

“YOU GO GIRL!”
NATIONALISM AND WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT
IN THE BOLLYWOOD FILM *KYA KEHNA!*

A Thesis

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Abstract

This essay puts forth an analysis of the recent portrayal of an unwed mother in the Bollywood film, *Kya Kehna!* (Kundan Shah, 2000, henceforth KK). The title, which is readily translated to the rhetorical, “What can you say?” has additional significance here as a laudatory exclamation directed at the film’s young heroine. Targeting a younger audience, the film was hailed as a challenging exploration of female sexuality and women’s empowerment. The film in fact reaffirms traditional stereotypes of women in which their behavior is carefully controlled within a patriarchal framework. In spite of the awkward fact that the main character’s state of motherhood is the result of pre-marital sex, nationalist mechanisms are put into play to glorify the ideal of Woman-as-Mother. Unwed motherhood is not unheard of as a half-hidden side-plot of Hindi film, but it is very unusual to find it as the main narrative focus. A close textual reading of KK will enable a detailed comparison with an earlier film that apparently served as a template for the later production. *Julie* (K. S. Sethumadhavan, 1975), is a film that handled the same subject with a sensitivity unmatched in the more recent film. Further, placing KK alongside other contemporaneous releases, will show how—even in a film that does not foreground political, patriotic, or religious storylines—nationalist subtexts can be discerned in its handling of pre-marital sex, religion, and in the staging of its conclusion. The influences of economic liberalization, rising Hindutva sentiment in India (and commensurate communal tensions) as well as the impact of the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) community are all factors that play a part in the shaping of current Bollywood ideology, and their effects are visible in this film. Finally, viewer response and the concept of women’s “uplift” will be addressed.

Prologue

With a national cinema as diverse as that found in India, it should come as no surprise that some sort of “trend” is proclaimed almost every day. A cursory glance through a stack of old issues of *Filmfare*, an Indian film periodical, will reveal any number of outdated claims that popular film is headed towards “new” ideological or visual horizons. With the benefit of hindsight, however, we can see that most of these trends turn out to be mere blips in the massive, complex, and variable field that is Indian cinema. This paper grew out of a response to an assertion by Anupama Chopra, film critic of *India Today*, who declared that “the Bollywood rules are being bent beyond all recognition” because “a new generation of educated, savvy, and sassy women are demanding better roles.”¹ It is true that, historically, the majority of women’s roles in commercial Indian film have been drawn from a limited menu of formulas, and there have been occasional clusters of films that veer away from that norm now and again.² Chopra was referring, in this case, to a recent string of films featuring top-billing for women whose characters find themselves in situations unusual for Hindi film, with sometimes startling plot twists. These films have been promoted as “progressive” in their attempts to address difficult, women-oriented issues such as rape, unwed motherhood, and surrogate pregnancy. Generally, the Indian cinema press, including Chopra, has trumpeted these films as part of yet another “new wave” of issue-oriented cinema directed towards women, though the audience response has remained rather mixed.³ While there seems to be no doubt that a number of new films are taking risks in dealing with heretofore taboo themes, it is *not* the case that women’s roles are presenting a new, progressive standard. Chopra herself acknowledges that, despite this flurry of bold new roles for women, the bulk of popular films still depict women as “eye candy,” and that the “politics are largely regressive.”⁴

This essay puts forth an analysis of the recent portrayal of an unwed mother in one such Bollywood film, *Kya Kehna!* (Kundan Shah, 2000, henceforth KK). The title, which is readily translated to the rhetorical, “What can you say?” has additional significance here as a laudatory exclamation directed at the film’s young heroine. In keeping with the marketing strategy of the film’s makers, I have chosen to paraphrase the title into rather more current slang, thus: “You Go Girl!” Targeting a younger audience, the film was hailed as a challenging exploration of female sexuality and women’s empowerment. I will show that the film in fact reaffirms traditional stereotypes of women in which their behavior is carefully controlled within a patriarchal framework. In spite of the awkward fact that the main character’s state of motherhood is the result of pre-marital sex, nationalist mechanisms are put into play to glorify the ideal of Woman-as-Mother. Unwed motherhood is not unheard of as a half-hidden side-plot of Hindi film, but it is very unusual to find it as the main narrative focus. A close textual reading of KK will enable a detailed comparison with an earlier film that, I believe, served as a template for the later production. *Julie* (K. S. Sethumadhavan, 1975), is a film that handled the same subject with a sensitivity unmatched in the more recent film. Then, by situating KK alongside other contemporaneous releases, I hope to show how—even in a film that does not foreground political, patriotic, or religious storylines—nationalist subtexts can be discerned in its handling of pre-marital sex, religion, and in the staging of its conclusion. The influences of economic liberalization, rising Hindutva sentiment in India (and commensurate communal tensions) as well as the impact of the NRI (Non-Resident Indian) community are all factors that play a part in

the shaping of current Bollywood ideology, and their effects are visible in this film. Finally, taking into account viewer response, I will touch on issues of genre and the concept of women's "uplift." First, for readers unfamiliar with the Bombay film industry, a brief history of Bollywood cinema will provide a background against which these current developments can be placed.

Part I

Writing in 1968, Chidananda Das Gupta criticized the commercial film industry of India for pandering to the masses with a formula of watered-down tradition and escapist, middle-class fantasy wrapped up in a package of spectacular song-and-dance and maudlin performance. He is one among many writers who have long lamented the apparent decline of Indian cinema: “If India’s course today is still being guided by the Tagore-Nehru dream of an East-West synthesis, the all-India film actively prevents the filtering down of that dream from the advanced middle class to the wider base of the population. It is thus a conformist, reactionary film, out to prevent social revolution rather than to encourage it.”⁵ Noting the sharp divide apparent between realist Independent cinema and its more popular cousin, Das Gupta predicted the eventual demise of “quality” film. He championed modernity in the regional art film of India, exemplified by auteurs such as Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. He concedes that Ray’s appeal is restricted to intellectuals and to Ray’s own compatriots in Bengal—a state that has benefited from a higher degree of education than many of its neighbors—as well as enthusiastic Western viewers.⁶ For Indian audiences, however, Indian films remain the first choice, and Hindi film is in the lead.

Comparing Bollywood pictures to popular films churned out by Hollywood, Das Gupta points out that there is no division of genres, as exists in the West: no Westerns, no romances, no thrillers. According to Ashis Nandy, this may be because the Bollywood film has been shaped by the need to appeal to an incredibly diverse audience: “An average, ‘normal’ Bombay film has to be, to the extent possible, everything to everyone. It has to cut across the myriad ethnicities and lifestyles of India and even of the world that impinges on India. The popular film *is* low-brow, modernizing India in all its complexity, sophistry, naiveté and vulgarity.”⁷ This is confirmed in a recent online article at *abcNEWS.com* in which it was stated that, “In India, movie stars are rock stars, sports stars, and film stars rolled into one. A Hindi film hero has to cry, sing, dance, fight, and be a good son.”⁸ Later in the article, an unnamed Bollywood screenwriter is quoted as saying that a Hollywood film like *Speed* would not succeed in India, because of its single plot line. “Here, it [*Speed*] could only work as a climax scene. We need multiple tracks: the emotional track, the comedy track, the action track. Western audiences can appreciate such a basic plot line, but Indian audiences would reject it.”⁹ Such a multifaceted approach can seem confused and fractured to some audiences in the West, especially to those steeped in a linear tradition of narrative.

Accordingly, there has never been a shortage of critical praise for Ray, the country’s most-celebrated auteur, and other art-house filmmakers working in the realist tradition in the 1950s and 60s—the so-called Golden Age of Indian cinema. Thus, much of the literature about *popular* film, whether regional or Bombay-based, begins defensively. As if to justify its existence, defenders of popular film often preface their essays with a barrage of statistics that attest to the enormity of the industry—and, indeed, the impressive numbers are worth repeating here: government reports estimate that India’s more than 13,000 cinemas seat a daily crush of nearly 15 million people.¹⁰ Between 750 to 800 feature films are released each year and are enjoyed by audiences throughout Asia, the Middle East, and Africa. Many films are simultaneously released in several of India’s 18 official languages, but the vast majority are produced in Telugu, Hindi, Tamil, and Malayalam. The Hindi-language film, sometimes referred to as the All-India film, takes the lion’s share of the market because Hindi is widely

understood throughout the subcontinent (particularly the northern region) and because the genre usually draws elements from a broad spectrum of cultural sources.¹¹

These figures show that, despite occasional slumps in box-office returns—resulting from the introduction of VCR technology (and thus video piracy) and cable and satellite television—the Indian film industry is evidently stronger than ever. The past decade has seen a string of phenomenally successful releases and a proliferation of scholarly writing on every aspect of Indian popular film. The sheer volume of Bollywood output and consumption is causing many to reconsider their dismissal of these films as frivolous—in fact, there seems to be a growing consensus that the interactive relationship between Indian popular film and its audience is one of the defining characteristics of South Asian culture.¹²

Bollywood film has long been an international phenomenon, comprising one of South Asia's most conspicuous exports, and rivaling the drawing power of Hollywood film in some markets.¹³ However, thanks partly to the heightened profile of the South Asian immigrant community in Europe and North America, home-grown commercial and regional cinemas are now even more popular outside of the Subcontinent, and many films are produced with the NRI population specifically in mind.¹⁴ Scholars have been quick to note the change that occurred in Indian film audience demographics during the Nineties, and to theorize how this has changed, in turn, the films themselves, reshaping subject matter, censorship practice, style, and so forth. Not only is the industry benefitting from a burgeoning fan base, but the critical reputation of Hindi film has seen an upturn as well: international acclaim for the Bollywood period drama *Lagaan* ("Taxes," Ashutosh Gowariker, 2001) has culminated in an Oscar nomination in the Best Foreign Film category; Australian-born director Baz Luhrmann has credited Bollywood film as a major influence on his own work, such as the film *Moulin Rouge* (2001).¹⁵ Clearly, more than ever before, there is an international exchange of influences, sensibilities, and receptiveness between the makers and consumers of both Indian and Western film—an exchange that is blurring the once-cherished boundaries between "high" and "low" culture, as well as between the "East" and the "West."

This essay is concerned particularly with exploring how such exchanges have affected the manner in which women are portrayed in the latest versions of the Bollywood "woman's film." While most Hindi films aspire to the widest possible audience, a significant number are crafted to have a more limited and specialized appeal. Categorization of Bollywood film is not standardized in any way, though there exists within the umbrella category the "social," a narrower designation of the "woman's film," a label that is *not* synonymous with "feminist film."¹⁶ Rather, it indicates simply that the subject matter is likely to be of interest to women—or at least assumed to be so. Often, women-oriented narratives seek to include a measure of "uplift" for women, though this is not a requirement and, arguably, intentions and declarations do not always match the results. I will examine the issue of women's uplift in more detail later in the essay; first I will provide a close textual reading of one such woman's film.

