as new indicators of affluence and cosmopolitan success.

The transition to foreign settings in cinema has substantial ideological implications, as exemplified by *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ). The film's initial segment, set against the backdrop of immaculate European landscapes, presents an idyllic fantasy realm that romanticises and legitimises an affluent, globally mobile Indian diaspora. In the song "Zara Sa Jhoom Loon Main," the characters Raj (Shah Rukh Khan) and Simran (Kajol) spontaneously engage in song amidst lush Swiss meadows, visually articulating the liberated desires of youth, unencumbered by the constraints of traditional Indian societal norms. However, as Priya Joshi observes, the narrative structurally necessitates the eventual reassertion of conservative family values and patriarchal authority, illustrating how Bollywood films of this era navigated global modernity, while reaffirming traditional morality (Joshi; 2015, 176).

Rosie Thomas presents a comparable viewpoint in her examination of the spectacle-centric nature of Bollywood musicals. She observes that "the extravaganza of the Bollywood musical functions as a site for unveiling repressed emotional content, wherein gestures and melodies supplant dialogue as the means of articulation" (Thomas; 2014, 62). This dynamic is vividly exemplified in *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997), where the entire narrative is centered around a dance-musical performance that metaphorically mirrors the romantic dynamics among Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), Nisha (Karisma Kapoor), and Pooja (Madhuri Dixit). In this context, the choreographic spectacle transcends mere decoration, serving a narrative function, with dance sequences crystallising emotional turning points and character transformation.

The heightened focus on spectacle is rooted in a broader theoretical framework that can be traced back to Tom Gunning's concept of the "Cinema of Attractions." This concept underscores visual spectacle as a fundamental element of cinematic experience, often taking precedence over traditional narrative coherence (Gunning; 1986, 230). While Hindi cinema has consistently embraced spectacle, the Long 90s significantly expanded this notion, situating spectacles at the confluence of emotional revelation, narrative progression, and cultural aspiration.

Furthermore, the economic liberalisation of the 1990s catalysed a notable commodification of cinematic spectacles, with films increasingly adopting visual opulence as both a marketing and narrative strategy. Scholars such as Ashish Rajadhyaksha examine how "Bollywood", as a global brand, utilised lavish musical sequences to augment its transnational appeal, thereby transforming cinema into a global commodity that serves both diasporic and international

audiences (Rajadhyaksha; 2009 29). Consequently, the choreography and musicality of Bollywood during this period became significantly more sophisticated and commercially viable, drawing inspiration from global aesthetic trends and enhancing production value.

Karan Johar's *Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) further exemplifies this trend by employing highly choreographed song sequences set in elite educational institutions and foreign locales to symbolize a cosmopolitan Indian identity. Sangita Gopal interprets these visual extravaganzas as reflective of aspirational Indian modernities, negotiating traditional familial expectations alongside modern desires for personal freedom and romantic fulfilment (Gopal; 2011, 55). This ideological tension is exemplified in the song sequence *Koi Mil Gaya*, where youthful exuberance and romantic flirtation are externalised through dance, emphasising individual desire against the backdrop of collective social norms.

In these films, musical numbers frequently function as emotionally charged narrative climaxes with choreography vividly articulating internal emotional states. In films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* (1994), director Sooraj Barjatya utilises elaborate domestic settings and festive occasions to underscore cultural and familial values, rendering song sequences as pivotal moments of emotional confession and relational dynamics. Madhava Prasad characterizes this narrative strategy as emblematic of Bollywood's tradition of embedding emotional catharsis within communal contexts, employing music and choreography to connect private emotional experiences with public social affirmation (Prasad; 1998, 85).

Another significant aspect of the choreographic grandeur during the Long 90s was its intersection with evolving gender norms and performances. Tejaswini Niranjana points out how elaborate choreography created spaces for negotiating gender identities, particularly femininities, within shifting socio-cultural paradigms. The visual spectacle of dance enabled actresses such as Madhuri Dixit, Karisma Kapoor, and Kajol to embody new, fluid identities that challenged traditional portrayals, while still adhering to acceptable mainstream frameworks (Niranjana; 2006, 112). This negotiation is vividly evident in *Dil To Pagal Hai*, where the physicality and emotional expressiveness of the female protagonists offer nuanced explorations of feminine desire, ambition, and vulnerability within culturally sanctioned boundaries.

The influence of the cinematic spectacle of this era is profoundly evident in contemporary Bollywood, significantly shaping the evolution of visual storytelling and audiences' expectations. As Rajinder Dudrah posits, "Bollywood's musicality and spectacle continue to flourish within complex transnational circuits, reflecting broader socio-political aspirations and anxieties" (Dudrah; 2006, 134). The choreographic grandeur that emerged during the Long 90s established foundational benchmarks for future filmmakers who continue to explore the intricate relationship between spectacle, narrative, and emotional authenticity. Consequently, Bollywood's choreographic magnificence remains a compelling subject for cultural analysis, underscoring cinema's intricate negotiation among traditional values, modern aspirations, and global aesthetics.

4. THE BIRTH OF THE HYBRID CULTURAL IDENTITY: TRADITION AND MODERNITY IN TENSION

A characteristic feature of romantic comedies from the extended 1990s was their endeavour to reconcile contemporary expressions of individuality with the perceived sanctity of the Indian tradition. As evidenced during the 1990s, liberalisation policies facilitated the entry of global influences into the market, while increasing urban income fostered new consumer behaviours. Concurrently, family values and societal conventions continue to exert a significant influence on personal decisions, particularly in the domain of matrimony.

In *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, college life is portrayed as distinctly Westernised, with students wearing designer clothing, participating in basketball, and celebrating Valentine's Day. However, the narrative shifts in the second half to a summer camp setting rich in Indian cultural festivities, culminating in traditional weddings. This seamless transition between these two cultural paradigms is exemplified by the character Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan), who embodies both a modern, flirtatious college student and an individual who deeply yearns for parental approval in romantic matters. This cultural tension is analysed by Arjun Appadurai, who asserts that "modernity in the Indian context is never merely a replication of Western forms, but rather a provisional amalgam of the new with the inherited norms of community" (Appadurai; 1996, 86).

While these romantic comedies ostensibly celebrate a harmonious fusion of Eastern and Western cultures, a more nuanced examination reveals the underlying tensions. Female protagonists often find themselves navigating a delicate

balance: they adopt Western styles in clothing and behaviour, particularly in academic settings, yet revert to traditional attire and demure conduct in the presence of the elderly. *Dil to Pagal Hai* exemplifies this tension: Pooja's moral integrity is symbolically linked to her wearing traditional outfits, such as the salwar kameez, during significant romantic declarations, whereas the more "modern" Nisha is initially depicted as bolder, more outspoken, and implicitly less suited to the role of an ideal partner in a conventional marriage. Uma Chakravarti observes that "the cinematic portrayal of women's hybridity often privileges the reification of tradition under the guise of modern progress" (Chakravarti; 2003, 93). Thus, while these films outwardly project liberal acceptance of modernity, they also tacitly reinforce the patriarchal status quo.

This transformation introduced a novel form of hybrid identity in cinematic representation, one that embraced Western ideals of freedom – particularly in fashion, public displays of affection, and casual dating – while fervently upholding Indian familial tradition. According to Benedict Anderson's concept of "imagined communities," cinema serves as a potent medium through which diaspora audiences can experience a sense of collective nationality (Anderson; 2006, 44). Consequently, these romantic narratives integrated cosmopolitan elements, such as musical sequences set in European cities and references to Western popular culture, with explicit homages to Indian festivals and ritualistic family gatherings, thereby creating a culturally hybrid aesthetic.

5. THE RISE OF THE 1990S STARS SYSTEM AND THEIR FUNCTION AS CULTURAL MEDIATORS

During the expansive period known as the Long 90s, several prominent figures emerged as emblematic of romance, aspiration, and moral virtue. Notable among these were Salman Khan, Shah Rukh Khan, Aamir Khan, Madhuri Dixit, Kajol, and Karisma Kapoor. In *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid*, Ashish Rajadhyaksha observes that "the star persona in 1990s Hindi cinema is integral to shaping not only box-office fortunes, but also broader cultural discourses around national identity and consumerism" (Rajadhyaksha; 2009, 158). The off-screen images of these stars – through charitable endorsements, brand advertisements, and public appearances – converge with their on-screen personas, leading audiences to blur the distinctions between real-life virtues and fictional roles.