Part II

Director Kundan Shah's recent film, *Kya Kehna!* is an example of a woman's film that left many critics surprised by its box office success. Released in May of 2000 after four years of production delays, it was criticized for continuity problems and an uneven music score. Heavily promoted as "clean" family entertainment, it later garnered several awards, including the Filmfare Best Story award for Honey Irani, who wrote the script.¹⁷ This fueled ticket sales enough to boost it to blockbuster status in what was agreed to be a rather flat year for Bollywood.¹⁸ KK seems, on the surface, to challenge the reassuring formula of traditional family values to which most popular films adhere. Trying to shed a positive light on the difficult subject of unwed motherhood, the film promises to depict an empowered and emancipated woman who takes a stand against the traditional oppressions of family and society. By the end of the film, however, we find the family safely intact and, by extension, social order is restored.

The story revolves around the spunky and independent Priya Bakshi, the only daughter of a middle-class family that lives in a picturesque town in the Himalayan foothills. When Priya graduates from her exclusive all-girls boarding school, she returns home to attend college and there falls for the dashing local boy, Rahul. Against the strenuous objections of her family, who are well aware of Rahul's reputation as a Casanova, Priya begins a passionate affair with him. Predictably, she becomes pregnant and, unsurprisingly, she is ejected from home amid the scandal of family dishonor. Priya, who had been the apple of everyone's eye, seems stunned upon realizing that she has been exiled not only by her family, but by her whole community. After some soul-searching, and a close call with some local youths, she heads for the railway station, with the intention of running away. At this point the script defies the usual expectations. As she waits for the next train she is intercepted by her conciliatory family, who has decided that her absence is too painful for them to bear. Later, they attend a school play where they watch a thinly-disguised performance of her own predicament in which the expectant protagonist, played by her best friend, takes her own life, as is only "proper" to restore the family's honor. This public shaming, orchestrated by Rahul's mother, is devastating to Priya, but she is determined to speak up in the end. She rallies, takes the stage, and delivers a lengthy speech that so moves her audience, they are stirred to an enthusiastic standing ovation and resume their affections for her. Rahul himself is the first to clap. Thereafter, a visibly pregnant Priya returns to school and is suddenly the toast of the college. She's showered with gifts, whisked to the front of the queue, and doted on by everyone. Finally, faced with proposals of marriage from both the father of the baby and from an old friend, she gives birth to a baby girl. Just when her family (and the filmgoer) are reassured that she will indeed marry Rahul, she chooses instead the friend, providing a "surprise ending" that found favor with many viewers. Priya's ability to make her own choice in marriage, together with her strong-willed character and outspokenness, are examples of several small "concessions" to progressive thinking which, in the final analysis, still do not add up to an "empowering" film, as will be made clear.

Fans of Bollywood cinema will be familiar with the main narrative themes addressed by KK: morality, family, arranged marriage, and motherhood. Plainly, these are not the *sole* issues possible; I have chosen them because they are particularly salient to a plot that revolves around pre-marital sex and its aftermath. Further, an analysis of these four issues provides a useful framework for a later comparison with an analogous film. I will deal with each one in turn.

There are several strands of the morality debate that run through the film. Whereas in action films the moral struggle is waged by the patently transparent “good” hero and the “evil” villain, in melodrama the distinctions, while there, can be rather understated. In *KK*, the audience understands immediately that Priya is a good person. When the suave Rahul, who eventually fathers her baby, is introduced, he is immediately recognizable as a scoundrel because of his tough-guy demeanor and blatant sexual interest in the college co-eds. Yet his ability to change his mind, to develop a kind of respect for Priya, and to behave with some grace at the end, makes him somewhat more human than the usual Bollywood villain. Also, a double standard is established: the total lack of public and family censure for Rahul’s part in the whole affair reminds us that “boys will be boys,” while the disgrace and dishonor fall entirely upon Priya and her family. Thus, the film makes clear that issues of morality hinge on the behavior of women, rather than on the actions of men.

Priya’s outspoken nature is established in the opening scenes when she agrees, on a dare, to slap the vice-principal of her school on behalf of her classmate, who had been sexually molested by him earlier that day. This takes place onstage at a “farewell” ceremony during which Priya receives an award as “Best Student.” Though for a moment everyone is shocked at her brazen act, immediately she is exonerated for revealing the truth. Thus, Priya is shown not only to be brave and unreserved, but willing to speak out for what is right—especially on behalf of those who cannot speak up for themselves. This is an important trait that will, in her final speech at the end, win back the hearts of the townspeople and, presumably, the filmgoers. I will examine this important scene in more detail later.

The contrast between bad and good is fleshed out by implications that the morally and spiritually-pure “East” is located in opposition to the materialistic and morally-bankrupt “West.” This is well-trod territory in Bollywood narratives—as it is, for that matter, in many independently-produced, art-house films, made by and targeted towards the South Asian diaspora. Recent examples, including *ABCD*¹⁹ (Krutin Patel, 1999), *East is East* (Damien O’Donnell, 1999), *My Son the Fanatic* (Udayan Prasad, 1997), and *Chutney Popcorn* (Nisha Ganatra, 1999), have made the differences between East and West a central motif, foregrounding the conventional wisdom that children have a better upbringing, better spouses can be had, and higher moral standards obtain in the homeland—core concerns for the NRI community. The crucial distinction, of course, is that the outcomes in diaspora-oriented productions are usually ambiguous, choosing to depict the real-life problems that are attendant on the shift from one culture to another, whereas Bollywood films have traditionally been unequivocal in their insistence that a character’s “modern” upbringing will signal oncoming problems.²⁰ In this respect, *KK* is no exception.

From the beginning, Priya’s family is established as modern and middle-class: owners of the college canteen, they live in comfortable circumstances, the daughter pursues higher education, and there is little sense of a family hierarchy. When Priya becomes pregnant half way into the film, however, this very modernity becomes a serious liability for them. The first instance in which this is explicitly stated is at the disastrous wedding reception for Priya’s eldest brother, Vikram, and his new wife Nina. By now Priya’s disgrace is known to the entire town, thanks to the gossip Rahul’s mother has spread with relish in her bid to dishonor the family. The only people who make an appearance at what would normally be a large and joyous event are the neighbors, Mrs. Sativa and her son Ajay, who has loved Priya from a distance since the two were

children. Disgusted with the turn of events, Nina's father orders the caterers to give all the food to the beggars and expresses his outrage: Mr. Bakshi—in particular his failure to provide a “proper” upbringing for his children— is to blame for everything. By marrying Nina into the Bakshi family he feels he's “thrown his daughter into a filthy sewer.” When Nina jumps to the defense of her new (and newly disgraced) family, he congratulates her steady loyalty to them even in the face of such dishonor and draws a plain comparison between the “good” (traditional) Nina and the “bad” (modern) Priya: “That is the kind of upbringing I've given to my daughter. Had you given your daughter a good upbringing, this day would never have come.”

Though KK does not explicitly state that “the West” or “modernity” are responsible for Priya's fall from grace, the implication is continually made clear by the pattern of her clothing choices. In the first half of the film she is clad solely in Western dress: the improbably-short schoolgirl's skirt, jeans, coveralls and, during the courtship with Rahul, mini-dresses. We see her in a more traditional *salwar kameez* at Vikram's wedding—only after she has consummated her relationship with Rahul and subsequently suffered his rejection of her. Alert viewers will have surmised already that Priya is pregnant, and this is confirmed by the knowing looks between her parents when she faints during the ceremony. Thereafter, a chastened Priya can be seen in almost exclusively traditional dress. Now, this is not unusual in Hindi film: a change in women's clothing is often used to mark a shift in status (from a single to married state, for example) but the device is used so heavy-handedly here that it gives KK a distinctly “old-fashioned” tone. A later scene stands out for its pointed use of the oppositional signs of East/West garb. Once Priya's reputation has been rehabilitated in the eyes of the townspeople, both Rahul, who now realizes her worth, and Ajay, who has loved her steadfastly throughout, resolve to ask for her hand in marriage. Their enthusiasm is portrayed in an exuberant song sequence in which the romantic fantasies of the two suitors are juxtaposed. In Rahul's imagination he is driving a flashy red convertible while Priya returns his love wearing a sexy red mini dress. Ajay's thoughts, meanwhile, feature him riding a more humble motorbike and enjoying the company of a modestly-clad Priya, in a yellow *salwar*. Clearly, the viewer is meant to infer that Rahul's desires are still based in materialism and sexuality, and are therefore not as pure as Ajay's motives, which are grounded in tradition and are therefore more respectable.

Mr. Bakshi's moral and paternal failures are further alluded to when, at a college board meeting, Rahul's mother bullies the town elders into joining her campaign to put the Bakshi clan—who are merely middle class—in their place. She is furious that the pregnant Priya, now returned to the embrace of her family, seems to be flaunting her transgression around town without remorse. “I ask you,” she screeches, “what effect is this having on our social order, our children?” Mrs. Modi herself embodies a caricature of the modernity/tradition debate—in fact, as the figure who continually orchestrates collective ill-will towards Priya, she could even be called the villain of the film. Although she is always seen in a *sari*, they are not at all traditional, particularly in this scene in which she is clad in a zebra-striped version. Concerned only with appearances, wealth, and class, her strident, shallow character can be seen to represent, in some respects, a betrayal of “authentic” tradition. This is a charge that has been levied by conservative Hindus in India against the secular state, which has been blamed by them for the erosion of Indian tradition by what they perceive as repeated concessions to minority religions.²¹ At a time when communal tensions in India are higher than ever, Mrs. Modi's persona seems more tragic than comic. Thus, Priya and Mrs. Modi embody the two detested extremes of

modernity: one, the wholesale abandonment of Indian tradition in favor of a Western upbringing, the other, the adoption of a faux traditionalism to cover a secular ideology.

The second key theme is that of the opposing of individual interests against those of the family, also a popular feature of much Hindi film. Priya's rebellion against her family is relatively short-lived, and is overcome through the sheer force of their love for one another—a common motif. It is her broader confrontation with society that is prominently figured in her very public speech scene and which is usually singled out as proof of her ground-breaking independence and modern individualism. As we shall see, however, Priya's freedom is hobbled by religion and tradition.