It is impossible to discuss the Long 90s romcom without acknowledging Shah Rukh Khan's emergence as the quintessential "romantic hero." After the success of *DDLJ*, he continued to portray variations of this role in films like *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Mohabbatein*, *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*, and even *Ham Tumhare Hain Sanam*. His on-screen presence skilfully blended overt playfulness – evident in his comedic expressions and flirtatious banter – with profound respect for parental authority. This combination appealed to youthful fantasies while soothing the concerns of older generations about modern relationships. Rustom Bharucha notes that "Shah Rukh Khan's star persona effectively bridges the local and the global, embodying a new Indian masculinity that is cosmopolitan but never completely unmoored from tradition" (Bharucha; 2006, 106).

Madhuri Dixit, as the female counterpart, epitomized a female archetype that adeptly integrated modern independence with familial devotion. From *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* to *Dil To Pagal Hai*, Dixit exuded grace, charm, and an aura of moral propriety. In "*Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*" specifically, her portrayal of Nisha – vivacious yet self-sacrificing – came to define the decade's ideal of the perfect bahu (daughter-in-law). While critics have underscored the restrictive traditional roles that women often occupy in these narratives, Dixit's star image nonetheless resonated with the transitional ethos of the 1990s, a period when many urban middle-class women entered the workforce while still navigating entrenched gender norms at home. As Rachel Dwyer notes, "Madhuri's persona allowed for a controlled form of female desire on screen, legitimising romantic expression without transgressing mainstream Indian moral codes" (Dwyer; 2006, 78).

In addition to the aforementioned icons, Salman Khan and the film *Maine Pyar Kiya* rapidly became emblematic of the benevolent, occasionally mischievous, yet endearingly innocent protagonist. His robust physique and spontaneous charisma offered a more physicalised depiction of romance, complemented by soft-spoken sincerity that resonated with family audiences. While Aamir Khan explored a diverse array of genres, films such as *Rangeela* (Verma; 1995) and *Dil* (Kumar; 1990) highlighted his comedic-romantic prowess. By the late 1990s, his selections, including *Ghulam* (Bhatt; 1998) and *Sarfarosh* (Matthan; 1999), indicated a subtle departure from the conventional romantic comedy formula, yet he continued to shape audience expectations for "youthful" romance in his earlier works. As a female lead, Kajol, unlike Madhuri Dixit, initially portrayed a more assertive, tomboyish persona in early films such as *Baazigar* (1993) and *DDLJ*

(1995), before transitioning to more traditional feminine roles in *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham*. Her onscreen chemistry with Shah Rukh Khan was instrumental in establishing a definitive NRI romance formula.

Collectively, these star performers acted as cultural emissaries, normalising transnational fantasies and consumerist desires while affirming that heartfelt sincerity and filial devotion remained paramount.

6. THE JOINT FAMILY AS NARRATIVE HUB AND THE PERMISSIVE PATRIARCH

Another distinctive feature of romantic comedies since the Long 90s was the prominence of the joint or extended family as a central narrative element. These films are often centred on wedding ceremonies, festive occasions, or daily comedic interactions within large households. *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!*, widely credited with revitalising the family centric musical genre, filled nearly every scene with celebrations of tradition, whether it was a baby's naming ceremony or a dog's comedic intervention exemplified by Tuffy's role in the film. Sudhir Kakar characterizes the joint family in Indian society as a "microcosm of reciprocal obligations and multi-generational care," which also serves as an allegory for broader social organization (Kakar; 1992, 49). These multigenerational families facilitated subplots, comedic characters, and a narrative that interwove love with the tapestry of familial responsibilities.

Hum Aapke Hain Koun..! allocated considerable screen time to the rituals associated with weddings, both preceding and following ceremonies. The romantic relationship between Prem (Salman Khan) and Nisha (Madhuri Dixit) develops amidst these social gatherings, indicating that love flourishes most authentically during communal events. This depiction of the joint family signifies a departure from earlier decades when extended families were frequently portrayed as sources of conflict rather than celebration, as exemplified in the social dramas of the 1970s by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. Moreover, the authoritative presence of family patriarchs – such as Amrish Puri in *DDLJ* or Alok Nath in *Hum Saath-Saath Hain* – demonstrates how these films anchor romantic decisions in familial approval.

Potential rebels, if they exist, rarely achieve success without ultimately securing family approval. The protagonist's personal aspirations must be integrated rather than pursued independently. Consequently, from a structural standpoint, resolution requires a balance between romantic unions and familial norms. Uma Chakravarti observes how "By situating the father as the ultimate gatekeeper of female desire, these narratives reaffirm patriarchal hierarchies while appearing progressive in granting women partial autonomy" (Chakravarti; 2003, 101). The emotional impact of such conclusions arises from the depiction of paternal endorsements as both an emotional and cultural necessity.

7. SPACE AS CHARACTER IN THE ROMCOMS OF 1990S

One critical aspect of the romantic comedy under examination is the influence of spatiality on a film's power dynamics. Architecture here functions not merely as a backdrop but also actively shapes power relations and social norms related to desire and class mobility. Henri Lefebvre, a prominent figure in spatial theory, argues in "The Production of Space" that "space is socially produced rather than merely a neutral or passive backdrop for social action" (Lefebvre; 1991, 39). In the context of Long 90s romantic comedies, physical settings such as opulent mansions, modern college campuses, and exotic foreign locales are not simply incidental backdrops. They are socially constructed spaces that reflect and perpetuate the values and aspirations of their inhabitants and, by extension, those of the film's intended audience.

Lefebvre distinguishes between "representations of space" (the conceptualized space crafted by planners and authorities) and "representational space" (the actual lived space imbued with symbolic meaning) (Lefebvre; 1991, 40–46). In the romantic comedies analysed in this article, family mansions – often depicted as palatial or hyper-real – serve as representational spaces for class privilege and intergenerational hierarchy. For example, the opulent Raichand residence in *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* is designed to favour the patriarch's perspective (Amitabh Bachchan's character), with expansive corridors and a grand foyer that visually situates him at the centre of familial authority. The audience is expected to perceive such architectural splendours as both aspirational and norm-enforcing; those unable to navigate these spaces (such as the middle-class character Anjali, portrayed by Kajol) are both literally and metaphorically outsiders until they conform to patriarchal and class conventions.

In *Maine Pyar Kiya*, Suman's modest residence stands in stark contrast to the affluent home of Prem (Salman Khan). While the film emphasises domestic interiors as areas of paternal oversight, it also illustrates how these familial spaces are influenced by what Lefebvre describes as "spatial codes", or implicit assumptions regarding who is entitled to occupy

certain spaces (Lefebvre; 1991, 52). As a woman of lower socioeconomic status, Suman must 'earn' her entry into Prem's wealthier environment; her presence is initially perceived as disruptive, necessitating moral justifications, such as her virtue and her father's loyal friendship with Prem's father – to legitimise her right to inhabit that space. This exemplifies how cinematic space both structures and symbolises social stratification, operating as a "code" that must be learned and internalised for social acceptance. (Lefebvre; 1992, 89)

Lefebvre posits that space is imbued with affective resonance and ideological underpinnings. In Bollywood romantic comedies, interior sets and choreographed exteriors such as lavish gardens for wedding rituals become emotional landscapes that signify belonging, exile, love, and conflict. The recurrent motif of the threshold, exemplified by crossing the threshold of a home, signifies acceptance into the familial space or, conversely, the denial of entry. These symbolic transitions illustrate how cinematic spaces can be manipulated to represent intangible emotional development within narratives. Thus, Lefebvre's framework enables an understanding of how space is shaped by and formative of the characters' experiences, influencing the film's portrayals of love, virtue, and aspirations. (Lefebvre; 1992, 122)

Nevertheless, Lefebvre's concept of "space as socially produced" does not fully encompass the functional dimensions of 'space' in the films under examination. Two additional theorists, David Harvey, already cited above and Edward Soja, are equally significant in enhancing our comprehension of the nature of space in these films. By integrating Marxist geography with postmodern analysis, Harvey and Soja provide further insights into the politicised and multidimensional nature of space within cultural texts. Their concepts – Spatial Justice, the right to the city, and ThirdSpace respectively – broaden our perspective on how class divisions and identity negotiations manifest in the spatial configurations of Long 90s Bollywood.