Closely allied with the assertion of personal desire against clan concerns is the third social theme I wish to address, that of the love match as opposed to the arranged marriage. Identified as the “animating logic of south Asian romance” by Patricia Uberoi, its resolution is increasingly that of “the contemporary ideal of the ‘arranged love marriage’” in which the son or daughter's one true love is someone the parents might have chosen anyway—often a sibling of the rejected suitor.²² Or, as in *KK*, a longtime friend who has proven his or her steadfast loyalty under any circumstances. Ajay, after spending the entire film pining in the wings, finally musters the courage to propose marriage to the heavily-pregnant, newly-pious Priya who is praying in temple. Before she can answer, however, she goes into labor and is rushed to the hospital. By this time, her parents have already accepted Rahul's offer on her behalf. At the gathering to celebrate the birth of a daughter, we watch a humbled Rahul give a heartfelt apology for his callowness and, to everybody's astonishment, Priya's polite rejection of him. Drawing the suspense out to the very last, she finally announces her acceptance of Ajay's hand, thereby reassuring her parents (and a much-relieved film audience) that the baby will indeed have a father's name. Unwavering in his convictions, loyal and supportive throughout, Ajay is in some respects the true (if understated) hero of the film. By agreeing to marry a woman who has given birth out-of-wedlock to another man's child, he goes beyond standard expectations in a way that Priya's character, who remains bound by tradition, never manages. Once again, we see independently-produced, diaspora films dealing with these problems head-on and with a measure of ambiguity, as in *Monsoon Wedding* (Mira Nair, 2001), in which a woman from Delhi marries an NRI groom who has returned to his homeland for an authentic Indian wife. In *East is East*, set in 1970s England, the children of George Khan, a Pakistani immigrant, reject outright their father's chosen matches for them. In Bollywood film, as Uberoi has demonstrated, the problem of marriage has recently taken on a new urgency, in part because of the growth of the NRI audience and a commensurate increase of anxiety about the nature of “Indianness.”²³

The fourth main theme is that of motherhood. As I hope to demonstrate, *KK*'s marked celebration of motherhood is at the heart of the film's conservative bias. Scholars have long commented on the centrality, in India, of woman's generative role in the formulation of nationalist ideologies and symbolism.²⁴ In Indian cinema, the conflation of motherhood with the motherland has been a recurring trope for decades, most famously in Mehboob Khan's iconic *Mother India* (1957).²⁵ In *KK*, Priya's decision to have the child is based on the valorization of motherhood itself, which is here grounded in a religious vision. Her status as an *unwed* mother might, at first glance, seem an obvious obstacle to an assertion that she could, in any way, represent an idealized Mother, but this is handled in a novel manner in the climax of the film, as we shall see.

The earlier scene in which Priya first decides to *keep* her baby is pivotal and bears closer examination. After she faints at her brother's wedding and her family realizes she's pregnant, Mr. Bakshi and Vikram go to the Modi home and plead with Rahul to rescue Priya's doomed honor by marrying her. Rahul agrees to marry Priya in order that the baby will have the father's name, but only on the condition that he will immediately divorce her. This infuriates the two men who then return home and report the bad news to the family, including a soberly-clad Priya, who is wearing traditional clothing for the first time. When her father proclaims, "There's no other way out," Priya understands that he means for her to have an abortion and she retreats into the house, in tears. There, she has a mystic vision. In a household that, up to now, evinced no religious inclinations whatsoever, Priya finds a painting of Krishna at every turn. Bathed in a holy light emanating from the idols, she hears a child's giggle and a small voice calls out "Ma!" Krishna, of course, is one of the most popular of the Hindu gods, partly because he is manifested in a variety of aspects, thereby appealing to diverse needs, but also, as Sudhir Kakar points out, because of the "promise of salvation to the dispossessed classes."²⁶ As the young cowherd, ecstatic lover of Radha and her companions, he represents the chance for anyone to attain *moksha*²⁷ through purity and intensity of devotion, regardless of caste or class. Significantly, he is shown in this scene in another manifestation, as the mischievous child-god, playing his flute and stealing butter. Kakar continues, "Krishna, the god of the legends, is the saviour of women not as an adult male and lustful partner but as the son who is vital to the consolidation and confirmation of a Hindu woman's identity around the core of motherliness."²⁸ Thus Priya's choice to keep her baby is infused with the authority of religious sanctification, rather than being truly her own free will. At this point she is unceremoniously kicked out of the house in a last-ditch effort to recoup the family's honor. As noted earlier, she spends only one stormy and feverish night out before she is recovered by her remorseful family at the train station.

In sum, KK seems like any number of Bollywood's women-oriented films in many respects, foregrounding standard themes such as family dynamics, morality, and the issue of the love vs. the arranged marriage. True, it departs from the norm by featuring a heroine who engages in pre-marital sex and subsequently becomes an unwed mother. While Priya's decision to keep her baby is touted as an inspiring example of women's empowerment and the expression of individual free will, it is my contention that her celebrated individualism is a pretense and she has not made much "progress" on behalf of women's empowerment. This is partly because religion, not free will, is invoked as the motivation behind her decision to rebel against her family and society, a development I will examine in the next section. Another reason that its claim as a bold, empowering film can be regarded with skepticism is that it has, in fact, *been done before*. The rather lengthy textual reading of KK has laid the ground for a fruitful comparison with another film that explores the theme of unwed motherhood.

Part III

Perhaps every generation needs its own version of moral tales. Preity Zinta (the actress who played Priya in KK) declared,

For once, a film brings the topic of sex out in the open. It forces parents to talk to their daughters about it so that they never get into a situation like Priya did. Sex education is a must for the youth. It's high time we brought the topic out in the open.²⁹

Yet the makers of KK were certainly acquainted with a film released nearly thirty years ago that deals with unwed motherhood in almost exactly the same fashion. *Julie* (K. S. Sethumadhavan, 1975) is remembered by older Indians as a popular hit and is familiar to a younger generation thanks to periodic rebroadcast on television and to the enduring popularity of several of its songs, composed by Rajesh Roshan, who was also responsible for the music of KK. Quoting, reworking and updating older plots, or re-releasing a regional film in Hindi are frequent and accepted practices in Bollywood—*Julie* is itself a remake of the director's own *Chattakkari*, a Malayalam release of the previous year. The old-fashioned visual and textual tone of KK is readily apparent when seen alongside *Julie*, which tells the story of a young girl who, like Priya, finds herself in the position of unwed mother. Despite the similar plot line, however, there are some important differences which betray a fundamental disparity in the underlying ideologies of the two films.

Julie follows a year in the life of Julie Morris, the eldest daughter of a Christian family living near an unnamed large city in South India. On one level it is a tale about a young woman's discovery of her own sexuality—and its unfortunate consequences—but the film also highlights tensions between Muslims, Hindus, and the Anglo-Indian (Christian) community, focusing especially on the latter two. Julie's family environment, generally one of love and affection, is not without some dysfunctional aspects: her father's alcoholism causes recurring problems at home and in town and is an ongoing source of frustration for her. His job as an engine driver for the Railway establishes them as middle class, but they suffer perennial money woes, which are blamed on his drinking habit. Julie's half-British mother is obsessed with the idea of moving to England, which, though she's never been there, she feels is her true home. Her corresponding contempt for all things Indian forms the basis of her mistrust of the Bhattacharya family, whose son Shashi becomes the father of Julie's child.

The fathers of both Priya (in KK) and Julie are depicted in similar, almost comic, fashion: well-meaning, yet bumbling and out-of-touch, they are blinded by a loving devotion to their daughters. It is they who seem to suffer most when the expectant girls are sent away from the home, though Julie's father remains unaware of her pregnancy and has been led to believe she's gone to work in a convent. In both films their uncritical indulgence of their daughters is seen to be a root cause of the girls' eventual fall from grace—yet it is the daughters themselves that must pay the price. The implication here is that the fathers' patriarchal weakness is the result of influence by the slack Western ethics that are responsible for the correspondingly loose morals of Western women. Julie, as an Anglo-Indian girl, would already be seen as potentially “loose” by Indian society. As Ernestine Gaur observes, “the position of Anglo-Indian girls is an uneasy

one. Mostly educated in Christian schools, dressed like Europeans, and allowed a similar amount of social freedom they are constantly suspected of immorality by Hindu men. Hindu families will rather accept a Western daughter-in-law (painful as this may be) than an Anglo-Indian girl.”³⁰

Both films treat the blossoming love between the young couple similarly: the girl, shy and uncertain about her feelings, must be coaxed by the handsome—and certainly more experienced—boy into a more intimate relationship. In Hindi films, in order to retain a measure of viewer sympathy, the female character must be seen to resist—at least for a time—the advances of the courting male, until finally the relationship is consummated. This usually takes place during a song sequence replete with coded allusions to sexual intercourse.³¹

In *Julie*, the secret courtship extends over several scenes and a period of months until finally, while Shashi’s family is out of town attending a wedding, the two make love in the Bhattacharya home. Here we see a bikini calendar on the wall and “gentlemen’s” magazines on the bed which, ruffled by the breeze of an oscillating fan, flash images of bare-breasted women. Both can be understood as signs of a liberalized Western attitude towards sexuality. Further, Shashi has fortified his courage with alcohol in anticipation of Julie’s arrival and encourages her to follow suit. Citing her father’s disastrous dependence on such “poison” she declines, and points out that his mother, a very pious Hindu, would be appalled to know of whisky in the home. Eventually she is persuaded to have a drink and we are led to believe this is the inspiration behind the carefree off-screen stripping of her clothes, registered as arousal on Shashi’s face. By contrast, in *KK*, the courtship between Rahul and Priya is delayed by parental injunctions for them to stay away from one another, but nonetheless is accomplished over a much shorter span of time than in *Julie*. The pair finally come together in the now-standard love scene in which the windswept couple dances in a forested mountain range. This mildly provocative song sequence raised some eyebrows in India because it showed the couple in a sexual embrace, unclothed from the waist up, followed by a brief moment of exhausted afterglow. The rest of the scene, however, is well within the boundaries of conventional depictions of love-making in popular film.

The subsequent expulsion of the girls from their homes in both films results from the desire to preserve the family honor. In *KK* the punishment is intended to be permanent, whereas in *Julie* the exile is understood to be merely temporary. Julie’s mother, unwilling to accept the thought of further involvement with a Hindu family, takes pre-emptive action, hastily concocting a story that will explain her daughter’s sudden relocation to another town at the home of a trusted family friend. There, the “aunty” rejects Mrs. Morris’ request that she arrange an abortion for Julie: “No Margaret, no! This is a big crime!” With Julie’s mother repeatedly invoking the threat of shame and dishonor for the Anglo-Indian community should news of the pregnancy get out, an arrangement is made that Julie will stay with Aunty until “her time is up.” Later, after a quiet pregnancy, she goes into labor upon hearing the news of her father’s death. A tearful return home is made doubly sad for Julie because she was made to leave her infant boy behind, to be given up for adoption.

While *Julie* and *KK* share many similarities, it is their differences which support my contention that the later film asserts a more conservative stance. Many of these disparities can be attributed to the varying degrees of realism presented by the two: *Julie* has a far greater sense of naturalism while *KK* follows a much more formulaic pattern of melodramatic idealization. In

Julie, not only is there more character development and a deeper exploration of family foibles (racism, alcoholism), but there is more credibility in its willingness to show *all* social groups as capable of moral lapses, something not seen in *KK*, which renders an exclusively Hindu world.