The core of Harvey's idea rests in the postulation "what kind of city we want cannot be divorced from the question of what kind of people we want to be" (Harvey; 1973, 23). If we treat the filmic *mise-en-scène* as a microcosm of the "city," or the environment in which characters operate, the question becomes: How are these sets arranged to reflect or contest the notion of social justice? In *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* the film's cityscapes – be they the bustling scenes of Chandni Chowk or the wealthy enclaves of Delhi – show stark visual contrasts in lifestyle and opportunities. The vast differences in architecture, roads, and communal interactions reflect the uneven distribution of resources that frame the romance between Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) and Anjali (Kajol). The narrative remains torn between the desire to show unity (the "family can heal all rifts") and a reassertion of class-based gating (Rahul's eventual acceptance by his father, Yash, only after a sequence of melodramatic revelations). Harvey's argument suggests that such cinematic representations either challenge or reinforce existing socio-spatial inequalities. While the film claims that love can transcend class, it ultimately reaffirms that class assimilation is contingent on acceptance by elite patriarchs.

Similarly, Soja's notion of Thirdspace outlines a conceptual realm that transcends the duality of physical space (space) and symbolic or mental space (second space) to produce a hybrid dimension that is both material and imaginative (Soja; 1996, 64). In Hindi romcoms, Thirdspace might be located in a diaspora or transnational sites where traditional Indian values intersect with Western modernities, forging new cultural expressions. *Dil to Pagal Hai* features stage musicals that are neither purely Western nor entirely Indian in their aesthetics. These musicals occupy a third space, a performance site that synthesises dance forms, costume designs, and narrative arcs from multiple cultural repertoires to articulate romance. On a more literal plane, foreign campuses, such as the boarding school in Mohabbatein, also function as ThirdSpaces: not wholly Western, not wholly Indian, but a fusion of both, shaping the ways students articulate love, rebellion, or tradition.

Both Harvey and Soja emphasise that space is never neutral. Rather, it is a battleground for conflicting interests, ideologies and aspirations. Even in frothy romances such as *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, the tension between the flamboyant college environment and the religious summer camp (in the second half of the film) underscores a dialectical shift from liberal, carefree youth culture to a devout, ritual-oriented setting, where romance is again overseen by parental figures. This exemplifies how the narrative moves across different spatial regimes, each within its own moral economy.

Analysed through the theoretical frameworks of Lefebvre, Harvey, and Soja, it becomes apparent that space in Bollywood romantic comedies of the late 1990s transcends mere decorative functions. It serves as a complex and dynamic arena in which sexual desire, class identities, and familial hierarchies are codified, contested, and frequently resolved in visually compelling forms.

8. REGULATION OF SEXUAL ECONOMY

Moving on to the sexual economy of the 1990s romcoms, one finds that it is tightly controlled by familial oversight, reflecting broader Indian societal norms, wherein matrimonial choices are seldom viewed as purely individual concerns. Laura Mulvey's idea of "controlling gaze" (Mulvey; 1975: 19) finds an extended expression here: instead of a singular male gaze, an entire network of relatives – parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, sometimes even neighbours – participates in regulating female sexuality and policing romantic conduct.

For instance, while the films exhibit a sympathetic portrayal of "love marriages," these unions ultimately require parental approval. *Maine Pyar Kiya* serves as a prototype, with Prem diligently striving to demonstrate to Suman's father the honourable nature of his love. The objective is to illustrate that even if the union originates as a "love match", it must emulate the solemnity and communal acceptance characteristic of an arranged marriage. Gyan Prakash's analyses of postcolonial modernity contend that "the friction between love marriages and arranged marriages in popular cinema crystallizes the tension between individual liberty and collective familial identity" (Prakash; 2010, 77). Thus, these two impulses must be reconciled.

In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the character of Simran's father, Baldev Singh (Amrish Puri), epitomizes the role of the patriarchal gatekeeper, whose approval is indispensable and cannot be circumvented or coerced. Raj's endeavour is to obtain this paternal endorsement, culminating in the cult statement, "Ja Simran, jee le apni zindagi" (Go, Simran, live your life). This paternal declaration legitimises the sexual relationship, transitioning it from a transgressive act to one that is socially sanctioned. Foucault's analysis of how institutional power structures regulate sexuality (Foucault; 1984, 110) is pertinent here, as the father embodies the familial institution that must either "permit" or "deny" romantic consummation.

During this period, the emphasis on chastity, whether literal or symbolic, is remarkably pervasive. Even within comedic narratives, the concept of heroine purity is central to the depiction of desire. The film *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* portrays Anjali (Kajol) as initially tomboyish yet implicitly "pure," contrasting her with the more Westernized Tina (Rani Mukerji), whose modern attire and form-fitting dresses are critiqued but ultimately validated by her adherence to familial respect. A paternal figure or elder from an extended family frequently emphasises that physical intimacy should be deferred until marriage. This cinematic moral framework reflects a broader patriarchal ideology, wherein female sexuality is sanctioned only under strictly regulated conditions. These films portray a familial structure that not only monitors, but also actively orchestrates the sexual economy, determining which desires are permissible, when they may be fulfilled, and under what conditions of ritual or social acknowledgement.

Of Love, Desire, and Musical Sequence

From *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* to *Dil To Pagal Hai*, musical sequences facilitate interactions between couples that might be deemed culturally inappropriate in conventional narrative scenes. For example, "Dil To Pagal Hai" includes dance rehearsals where Rahul (Shah Rukh Khan) lifts Pooja (Madhuri Dixit), an act of physical closeness that the film's everyday reality might otherwise prohibit. The choreographed nature of these interactions lends an air of respectability, as bodily proximity is "justified" by the context of performance.

In numerous films, dream sequences—often depicted in foreign or imaginary settings—serve to literalise a form of escapism wherein sexual desire can be more openly expressed, albeit within a fantastical framework. *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* features a dream song in which Rahul and Anjali dance in the rain. This dreamlike setting becomes a securely coded environment, in which the constraints are dissolved. Upon the conclusion of the sequence, the characters revert to a normative regime of familial or social obligations.

During these musical interludes, there is often a significant transformation in costuming, particularly concerning heroines. Traditional attire, such as the salwar kameez or sari, may be supplanted by Western dresses or revealing garments, indicating a temporary embrace of sensuality. Nevertheless, the narrative typically reverts to conservative clothing once the song is concluded, reinforcing the notion that overt displays of sexuality must be confined to performance spaces. Patricia Uberoi notes that "Bollywood musicals permit an oscillation between tradition and modernity in costuming that, while visually striking, ultimately reaffirms the ethos of familial respectability" (Uberoi; 2006, 102).

Choreographed encounters function as narrative devices to transform sexual desire into artistic or imagined performances, thereby allowing audience satisfaction without overtly breaching the moral codes that regulate mainstream Hindi cinema. While familial oversight serves as a primary regulator of sexuality, class hierarchies further delineate which romances are acceptable. The "poor girl-rich boy" trope, as exemplified by *Maine Pyar Kiya*, recurs throughout the 1990s, suggesting that cross-class desire, although romanticised, must ultimately conform to the norms of the wealthier party for the union to achieve social legitimacy.

In certain films, comedic subplots emphasise the perspective of servants or lower-class friends, thereby reinforcing the authority of affluent protagonists. The film *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* features a group of domestic workers who facilitate the meetings of lovers, but are never granted a romantic agency equivalent to that of the central couple. This dynamic highlights the implicit regulation of sexual roles by class position: affluent protagonists possess the narrative "right" to engage in romance, whereas servants or working-class characters are confined to supportive or comedic roles.

Economic negotiations, although seldom overt, manifest through auspicious gifts, extravagant wedding expenditures, or property disputes. In *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge*, the father's farmland in Punjab serves as both a source of pride and potential inheritance linked to Simran's marriage. The sexual economy, particularly concerning a daughter's marriage, intersects with the class economy of property ownership, thereby reinforcing patriarchal structures. Martha Nussbaum's ethical critique of the commodification of women's sexuality is pertinent here, as families in these films perceive the daughter's union as a transaction where moral, economic, and cultural capital are intertwined (Nussbaum; 2000, 57).

For romantic relationships to flourish, individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds must either integrate into elite social circles or exhibit exceptional moral integrity that warrants acceptance. The film *Maine Pyar Kiya* explicitly portrays this process of assimilation: Suman is required to demonstrate her steadfast virtue, while Prem must renounce materialistic comforts (symbolically by "working" for Suman's father) to validate the righteousness of their cross-class love. Consequently, the regulation of sexual behaviour extends to the regulation of class, as desire is deemed acceptable only when it conforms to the socioeconomic elite standards, as depicted in the film's resolution. This alignment effectively merges patriarchal morality with bourgeois respect.

Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam (2002) as a Symbolic Coda to an Era

In numerous ways, *Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam* serves as both a culmination and an epilogue to the family-oriented romances of the 1990s. The concluding scenes of familial reconciliation and forgiveness appear almost obligatory given the frequent replication of this formula in prior films. Consequently, while it was not the sole film to bridge the traditional and contemporary cinematic eras, its release in 2002, coupled with its ensemble cast – emblematic of the 1990s cinematic elite – renders it an apt conclusion to the cinematic epoch initiated by *Maine Pyar Kiya*.

Rachel Dwyer observes, "The conclusion of the 1990s romantic comedy cycle is best understood not as an abrupt cessation but as a gradual transformation, whereby the formula evolved into more nuanced and multiplex-friendly narratives that better aligned with the aspirational tastes of a changing Indian middle class" (Dwyer; 2006, 75). In what can be seen as a final swan song, *Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam* encapsulates the virtues and vices of a formula that had reached its culmination, leaving behind an influential legacy that continued to be reinterpreted in subsequent decades, albeit with diminishing returns for straightforward replication.

Upon reflection, the romantic comedies of the 1990s significantly shaped the manner in which Hindi cinema conceptualises themes of romance, family, and cultural identity. Even contemporary blockbusters that diverge from traditional formulas by incorporating more realistic narratives or innovative cinematic techniques remain indebted to the 1990s legacy characterised by star power, cross-cultural representation, and the integration of music with narrative. For diaspora audiences, in particular, these films served as a cinematic repository of memories that bridged the gap between homeland and host countries through the emotional resonance of romance, music, and family traditions.

Moreover, the sustained popularity of these films on streaming platforms and through television reruns underscores their enduring appeal: the melodic compositions of *"Maine Pyar Kiya"* and the comedic elements of *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* The iconic dialogues of *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* and the star-studded drama of *Hum Tumhare Hain Sanam* continue to engage in new generations. Nonetheless, as the broader media landscape becomes increasingly diverse and contemporary audiences seek greater thematic variety, the "Long 90s formula" is more frequently perceived through a nostalgic lens rather than as an immediate cultural necessity.

Nonetheless, the importance of this era as a collective cinematic imagination— characterised by communal love, families that were both comedic and authoritarian, and songs that resonated across scenic landscapes – cannot be overstated. Hence, the romantic comedies of the Long 90s serve as a chronicle of India's ambitions, constraints, and evolving self-perception during a pivotal transitional period. As the nation and its diaspora progressed to the 21st century, new narratives and cinematic styles emerged. However, the legacy of these quintessential romances persists, leaving behind an archival reservoir of filmic texts that continues to influence discourse on family, love, and cultural identity within Indian popular culture.

New Models of Consumption and Their Impact on Viewer Demography

This continuity significantly involves the evolving modalities of film consumption. Historically, Hindi romantic comedies have been predominantly associated with single-screen theatres and VHS tapes. However, the 21st century has seen the advent of multiplexes, television syndication, social media, and over-the-top (OTT) platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ Hotstar. Consequently, it is imperative to investigate how these new channels have transformed audience demographics, interpretations, and the enduring impacts of romantic comedies since the Long 90s.

With the emergence of multiplex cinema, the theatrical release window for numerous films has contracted, thereby intensifying competition. In the 1990s, blockbusters such as *Hum Aapke Hain Koun..!* or *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* was screened for more than a year in certain theatres. However, the multiplex era saw films being replaced after only a few weeks, necessitating more aggressive marketing strategies. Arvind Rajagopal observes that "the rapid churn in multiplex schedules contributed to the diversification of film content, prompting producers to experiment with new genres to capture an increasingly fickle audience" (Rajagopal; 2001, 62). The lengthy family romances of the 1990s, often exceeding three hours, proved less compatible with these accelerated cycles, thereby nudging the industry towards shorter runtimes and more varied subjects.

In the mid-2000s, platforms such as Orkut, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok later became central hubs for fans to discuss, rewatch, and create memes of iconic scenes from the 1990s. Henry Jenkins's concept of "participatory culture" (Jenkins; 2006, 60) aptly describes how fans actively remix or parody film sequences, thereby challenging the top-down control once exercised by producers. *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* has numerous fan edits on YouTube, ranging from comedic spoofs of the "palat" scene to heartfelt tributes capturing diaspora nostalgia.