Interestingly, the naturalism of the film is most evident in the poignant and sometimes startling details pertaining to Julie's body. The night after she and Shashi have kissed for the first time, she lies in bed next to her younger sister, inflamed with desire and unable to sleep. At the time this film was released, such a frank and unstylized depiction of female arousal was rare, and slightly shocking for a character not classed as a vamp.³² There are other moments that stand out as well, as when Julie takes private pleasure in the sweat of the sleeping Shashi after they have made love. Her first night at home without her baby is another example: again sharing a bed with her sister, she tosses and turns, wide awake and troubled by the thought of the child she was forced give up. When she hears the cry of a neighbor's baby outside her window, her milk comes down and stains the front of her nightdress. This prompts her sister to reveal that she knows exactly what kind of "work" Julie did during her time away. The enhanced sense of realism extends even into the pivotal scene where Julie and Shashi consummate their relationship. In a departure from the usual formulaic song-and-dance sequence in which the couple "make love" in coded, choreographed moves in a idealized, picturesque setting (as seen in *KK*), they have sex in an actual bedroom in Shashi's home.

These incidents are made possible by the overwhelmingly *private* setting of *Julie*, which takes place almost entirely in interior domestic spaces. There is only one scene which features a crowd, that is the dance at the Railway Institute where Julie and Shashi make close physical contact for the first time, during a slow number. The prevailing private context allows for two important developments: first, the exploration by Julie of her own sexuality, as described above. Second, it is this domestic space in which the considerable power and control exerted by the two matriarchs can unfold. Both women are depicted as exceedingly concerned with social appearances and religious custom. Though it gradually becomes clear that not everyone has been fooled by the story explaining Julie's nine-month absence, for most of the film, the "scandal" remains confined to her own family. Only towards the end does the Bhattacharya family become aware that Shashi is a father.

This is in stark contrast to the public arena in *KK* which finds Priya at its center. Her pregnancy becomes a matter of general debate—thanks, in part, to Rahul's gossipy mother, but also to her own outspokenness. The public nature of Priya's dilemma necessitates a simplistic rendering of the situation—there is no place for shades of grey in a quarrel over ideology. Thus Priya finds that *everyone* is against her, even her best friend. If any aspect of the film could be labeled "empowering for women," it might be her willingness to take on a society that has turned its back on her. Unfortunately, this "free will" is not based in her self-awareness or personal desire, but is couched in a newly-adopted, superficial piety that evokes the religious rhetoric of Indian nationalism.

Partha Chatterjee has famously outlined the manner in which nineteenth-century Indian independence movements articulated the terms of nationalist discourse as a gendered distinction between the home (*ghar*) and the world (*bahir*), corresponding to the dichotomy of the inner/spiritual domain and the outer/material world.³³ Thus, nationalist rhetoric invoked the language of family as a strategy to prevent Colonial authorities from interfering too much in matters of religion and tradition. Catherine A. Robinson describes how early women's

movements, by appealing to a “Golden Age” of Indian tradition, adapted this blueprint of independence to their own efforts in advancing women’s causes, or women’s uplift. By framing the debate in such terms of Hindu revivalism, renowned figures like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu were able to garner significant popular support for the entry by women into society and the public sphere.³⁴

The climax in *KK*, when Priya delivers her moving speech, illustrates very well how this shift from the private to the public domain is depicted in Bollywood film as a treacherous and often futile effort for women. When the scene opens, we see Priya and her family, ill-at-ease amid the rapt audience, all watching the climactic ending of a humiliating morality play about Priya’s own dilemma. The performance is a histrionic dramatization of what *should* unfold in such circumstances, according to conventional Bollywood narratives that revolve around the dishonor brought about by unsanctioned female sexual activity. Appropriately, the action takes place in an interior domestic space (though one accessible to public scrutiny through the open windows), the gloom punctuated with statements like “How could she have faced the world?”—at which point “Priya” emerges from a secret hiding place and hastily downs a vial-full of poison, ending her own life and thereby restoring some measure of lost honor to the stricken family. Thus, the townspeople are witness to a public airing of normally private family concerns (an undesired pregnancy, conceived out of wedlock; a penitential suicide) and, through the narrative and cinematic device of a story within a story, so is the film audience. In a sense, the stage “Priya” has served as a surrogate, *sacrificial* character—and her suicide as a cathartic release for the diegetic *and* the actual film audience. This is underscored by her prior, devotional interaction with Krishna— a means of salvation for the masses in popular Hinduism. By the time she steps onstage, a redeemed, real-life Priya faces a public that has been primed for her speech. This has enabled a convenient erasure of her sexuality, the awkward pre-marital activity that got her there in the first place. What follows is a mawkish appeal for re-acceptance into the community, in which Priya invokes the sanctity of motherhood: “Motherhood is the greatest blessing; God’s greatest gift.” And later, “Society says there is only one option for girls like me, who are helpless: abort the child. Would that not be a sin?” She admits she too contemplated suicide, but was saved by her vision. Continuing, she relates the communication she had with her unborn child, who said: “Ma, I am inside you, I have already been born.” “I am here moving inside your womb, getting a feel of life.” The child’s voice finishes with the baleful plea, “Don’t kill me mummy.” Priya concludes with the following declaration: “That’s why I decided to have this baby: as a mark of respect for God’s gift. I decided to bring him into this world. *I will do my duty as a mother.*” (Emphasis added.) Priya makes no apologies for her out-of-bounds sexual activity but, significantly, she does not assert it either. This effacement of her sexuality recalls the Gandhian approach to “the woman question” adopted by nationalist movements in the decades leading up to India’s independence. Ketu H. Katrak reminds us that

Female sexuality was essentialized through Gandhi’s appeals to the ‘female’ virtues: chastity, purity, self-sacrifice, suffering. Gandhi’s model for female strength was Draupadi, not the militant Rani of Jhansi who ‘dressed like a man’ and on horseback, led her troops in a battle against the British in 1857. Draupadi’s is the more appropriate, feminine courage which, in the face of imminent dishonor, calls upon Lord Krishna for help.³⁵

Thus, while Gandhi's politics encouraged women to enter the public sphere in aid of independence, they were expected to do so in their traditional "female" roles: wife, sister, daughter, mother. Likewise, in *KK*, in a scene that recalls the opening sequence of the film in which we are first introduced to her assertive nature, Priya emerges into the male domain of public discourse but, once there, she speaks not for herself, but for the unborn child—as a mother. In these concluding scenes, she is unapologetically made to return to the domestic sphere, first to her role as mother, and finally, as wife. Thus, emancipation, for Priya, has been not only fleeting, but an illusion all along. Katrak states that, "Mothering as perhaps the most venerated expression of female sexuality is permitted only within the parameters of Hindu marriage."³⁶ Again, this is neatly addressed by the staged suicide of the Priya character in the school play, and fully resolved minutes later, as the film ends with the announcement of the real Priya's intention to marry Ajay.

A remarkably similar outcome is realized through parallel yet quite distinctive means in *Julie*, where the resolution occurs, not in a packed auditorium, but in the privacy of the Bhattacharya home. By this time, much has transpired: Shashi, who has been away at college and remained oblivious to all that has happened, immediately suggests marriage when Julie reveals all to him—a plan deftly scuttled by his mother, who professes full support for the match, but knowingly manipulates the loyalty Julie feels towards Uma, her best friend and Shashi's sister. Like Mrs. Morris, Mrs. Bhattacharya cannot bear the thought of a mixed-faith household. She disingenuously explains to Julie that it "doesn't matter" if Uma's prospects for a suitable match will be completely ruined should the couple proceed with their plans to marry. Julie, already feeling responsible for everything bad that has happened thus far, rushes home in tears, abandoning thoughts of a marriage that would hurt her best friend. This scene, like the one in *KK* in which the dishonor of the Bakshi family has "soiled" the reputation of Nina, illustrates yet again how family honor is predicated on the behavior of women, and how, when they transgress moral boundaries, the dishonor brought down upon them "infects" the rest of the clan. Meanwhile, Julie's eldest brother, who lives in London, has finally arranged for the Morris family (*sans* Mr. Morris, who has died by now) to relocate to England. Julie, her heart heavy with the loss of her father, her baby, and deprived of the prospect of marrying the man she loves, has become relentlessly passive and wordlessly accedes to all her mother's demands. As the family is finishing up their preparations to leave town forever, Mr. Bhattacharya—a local Railway official, and who was therefore Mr. Morris' superior—uses the pretense of attending to paperwork regarding her deceased husband's pension to convince Mrs. Morris to stop by his home with her children on the way to the train station.

Here the final scene unfolds, as in *KK*, with a climactic speech intended to bring everyone happily back together—though in this case the strong, wise, patriarch, Mr. Bhattacharya, delivers the lecture. As noted earlier, Mrs. Morris has had a long-standing disdain for all things Indian, and it is primarily to her that his moralizing remarks are directed. Mr. Bhattacharya asks her, "Are you sad upon leaving your country?" to which she responds, "No I never thought of India as my home." Enter the rest of the Bhattacharya clan, one-by-one, including the family's "newest and youngest member, my grandson." To Julie's delight, and to her mother's horror, the baby has been rescued from the orphanage by Mr. Bhattacharya, who proceeds to reprimand Mrs. Morris for conforming to the closed-mindedness of society's meanness and prejudices. Outraged, she turns and storms out of the house, only to be stopped in her tracks when Mr. B

thunders, “Margaret! Before going hold this child in your arms and tell me: is he a Hindu? Is he a Muslim? Is he Christian? Indian? Anglo-Indian?” By now the rest of the family (including Mrs. Bhattacharya, who is understood to have already received *her* stern lecture from her wise husband) has made up their minds, and it is left to Mrs. Morris to finally melt into tears and concede that blood *is* thicker than water, and that she will stay in India forever in order to stand by her family.

Mr. Bhattacharya has cast his moralizing lecture in terms of a secular, Nehruvian brand of nationalism which embraced the creed of “unity in diversity,” and an exemplary, *plural* society. Reflecting this ideal, Shashi’s father is the strong, paternal figure, who intervenes to solve a domestic affair that has been clouded by issues of religion and honor. Ultimately, with the two adult women eventually submitting to his wise, impartial advice, *Julie* has privileged secular aspirations over communal interests. Like Priya in *KK*, Mr. Bhattacharya states that children are “God’s gift to us.” Yet his underlying message is one of optimism and, most importantly, inclusion. If the ending of *Julie* relates to a utopian dream that obtained in the 1970s, when India was still holding on to remnants of idealized, post-independence aspirations, then what sort of—and whose—utopia does *KK* reflect?