The capacity of social media for cultural retrospection has prompted the re-evaluation of romantic comedies by newer generations. Younger audiences may scrutinise patriarchal or classist subtexts that older viewers might have more readily accepted. Hashtags such as #DDLJRewatch and #90sBollywoodNostalgia amass thousands of posts, fostering discussions on gender norms, moral policing, and class prejudice within these cherished classics (Mehta; 2008, 38). This phenomenon is consistent with Stuart Hall's assertion that "the context of reception is not static; it shifts as societies and technologies evolve, prompting new 'decodings' of previously established texts" (Hall 1980: 132).

Platforms such as Twitter and Instagram have also facilitated direct engagement between stars, many of whom have remained active since the 1990s, and their audiences. For instance, Shah Rukh Khan frequently references his iconic 1990s roles, while fans respond to narratives on how the DDLJ influenced their personal lives. This digital intimacy continues to preserve the memory of these romantic comedies, reintegrating them into contemporary popular cultural discourse, albeit with a critical perspective that may not have been present during their original theatrical releases.

The transition from VHS tapes and limited theatrical releases to instant streaming has significantly impacted diaspora audiences, particularly in the context of overseas streaming and global fandoms. Films such as DDLJ, KKHH, and KKKG continue to be among the most frequently viewed on international streaming platforms. This extensive accessibility has facilitated the formation of global fandom communities that engage in activities such as sharing fan art, subtitling, and cultural critiques. The concept of "imagined communities," as articulated by Benedict Anderson, is particularly relevant in this context. Diaspora fans, spanning locations from Toronto to Dubai to Singapore, are able to participate in watch parties and online discussions in real time, thereby "further strengthening a virtual sense of Indianness" (Anderson; 2006, 29).

The advent of over-the-top (OTT) platforms has facilitated the introduction of classic films to non-Indian audiences through the provision of multilingual subtitles and dubbing. Such cross-cultural dissemination occasionally engenders novel interpretive frameworks. For example, Western critics often highlight the centrality of familial themes or the

extended duration of wedding sequences as being particularly distinctive. While older diasporic or Indian audiences may engage with these romantic comedies with a sense of cultural familiarity, newly introduced viewers from diverse national backgrounds may perceive them as exotic, archaic, or refreshingly romantic.

9. CONCLUSION

The period known as the Long 90s in Bollywood cinema, spanning from *Maine Pyar Kiya* (1989) to *Ham Tumhare Hain Sanam* (2002), represents a significant era of transformation in narrative structures, socioeconomic themes, and audience engagement. Our extensive analysis has revealed several recurring themes and theoretical insights: the elevation of romantic love as a cohesive social force; the complex regulation of sexual economies by familial, architectural, and institutional frameworks; the overt display of class privilege and ambition; and the enduring impact of these films in a media-rich, digitally oriented context.

By integrating these diverse insights – spatial, socio-economic, familial, star-driven, and audience-focused – it becomes evident that the Bollywood romantic comedies of the Long 90s constituted a complex tapestry of tradition and innovation. These films celebrated youth, romantic love, and transnational possibilities when India redefined its economic and cultural identity. Nevertheless, they simultaneously upheld and even reinforced patriarchal and class-based structures, portraying them as morally secure anchors amid societal changes. The cinematic spaces, such as mansions, foreign meadows, college quadrangles, and wedding halls, were not merely peripheral settings but essential arenas where desire intersected with discipline and aspiration merged with moral persuasion.

Although contemporary critics may question the formulaic characteristics of these narratives, their enduring influence on both the Indian and global diaspora underscores their emotional resonance and symbolic significance. Whether revisited with nostalgia or critiqued for patriarchal biases, these films remain cultural landmarks, bridging generational gaps and sparking discourse on themes of romance, identity, and cinematic artistry.

Thus, the Long 90s Bollywood romantic comedy is not merely a historical curiosity or a remnant of simpler cinematic times. It continues to serve as a testament to the adaptability of Hindi cinema, crafting narratives that simultaneously entertain comfort and codify social hierarchies. By bridging these interpretive domains—nostalgic reverence and socio-critical analysis—the Long 90s remain vibrant, reminding us that popular art is a dynamic discourse that continually engages with its past, present, and future.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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