To begin to answer this question, we must examine further the differing use of religious symbolism in the two films. In *Julie*, we find a sequence analogous to Priya’s encounter with Krishna in *KK*: the appearance of a Hindu deity at a key moment. Having just made love to Shashi, Julie encounters the goddess Durga as she descends the stairs. Slightly dreamy and disheveled, she is startled by the fierce image of the Warrior aspect of Durga, a many-armed figure shown astride her lion vehicle who is in the process of beheading the buffalo-demon Mahisha. For a moment Julie is spellbound, transfixed by the idol’s unflinching gaze. Recovering, she smooths her hair into place and tucks in her shirt as she hurries outside, with full awareness of her transgression. The encounter with Krishna and Durga experienced, respectively, by Priya and Julie is known as *darshan*, a powerful visual connection between a person and a deity. A concept that dates to the Vedic period, *darshan* means to see and be seen by the god or goddess in question.³⁷ Increasingly associated, since the medieval period, with religious devotion, or *bhakti*, this interactive visual activity, Sandra Freitag explains, “brought together both the new emphasis on the individual as consumer of religious and nationalist symbols, and the larger communities being constituted from collective acts staged by myriad such individuals.”³⁸ Thus, the film audience would be alert to the potential for nationalist or political references in these scenes.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan cautions against simplistic interpretations of religious symbolism: just as one should not assume “oppression” with religion, one should not assume “feminism” with the arrival of a goddess.³⁹ Accordingly, the appearance of the Hindu goddess here can be understood in a number of ways, and the fact that Julie is Christian adds to the already problematic nature of any “definitive” interpretation of its significance. A large, painted icon of Christ presides over the Morris household, adorned year-round with blinking Christmas lights; thus Julie is already familiar with the ceaseless vigil of a moral presence, though the countenance of Jesus is unquestionably less imposing than is Durga’s.⁴⁰ In any case, an understanding of the interpretive possibilities offered up by the presence of the Goddess is necessary in order to appreciate the differing political stance of the two films.

As Radha Kumar explains, the images of several goddesses were increasingly associated with the nationalist cause during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when “worship of Kali, Durga, and Chandi became incumbent for many young nationalists on the grounds that the ‘mother’ would ease the path to nationalist martyrdom.”⁴¹ Thus, in the case of *Julie*, released in 1975, an “empowering” Durga might immediately come to mind for, as Kumar maintains, “in worshipping Durga and Kali an emphasis was being placed on energy, nature, and action.”⁴² Even so, equally plausible is the claim that Durga’s manifestation as the restorer of cosmic order is pertinent here: associated with asceticism and celibacy, the goddess can be seen as the bearer of a stern reprimand to Julie, who has just tinkered with the cosmic order. Also credible is the idea that the vision represents an omen, foretelling Julie’s pregnant state. Further interpretations are possible—the literature on the “meaning” of Durga is enormous—but these few examples are ample demonstration that the significance of the Goddess in *Julie* is suggestively ambiguous. This is underscored by Julie’s own response, her facial expression indicating a complex mixture of awe, fear, and defiance.

Thus, while the presence of deities in both films could be interpreted, theoretically, as a reference to nationalism, an examination of other factors in *Julie* dictates against such a simplistic reading of Durga, whose appearance here is not categorically identified with Julie’s unborn child. Though Christians certainly would hold a dogmatic position against abortion, in this context the injunction is stated by the aunty in secular, not religious terms: “No Margaret, it’s a crime!” The recuperation of Julie’s reputation and the recovery of the baby are the events through which an ideal, utopian India is visualized; a society in which *pluralism* is celebrated, rather than any single community or ideology.

In contrast, KK has employed Hindu religious symbolism as the inspiring—and validating—force behind Priya’s “rebellious” decision to keep her baby just when her parents are about to insist on an abortion. The portent of Krishna’s magical appearance at that precise moment is thus unambiguous. Here, the deity is the medium through which the unborn child communicates a maudlin plea for protection (“Mummy don’t kill me!”) and provides Priya with divine approval for her challenge to traditional patriarchy. By this time, courtesy of Mrs. Modi’s gossip, Priya’s transgression is already public knowledge—she’s already a fallen woman. With the loss of her honor a given, it can hardly be called “empowering” to keep the baby because of divine directive. Of course, having a vision of a Hindu deity is not grounds enough to issue a verdict of “right-wing Hinduism.” However, the valorization of Motherhood *per se*, the fact that Priya never speaks for herself, and an ending in which she is safely delivered into the arms of a husband, all of these factors together should be more than enough to dispel any notions that KK has a valid claim as an empowering text for women. Both critics and supporters of the film took for granted that her choice to carry on with the pregnancy signaled the actions of an empowered woman determined to fight closed-minded traditional attitudes. While very few commentators noticed that Priya’s resolve to go against her parents’ wishes was based solely on religious motives and on the celebration of Motherhood, rather than on individual agency, this point was not lost to Paromita Kar. Writing for *Manushi*, she correctly states that Priya’s “choices only reaffirm the existing social order, choices which spell an effete independence.”⁴³ She describes the young girl’s vision as “a trick that touches the vast sentimental repertoire of an orthodox society and immediately clinches the deal for the audience” because “when a woman is also a Mother, all else becomes secondary.”⁴⁴ This exercise, wrapping staunch traditionalism with a

thin veneer of feminism, is a well-worn strategy of conservatives of any stripe.

Flavia Agnes explains succinctly how the agenda of the Indian women's movement of the seventies and eighties was shaped by the fact that many of its leaders were mostly urban and upper class Hindu women.⁴⁵ Consequently, by taking a populist approach, Hindu myths and imagery became the predominant means "to convey the newly constructed feminist ideology."⁴⁶ She continues, "the intention of using the symbols from the dominant religious culture was not to propagate Hindu ideology. But since the movement did not have 'secularism' as one of its prime objectives, no conscious efforts were made to evolve alternate symbols." Thereafter, "to its dismay, the women's movement found that the newfound strength, the *shakti* of the modern Durga was not directed against violence within the home and community, but was directed externally towards the Muslims."⁴⁷ Thus the political efforts of women have been summoned in the name of Durga, while simultaneously they are enjoined to adhere to their traditional roles within the context of a newly-invigorated and mobilized Hindu nationalism. As Sikata Banerjee notes, "many Indian feminists see this strategy as dangerous, because they believe it creates an illusion of emancipatory change while keeping patriarchal structures in place."⁴⁸ This statement could certainly be applied to KK.

In sum, a close textual comparison of *Julie* and KK reveals both numerous similarities and crucial differences between the two. Both films end with the return of the protagonist to the domestic sphere, woman's traditional place in a patriarchal society. The private world of *Julie*, a rather more naturalistic film, is on the one hand a mark of confinement and restriction, yet on the other hand has allowed for a nuanced development of female sexuality. In contrast, the public setting of KK, for all its promise, has served only to reaffirm a woman's place in a traditional patriarchal arrangement. If one assumes that film is, in some measure, a reflection of society's desires, then the very success of KK indicates that the conservative Hindu values it puts forth—notwithstanding the feminist gloss with which they are dressed—are in tune with the attitudes held by viewers of today. Similarly, the positive response elicited by *Julie* reveals, at the very least, that audiences were then more tolerant of candid sexuality and they still cherished aspirations of national diversity. There are other past films whose main characters were women who went even further in challenging the norms of patriarchal society. Notable examples include *Arth* ("Substance," Mahesh Bhatt, 1982) which concludes with a woman who rejects her cheating husband, as well as another suitor, and who deliberately chooses the difficult path of single motherhood when she adopts a little girl. In *Nikaah* (B. R. Chopra, 1982) a Muslim woman is divorced by her husband in a hot-headed moment. She remarries, but in the end decides to leave both men far behind, preferring to go it alone.⁴⁹ Further examples of such films exist, yet a comparison with *Julie* remains most relevant here because it was plainly the starting point for the updated KK. Clearly, successful, Bollywood-produced films have been able to portray strong women who do not conform to the social expectations of the subservient housewife and long-suffering mother, and they have done it without resorting to stereotypes normally associated with sexually independent women, such as the vamp.

My purpose, thus far, has been twofold: first, to refute the claim made by the makers of KK that they were "breaking new ground" with a film about unwed motherhood. Following a simplistic trajectory of stock nationalistic binaries, the film has not departed from the standard Bollywood formula in any meaningful or lasting way, and might not have received so much attention except for its insistent billing as an empowering film for women. By comparing KK to

Julie, I am not arguing that the latter should be regarded as a *feminist* film, simply that, nearly thirty years earlier, it explored the same subject far more candidly and with greater subtlety than the more recent production. Also, the fact that *Julie* is just one of a number of earlier films that have successfully challenged cinematic stereotypes disproves KK's claim to be the first film to bring a "difficult" topic like unwed motherhood out in the open. Second, an examination of parallel moments in key scenes of both films has demonstrated that crucial differences in their representations of women and in their use of religious imagery prove KK to be grounded in nationalistic rhetoric more thoroughly than its makers would have us believe. By undertaking a close reading of the two films, I have paved the way for *contextual* investigation of KK, in order that external influences might also be taken into consideration while trying to understand its success with the public.

Part IV

Engaging in strictly textual evaluation of KK might lead to the mistaken conclusion that the film's conservative tack is an isolated case. In fact, the past decade has seen an emerging trend in which conservative politics and Hindutva nationalism—already part of the political landscape—are finding their way into popular film. Therefore, an examination of KK alongside other films released contemporaneously will raise several important and interrelated issues, including the return to a focus on the family, the growth of the Hindu middle-class, India's increased economic liberalization of the nineties, and the expanding influence of the NRI community. Numerous Bollywood hits, many of them internationally successful, are clearly targeting a Hindu audience and may, in some instances, even offend minority audiences—if not exclude them altogether.

Jaganath Guha has remarked that historically, “the pursuit of the Nehruvian dream of development created an anticipatory euphoria that...helped drive other important issues out of the story frame.”⁵⁰ This view is developed further by Vijay Mishra in his analysis of the recent rise of fundamentalist themes in Hindi film.⁵¹ He speaks of the long-time residual antagonisms that resulted from Partition, and of the simmering, unresolved tensions that have built up over the decades. Further, he attributes continued Hindu/Muslim divisiveness to the unwillingness—or inability—of Indians to address these difficult memories. A brief look at the list of the latest Bollywood hits reveals that these tensions are finally making their way into mainstream cinema. In terms of box-office returns, the most successful films in the last several years have been so-called conflict drama, which will be discussed shortly, and the updated “feudal family romance,” indicating an ideological turn in Bollywood film—and its audience—that has been labeled by scholars as “devious” and “insidious.”⁵² Mishra has this to say about the recent Bollywood trend of continually rendering a Hindutva outlook in the “post-Ayodhya” period: “The danger that this poses, especially when it is re-shaped by India's dominant cultural form, is one of the greatest threats to precisely the nationalist secular ideal that Indian cinema has fostered.”⁵³

This is most evident in what Guha calls “conflict dramas”: films that feature plots of terrorism, war or sectarian hostilities.⁵⁴ For various reasons, including censorship by the Indian film board, a near total silence about Partition and the Kashmir conflict was maintained for decades by the Hindi film industry. After the 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya by militant Hindus, Guha observes, “war movies now found a niche in the Indian market, including films about ‘civil war,’ focusing on the tensions within.”⁵⁵ From the mid-1990s, when right-wing Hindu groups made enormous gains in Indian politics, Guha continues, “cinema too responded with a vengeance.”⁵⁶ He lists numerous such films, including *Dil Se*, *Bombay*, *Maachis*, *Border*, *Refugee*, *Terrorist*, *Sarfarosh*, *Fiza*, and *Mission Kashmir*, most of which have been exceptionally popular with the public.⁵⁷ To that list can be added the recent hit, *Gadar* (“Rebellion,” Anil Sharma, 2001) which has been a phenomenal success both within India and abroad, though there were calls by Muslim groups for it to be censored or even banned because they felt that its anti-Pakistani sentiments were stated too offensively. Addressing the still-delicate topic of Partition, the film tells the story of a Sikh who marries a Muslim woman, and must rescue her from Pakistani Muslims who are depicted as “barbaric rapists,” in the words of Mohammed Farooq Azam.⁵⁸ News reports told how screenings of *Gadar* provoked

demonstrations, vandalism, and boycotts by Muslim groups.⁵⁹ Looking at the broader picture, Guha goes on to warn that “the impact of ultra-nationalist cinema on the masses, and the depth and dimensions of its influence right down to the grassroots should never be underestimated.”⁶⁰

The family-based melodrama of KK may seem a world away from such “conflict drama,” yet it is precisely this climate of rising Hindutva interests that forms the backdrop against which films like KK—and their politics—must be viewed. While it is a relatively straightforward process to identify nationalism in a film that features sectarian or political conflict as its main narrative focus, pinpointing ideological traces in so-called “women’s films” requires more roundabout methods. A number of scholars have demonstrated that the social film is just as likely to be the site of nationalistic fervor as a war movie, except that the struggle takes place on the home front, within the domestic realm of women. Indeed, ideological debate has always been a component of the seemingly-neutral romances and family socials.⁶¹ Accordingly, the political *stance* of a Bollywood romance may be somewhat ambiguous, disguised as frivolous love stories. Some examples include *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai*, *Dil to Pagal Hai*, and *Dilwale Dulhuniye Le Jayenge*.⁶² Madhava Prasad has asserted that recent Indian cinema is the site of struggle between “an emerging middle-class ideology” and the old “feudal family structure.”⁶³

Sociologist Patricia Uberoi has examined the role of the middle-class family in Hindi film at length in much of her work.⁶⁴ In her analysis of the 1994 release *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun...!* (“Who am I to You?” Sooraj Barjatya, 1994, hereafter HAHK) she notes the development of “the family as an icon of the national society” in “clean” family films.⁶⁵ Citing HAHK as something of a paradigm shift in Bollywood cinema, she examines some of the reasons behind its landmark success.⁶⁶ According to Uberoi, a new, sanitized portrayal of the model Indian family has emerged in the wake of HAHK, which entails the elimination of “vulgarity,” the privileging of self-sacrifice on behalf of the clan, and the elevation of the joint family as the ideal unit of “Indianness.” She maintains that, in the last decade, the extent to which Indian popular film is being shaped by “the phenomenon of the internationalization of the middle-class family and the consequent problem of the cultural reproduction of Indian identity in transnational locations” is readily apparent.⁶⁷ The commensurate increase in emphasis on material wealth has been noted, not only by Uberoi, who describes this tendency as “sinister,” but by a chorus of writers who are lamenting this apparent shift to consumer capitalism.⁶⁸

A sampling taken from the last two years of box-office hits reveals an audience preference for films that conform to this pattern of depicting conspicuous consumption and a focus exclusively on the Hindu family. *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (“Secretly, Secretly, Quietly, Quietly,” A. A. Burmawalla, 2001, henceforth CCCC) features an inordinately cheery Hindu family ensconced in the comfort afforded them by an international business concern.⁶⁹ The story of *Dil Chahta Hai* (“What the Heart Wants,” Farhan Akhtar, 2001), a buddy film directed to the youth market, revolves around the lives of three young men, who never seem to work very much, but live in a state of eternal travel and luxury. Most recently, the saccharine *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (“Sometimes Happy, Sometimes Sad,” Yash Johar, 2002, henceforth K3G) which has been phenomenally successful outside of India, parades huge estates, fancy cars, cell phones galore, and private helicopters. Chock full of nostalgia for a glittering Indian (read Hindu) past, the promotional tag line declares “It’s all about loving your parents!” pointing to the film’s running theme of the eternal pull of the homeland on the unhappy heart of the NRI. To date, the film is the costliest in Hindi cinema history, featuring an all-star line-up,

international locations, and a cast of thousands, but looks set to rake in profits thanks to the sales of various overseas music and distribution rights.⁷⁰ In fact, it is abroad, particularly in North America and the U.K., that K3G has struck a chord with viewers. This success could be attributed not only to its weepy nostalgia, but also to its collection of catchy songs, which includes the nationalist anthem “Vande Mataram.”⁷¹

These films can be seen as the natural descendants of HAHK, continually reaffirming the nineties paradigm of the new Bollywood family, which is invariably wealthy, happy, and Hindu. Having fully embraced the technological trappings of modernity, not to mention the wealth associated with it, this fictional family shows that the secular dream of “unity in diversity” has long been discarded. Noted theater critic Rustom Bharuca has summed this up concisely in his withering critique of HAHK: “Economically, this is a film that is obviously in tune with the liberalisation of our times, while being thoroughly grounded in the signs of a homogenized, upper class, upper caste Hindu constituency.”⁷² Despite the overwhelming abundance of food, toys, and possessions—indicators of modern consumerism—he notes that “the cultural codes remain indigenous: no booze, no non-veg, no cigarettes.”⁷³ Thus, as Valentina Vitali has observed, “while Indian nationalist modernity set out to ‘modernise’ the traditional family sphere, HAHK proceeds to ‘traditionalise’ modernity.”⁷⁴

To recap the main points thus far: we have seen that the most successful Bollywood films of late have focused largely on themes of conflict or on family drama. Both types have betrayed a growing tendency to depict a realm in which Hindu ideology is the sole and basic requirement to be Indian. The recent family-based romances reveal an intensified concern with the ostentatious display of material wealth, and with the glorification of the Indian family, which, increasingly, is put forth as the basic unit of Indian society. These are portrayals that have shown a tremendous appeal for the overseas Indian audience. A full examination of the relationship of the NRI community with its homeland is beyond the scope of this essay and exists elsewhere. Nonetheless, there has been, since the HAHK phenomenon, a heightened awareness of the NRI effect on Indian film, indicating that those still residing in the homeland hold conflicting, and sometimes resentful opinions about their brethren abroad.

If Sagarika Ghose is to be believed, NRIs are the next colonizing threat to India. In a scathing review of K3G, labeled a “ghastly film,” she complains that, after watching it, “it’s impossible to avoid the conclusion that contemporary India is nothing but a figment of the NRI imagination.”⁷⁵ Ghose proceeds to describe how the flow of NRI capital has Bollywood “bound in chains to the dictates of overseas audiences,” and is thus re-shaping the Indian cultural landscape, creating “an ersatz tradition” to “appeal to an emigre audience that has no patience for Indian realities other than those peddled by a sensationalist media.” She voices a concern that is increasingly common among resident Indians, namely that “in the sphere of culture, the NRI’s vision of India is drastically and sometimes irrevocably in conflict from the vision of those who actually live there.” Shamita Das Dasgupta concurs, stating that Indians abroad “are developing what I call ‘Hindi cinema Hinduism,’ portraying ‘pativrata’ women, who may not be reality based at all. There’s this mythical, homogenous Hindu culture that is evolving.”⁷⁶

Admonishing Bollywood’s increased neglect of the traditional film-going public, Sudhanva Deshpande has outlined the drastically changing economy of the Hindi film industry.⁷⁷ Not only are corporate partnerships, satellite and cable deals, and profits from music rights to blame for the “big-budget, high-profile, large-revenue films aimed at the hyper-consumerist

audience,” but the NRI is to blame as well: an expanding overseas market brings in a swelling overseas profit, which in turn triggers the production of yet more films catering to the overseas market. “This pattern of financing leaves its imprint on the content of the film,” observes Deshpande, thus leaving the “lesser audience” out of the loop.⁷⁸

Refocusing our attentions on *KK*, it is clear that the film is not easily categorized. It is not patently patriotic nor simplistically anti-Western; it is not a standard romance. As noted earlier, time-tested Bollywood conventions are followed in its representation of the tradition/modernity dichotomy. Recent glitzy, high-budget films like those described above are in sharp contrast to its low-key production values and its small town, pseudo-village-India ambience, which recalls a bygone era of filmmaking. Yet it is also unmistakably a product of the nineties. This is evidenced by the obvious effort to appeal to youth culture: hip-hop influence in the dance numbers, for instance, and in the narrative tactic of having the young heroine deliver the moral sermon, rather than a paternal figure, as in *Julie*. Also, the depiction of wealth and class-consciousness (personified especially by Mrs. Modi) as mutually exclusive with Indian values (embodied especially in Ajay) marks *KK* as rather dated by current Bollywood standards. Yet it does share with the latest big-budget hits a near total lack of class or caste reality. Though *KK* privileges an exclusively middle class perspective, rather than the upper class construction favored by the other recent films already described, class distinctions are largely absent from the film. Mrs. Modi’s comment about not wanting to mingle with “mere canteen contractors” is one of the very few instances in which class is addressed in the film. Not surprisingly, the film did not shatter attendance records abroad: a moral tale of small town teens engaging in premarital sex would not have the drawing power to attract an audience accustomed to the high-budget Hindu nostalgia already described.

The many contradictions evident in *KK* present something of a distraction from the fact that, in the final analysis, it is a conservative narrative scripted to give the illusion that the protagonist is an empowered woman. Clearly *not* revolutionary in its depiction of an unexpected pregnancy, the film is unable to allow a potentially strong Priya to fully abandon a patriarchal family structure. By dovetailing nationalist ideology with contemporary consumerist ideals of the middle class, it betrays the influence of the new, highly successful Bollywood formula used by an increasing number of Indian directors of popular film, in which messy social problems are cleared up with the haste of a made-for-TV movie. Thus, the bleak economic and social realities facing so many Indian women who find themselves in a similar position have been excised entirely from *KK*.⁷⁹ Furthermore, this trend has celebrated a Hindu perspective, shaped in part by the economic impact of the NRI community, and has been hailed as a return to traditional *Indian* values—which demands an unapologetic return for women to the domestic sphere. Bharucha, in his review, notes that “it would be an exaggeration, perhaps, to claim that *HAHK* is about the Hindu right, but it is definitely a film that would not have been possible without a deep internalisation of the Hindu right in popular and mass culture.”⁸⁰ This statement can be applied not only to *KK*, but to countless films of the last decade. As Uberoi, Bharucha, Deshpande, and others have indicated, the utopia represented in Bollywood film has been shaped and eagerly consumed by both an overseas audience and those homeland viewers who have an interest in maintaining the reassuring fiction that being Indian means being Hindu. How does this position, subtly presented in *KK*, impinge upon its stated mission of “women’s empowerment”?

Part V

An examination of KK's endeavor to contribute to the uplift of women presents the opportunity to juxtapose the claims and intentions of the makers and promoters of the film with some of the reactions of its audience. Both *Julie* and KK, insofar as they present scenarios that prominently feature the transgression by women of social norms and they advance possible resolutions, are examples of popular entertainment whose form has been shaped by the desire to promote women's uplift. A number of writers have examined the concept of uplift from the time it originated in the mid-nineteenth century as part of the program of various nationalist movements.⁸¹ Generally speaking, it can be defined as a conscious didactic policy to improve the standing and everyday lives of women, especially with respect to the often contradictory forces of tradition and modernity.

In her exhaustive study of state-run television in India, Purnima Mankekar examines how the representation of women in Doordarshan serials, broadcast against a political climate of rising nationalistic fervor, contributed to the increasingly common conflation of Hinduism with Indian nationalism.⁸² She is careful to point out that she is *not* implying a causal link between television entertainment and communal violence, rather that the screening of popular Hindu religious texts, at a time when sectarian tensions were already brewing, "participated in a reconfiguration of discourses of nation, culture, and community that overlapped with and reinforced Hindu nationalism."⁸³ This is a point I would like to reiterate here: I am not suggesting that there exists a right-wing Hindu conspiracy whereby Bollywood films are consciously fashioned as propaganda for the Hindutva movement. My intent is to explore how popular film can serve to naturalize the position of women as emblems of traditional, ideal womanhood even while claiming to promote an empowered, progressive point of view.

Mankekar has concentrated primarily on television, especially on the representation of religious texts, quasi-realist serials, and advertising, yet many of her insights about how female characters are used to interpret and represent nationalist thinking are useful when looking at Bollywood film. Noting the renewal of state-sponsored interest in women's uplift in the mid-1980s, a period when "women's issues were accommodated within the nation-state's agendas of development and nation-building," she observes that virtually all of the dramatic serials directed towards women took place in domestic, middle class settings.⁸⁴ As she puts it, being middle class was not only a measure of a family's economic standing, but "it was also about attaining and maintaining respectability, sexual modesty, family honor" which in turn were "predicated on the conduct of women," resulting in "a particularly close watch on women's bodies, movements, behavior, clothes, and speech patterns."⁸⁵ Describing these serials as generally reflective of north Indian culture, she points out that the usual role for unmarried female characters was as daughters:

"Good daughters" always deferred to the authority of the patriarchal family; in contrast, those who transgressed their assigned "place" in the patriarchal family were severely punished by exile, profound emotional anguish, or suicide. The moral of these stories—that unmarried women had to be "protected" by their families—reinforced the patriarchal family's authority to control their sexuality.⁸⁶

In the case of television drama that featured strong, unmarried women who had entered the public domain, their sexuality is usually effaced. Focusing on the serial *Udaan*, Mankekar reveals that the heroine, who has joined the police force, is shown to have no more than a fleeting attraction for a fellow officer, and to ultimately defer to her father's "moral authority," making *him* the narrative's true hero.⁸⁷ Thus *Udaan*, like the later *KK*, shows that, for a woman's entry into the public sphere to be acceptable—that is, as a legitimate and valid contribution to the betterment of the nation and society—her sexuality must be erased, in accordance with the Gandhian model of women described above. This, Mankekar maintains, "resolves the middle class tension between women's agency and the surveillance and control of their sexuality."⁸⁸ *Udaan* is an example of how "late twentieth-century constructions of the New Indian Woman complicated notions of women's agency by valorizing 'emancipated' women who dexterously straddled the 'home' and the 'world.'"⁸⁹ Mankekar interviewed the director and script writer of *Udaan*, Kavita Choudry, who divulged that, mindful of the implications of working with the state television apparatus, she "had made a conscious decision to 'soften' her critique of gender politics in the family."⁹⁰ Choudry goes on to describe the difficulties of maintaining an appeal to a large cross-section of the viewing public, while still representing strong female characters that push traditional boundaries. Thus, *Udaan*, shaped by deliberate self-censorship in order to assure entertainment value for a broad audience, still manages to put forth a critique of gender relations. Rosie Thomas has pointed out that self-censorship is a common practice of Hindi filmmakers, stating that, "the moral universe within which the films operate is a form of self-censorship based not... on any ideology of social responsibility or concern about the public image of the film industry, but on a firm belief that the audience will simply boycott a film that is 'immoral' or clumsily transgresses the moral code."⁹¹

In *KK*, we see a reverse strategy at work: a film that has been *promoted* as a milestone in Bollywood history, that claims to stand for women's empowerment and uplift, in fact has nothing to offer by way of thoughtful critique of women's subservient role in society. Though there is not the strong patriarchal presence in *KK* as portrayed in *Udaan*, (in fact, as explained above, the *lack* of a stern father figure is part of the reason behind the daughter's downfall) it is clear that the onus of respectability and good behavior is still on the daughter. To put it another way, even in the absence of a strong patriarch, Priya's so-called independence is hamstrung at every turn by the constraints of a patriarchal society.

The connection between Mr. Bakshi's weakness and Priya's transgression was not lost on filmgoers. One viewer commented that "the only sensible scene in the entire film was when the girl's father packs her bag and slams the door on her face."⁹² As noted earlier, this paternal severity is short-lived and Priya is soon back in the arms of her tearful and contrite family. It is this turn of events—the re-acceptance by family and town—in particular that divided public opinion—that of the critics and audience alike. "*Kya Kehna!* has women weeping in compassion and men more liberated than before," was the judgement of one reviewer.⁹³ Later in the article the film is compared with Hollywood's *Erin Brokovich* (Steven Soderbergh, 2001) starring Julia Roberts, which is based on the true-life story of an unwed mother who singlehandedly takes on a corporation that has covered up its responsibility for several deaths in a small town. The review concludes: "So that's inspirational cinema for you—both the East and the West highlighting a single woman's fight for integrity against all opposition and hurdles from society and individuals. Fight they will—after all, that's what womanhood is all about—intensity of belief in

one's self and one's ideals." What seems to have eluded the reviewer is that in *Erin Brokovich* there is not the same level of stigma attached to unwed motherhood as there is in *KK*. Priya's capitulation to societal pressures to "give the baby a father's name" demonstrates that the figure of a single mother—not to mention an empowered one—is still not acceptable in Bollywood film. Other viewers expressed disapproval of what they felt to be *KK*'s *promotion* of immorality, that it condoned pre-marital sex.⁹⁴

Clearly, the makers of *KK* saw a need to educate their audience—an attitude most evident in the strident, didactic quality of Priya's speech at the end. Shah, the director, maintains that young girls should follow the example of Priya's strong will, not her lapses in judgement: "It's not necessary that every girl should behave like she does. What is important is that you feel you can make a stand in life."⁹⁵ This point is confirmed by Zinta as well. When challenged by interviewer Anuradha Choudhary that the film gives a "wrong message" to young people, the actress insists, "the movie does not propagate free sex. It tells you to learn from Priya's mistake."⁹⁶ Yet tellingly, when asked what she would do if she found herself in such a situation, she admits, "there's a big difference between real life and reel life. I wouldn't get into a situation like this. Frankly, if I ever did, I don't know how I would handle it."⁹⁷ Thus, we see that even those who are at the heart of the film's production acknowledge its limitations as an inspirational text for women who find themselves testing, intentionally or otherwise, the norms of society.

Zinta's plain awareness of the disparity between "real" and "reel" life point to the contradictions inherent in expecting popular entertainment—whether through television or Bollywood film—to deliver messages of uplift and empowerment to women. Aradhika Sekhon insists that *KK*'s setting and action "help retain a firm grip on reality."⁹⁸ Actress Raveena Tandon lauded *KK* for its brave attempt to reflect what is already happening in Indian society: "It is a sign that our audiences are maturing, that the moral code is being stretched to accommodate reality, that people are becoming more tolerant."⁹⁹ These moderate views are by no means in the majority, as can be seen in a rebuttal editorial by Dr. Kiran Bijlani. Despite Bollywood's attempts to raise "the social consciousness about this problem," she says, "it would be only an exceptionally bold, economically independent woman who would disregard censure from society and carry on with an out-of-wedlock pregnancy."¹⁰⁰

Priya's bold outspokenness was often cited as the main indicator of her strength and freedom. Yet, as noted earlier, she has no voice for herself and is depicted as always speaking on behalf of others—a commendable trait, certainly, but one at odds with the claim that her character is a model of self-sufficient independence. Another look at early nationalist activities will shed light on how the depiction of Priya's vocal nature works to distract the viewer from the reality of her subsequent subordination. Recalling Chatterjee's delineation of the home/world dichotomy, Kamala Visweswaran examines the effect this dichotomy had on women involved in the nationalist movement. She reminds us that:

the nationalist resolution of the woman question must be seen not only as a strategy for contesting colonial hegemony, but as a strategy for the containment of women's agency, carrying within it the seeds of colonial assumptions about gender. Colonial attitudes toward women depicted them as beings dependent on their husband's agency, and this idea of the "dependent subject" was replicated in

the way nationalist ideology rendered women as domestic(ated) and not political subjects.¹⁰¹

Visweswaran goes on to identify, in her analysis of the records of female political prisoners, how colonial and nationalist attitudes towards women converged in their recording of the women's "seditious" speeches. She notes that, "speech as agency is also a strategy of dominance produced in the process of silencing women. The result is actually a two-pronged strategy of containment: one which locates agency in speech and then denies speech to most women."¹⁰² As we have seen, this is precisely the sort of contradiction at work in *KK*. Deprived of the private setting, such as that in *Julie*, in which female sexuality could be explored with relative candor, Priya is thrust into the spotlight of public scrutiny, where her sexuality cannot be broached. Subsequently, despite the film's apparent promise that it might show a forthright young woman in charge of her own life, she is shown as effectively silenced, with no voice of her own. Thus, her entry into the public sphere, though praised as proof of her agency, is in truth a futile exercise.

This tactic is evident in other examples of women's films released in the same year as *KK*—films that were similarly promoted as progressive, even feminist. In *CCCC*, as in *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) of which it is largely a direct appropriation, the women's right to "speak out" for herself is lauded only once she's been taught (by a man) how to speak within the bounds of prescribed discourse—in other words, not too coarsely or loudly. *Hamara Dil Aapke Paas Hai* ("My Heart is With You," Satish Kaushik, 2001), touted as a film that would redefine attitudes towards rape, revolves around a meek and mute rape victim who speaks only to assert that she is too soiled and unfit to benefit from the shelter offered her by the enlightened, modern male who wants to marry her. This film was trounced by women reviewers all over India for the unremitting silence, the lack of voice of the female character. Yet these are among the films cited by Chopra, quoted at the start of this essay, when she declared that "a new generation of educated, savvy, and sassy women are demanding better roles." Better roles they may be, but clearly these recent portrayals of women are not in the forefront of progressive thinking.

In sum, *KK*'s particular brand of uplift contributes little to the cause of women's empowerment. Instead, it serves to confirm the views that were already held by audience members, whether conservative or liberal, when they walked into the cinema. Those inclined towards conservative thinking would find that the film promoted immoral behavior, while those with a liberal frame of mind would applaud Priya's bold outspokenness. Arguably, the high volume of discussion generated by *KK* about issues not usually aired in public can be regarded as a positive step towards addressing the real needs of Indian women. Yet the film's framing of the problem within the confines of a traditional patriarchal family structure served to direct the ensuing debate in similar terms, thereby obscuring the fact that Priya has not been empowered at all.

Conclusion

Simply stated, *Kya Kehna!* is plainly not the revolutionary, empowering text that its promoters would have us believe. A comparison of KK with *Julie* has shown that a nearly identical film, released nearly thirty years earlier, grappled with the topic of unwed motherhood in very much the same way, but with some crucial differences. In KK, the simplistic veneration of motherhood, the use of a mystical vision of a Hindu god as both the motivating factor and legitimizing force behind her so-called independence and free will, together with the fact that she is securely returned to the domestic sphere, all these serve to cancel out any claims to be an empowering film. Furthermore, the film is not an isolated case. Turning to examples of other box-office successes that were released contemporaneously, we can see a pattern of resurgent traditionalism represented in diverse types of Bollywood film. The form and content of many of these films are increasingly being shaped by incoming capital from the NRI community as well as homegrown Hindutva conservatism. What this suggests is that perhaps the makers of KK, when faced with an audience that has been receptive to narratives that favor a return to “Indian family values,” decided to shoe-horn what could have been a challenging, enlightening—yes, even empowering film—into a boot of standard Bollywood melodrama laced with the symbolic rhetoric of Hindu nationalism. Thus, it would seem that a judgement of KK must recall Das Gupta’s assessment of Bollywood film as a reactionary, conformist cinema.

Nicholas B. Dirks, in his thoughtful essay on the film *Roja* (Mani Rathnam, 1992) makes the observation that reviewers seem unable to allow “the pleasures of the film to exist with ideological critique.”¹⁰³ This is a comment that could be applied to much current analysis of Hindi film. Whereas once critics waxed nostalgic for the “Golden Age” of realist Indian cinema, it seems that now writers are lamenting a “lost” age of Bollywood film—which turns out to have been not as bad as everyone thought at the time. Dirks is one of a number of writers who have finally begun to address the issue of cinematic pleasure in Indian popular film.¹⁰⁴ Thomas reminds us that “the relationship between film and audience is not a simple one and that filmmakers’ assertions about the conservatism of the audience are not the whole story. It suggests rather that pleasure for the audience stems from their involvement in a playful manipulation—and successful resolution—of the moral universe.”¹⁰⁵ This begs the question, of course, “whose moral universe?” As long as the idea of pleasure is employed as just one element in the analysis of film, it remains a useful critical tool. The danger lies in the possibility that, failing to explain the popularity of a film through other means, one is tempted to throw up one’s hands in despair and relegate its success to mere pleasure.

Such is the danger with *Kya Kehna!* The film, the third most popular in the year 2000, is lacking the glossy, spectacular qualities of other recent hits. Accordingly, one must assume that the pleasure derived by the audience from viewing this film is based in their appreciation of the conservative moral universe it depicts—one which purports to show an emancipated woman but, as we have seen, fails to question or criticize the traditional, patriarchal family structure in which the narrative is encapsulated. Instead, the film brings to mind what *could have been*, had its makers decided to genuinely challenge the status quo—as indeed has been done, with arguably greater success, in the past. What if Priya had rejected the idea of marriage altogether, and decided to go it alone as a single mom, without a husband? What if her motivations had been shown as truly her own, not the result of a mystic vision of a Hindu god? What if the film had

included the perspectives of other communities as well? When Bollywood asks these questions in their films, without delivering pat answers, then we might be able to say “wow, kya kehna!”

End Notes

1. Anupama Chopra, "Sassy Sirens," *India Today* (Delhi), September 18, 2000, p. 55. The label "Bollywood" is used to denote the Bombay film industry. Usually construed as an indication of the industry's mimicry of Hollywood, the term is now more generally thought to point to the hegemonic position of Bollywood. Because the bulk of Bombay films are produced in Hindi, I have used the terms "Bollywood film" and "Hindi film" synonymously.
2. A number of writers have tried to categorize the "typical" roles available for women in popular Indian film. See K Moti Gokulsing and Wimal Dissanayake, *Indian Popular Cinema: a narrative of cultural change* (London: Trentham Books, 1998) chapter five; Lalitha Gopalan discusses one such trend of the 1980s, in her "Avenging Women in Indian Cinema," in *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*, edited by Ravi Vasudevan (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000) pp. 215-237.
3. Anupama Chopra, "Gender Doesn't Equal Success," *India Today Online Edition*, 2/8/01, <http://www.india-today.com/webexclusive/columns/anupama/20010208.html>, accessed 5/2/01.
4. Chopra, "Sassy," p. 57.
5. Chidananda Das Gupta, *Talking About Films* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Ltd, 1981) p. 7.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
7. Ashis Nandy, "Indian Popular Cinema as Slum's Eye View of Politics," in *The Secret Politics of Our Desires: Innocence, Culpability, and Indian Popular Cinema*, Ashis Nandy, ed. (London: Zed Books, Ltd, 1998) p. 7.
8. Tejaswini Ganti, quoted in Leela Jacinto's "Bollywood Bound: Indian Film Industry Gives Hollywood a Run for its Money," 5/4/2001, at ABCNEWS.com: <http://www.abcnews.go.com/sections/world/DailyNews/bollywood010504.html>, accessed 5/6/2001.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Nandy, "Indian," p. 1.
11. Pendakur, Manjunath. "New Cultural Technologies and the Fading Glitter of Indian Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1989, pp. 229-31.
12. Sara Dickey gives an anthropological perspective in her book, *Cinema and the Urban Poor in South India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) which features first-hand accounts of filmgoers' attitudes and responses to Tamil film, as well as an examination of the influence that fan clubs have on the production of films themselves. See also Rachel Dwyer's work on Indian film magazines in *All You Want is Money, All You Need is Love: Sexuality and Romance in Modern India* (London: Cassell, 2000), especially Chapter Six.

13. See Roy Armes, *Third World Film Making and the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) Chapter Seven. Other sources include John Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (London: Christopher Helm, Publishers, 1990) Chapter Nine.
14. For an insightful discussion of the contradictory tensions of the NRI position, see Shashi Tharoor's *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* (New York: Arcade, 1997) Chapter Six. For in-depth analysis of the effect of NRI influence on Bollywood film see Vijay Mishra, *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire* (New York: Routledge, 2002) Chapter Eight.
15. Andrew, Geoffrey. "Baz Luhrmann (II)" interview with Baz Luhrmann, in *Guardian Online*, 9/7/01, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4253778,00.html>, accessed 9/7/01.
16. A "social" is usually any film that features the problems (and their resolutions) of the family, as opposed to other loosely-defined "genres" such as a gangster film or conflict drama.
17. Unnamed author, Internet site with 2001 Filmfare Awards, n.d., <http://moviemagik.tripod.com/Bollywood/press/ffare2001.htm>, accessed 8/26/01.
18. For the year 2000, KK came in third in box-office receipts, after *Kaho Naa Pyaar Hai* (Rakesh Rohan), a bubble-gum romance, and *Josh* (Mansoor Khan, 2000), an action flick.
19. ABCD means "American-born confused *desi*," referring to those who are born abroad to South Asian immigrant parents.
20. Vijay Prashad explores the difficulties encountered by the South Asian diaspora in North America, paying particular attention to race in his *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2000).
21. For an extensive analysis of the relationship between right-wing Hindu groups and secularism, see Katherine Young, "The Indian Secular State under Hindu Attack: A New Perspective on the Crisis of Legitimation," in *Ethical and Political Dilemmas of Modern India*, edited by Ninian Smart and Shivesh Thakur (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).
22. See Patricia Uberoi, "The Diaspora Comes Home: Disciplining Desire in DDLJ," in *Tradition, Plurality, and Identity*, edited by Veena Das, Dipankar Gupta, and Patricia Uberoi (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999) p. 164-66.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 166-67.
24. For instance Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially pp. 130-132. Sudhir Kakar discusses the centrality of motherhood in Indian society in his book *The Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981). See also Amrita Basu, "Feminism Inverted: The Gendered Imagery and Real Women of Hindu Nationalism," and Kumkum Roy, "Where Women are Worshipped, There the Gods

Rejoice: The Mirage of the Ancestress of the Hindu Woman,” both in *Women and the Hindu Right*, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995).

25. Many writers have touched on the importance of this film, but Rosie Thomas’ oft-cited essay provides good, comprehensive analysis. See “Sanctity and Scandal: The Mythologization of Mother India,” in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1989.

26. Kakar, *Inner World*, p. 144.

27. *Moksha*: liberation from the cycle of rebirth; a state free from all suffering and sorrow, often described as infinitely blissful. Taken from Bruce M. Sullivan’s *Historical Dictionary of Hinduism* (Lanham, Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 1997) p. 141.

28. Kakar, *Inner World*, p.153.

29. Preity Zinta, interviewed by Choudhary, Anuradha. “Preity Zinta...Kya Kehna: Whoopee,” *Filmfare*, July 2000, pp. 34.

30. Ernestine Gaur, *Women in India* (London: The British Library, 1980) p. 22.

31. Madhava Prasad has written on the stylized behavior depicted in Bollywood love scenes, and on the longtime ban on kissing. Refer to Chapter Four in his *Ideology of the Hindi Film* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).

32. *Aradhana* (Shakti Samanta, 1969)—another film that dramatized the consequences of pre-marital sex—featured a similarly bold love sequence involving a “good” heroine.

33. Chatterjee, *Nation*, p. 120-121.

34. Robinson, Catherine A. *Tradition and Liberation: The Hindu Tradition in the Indian Women’s Movement* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999) pp. 8-15 and Chapter Three.

35. Draupadi was the common wife of the five Pandava brothers, part of the royal family featured in the *Mahabharata*. When she is lost by one of the brothers in a game of dice to their rivals, Draupadi calls on Krishna to save her from being raped. He does so by the miracle of endlessly replacing the fabric of her sari as it is removed by her assailant, thus preventing her disrobing. Quote is from Ketu H. Katrak, in “Indian Nationalism, Gandhian ‘*Satyagraha*,’ and Representations of Female Sexuality,” in *Nationalisms and Sexualities*, edited by Andrew Parker, Mary Russo, Doris Sommer, and Patricia Yaeger (New York: Routledge, 1992) p. 398. Of course, Gandhi’s position on the role of women in India’s nationalist struggle is well known to have been very complex and full of contradictions, something many authors have addressed. For more on this subject see Radha Kumar’s *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women’s Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1993) especially chapter 5.

36. Katrak, “Indian,” p. 399.

37. A few scholars have begun a tentative exploration of the way in which *darśan* may fit into or correspond with cinematic theory—particularly with psychoanalytic theory, most notably outlined by Laura Mulvey’s analysis of the gaze and cinematic pleasure in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in Constance Penley, editor, *Feminism and Film Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1988). See Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1985) for an introduction to the concept, and Sandra B. Freitag, “Visions of the Nation: Theorizing the Nexus between Creation, Consumption, and Participation in the Public Sphere,” in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, editors (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) for a theoretical approach.
38. Freitag, “Visions,” p. 43.
39. Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in “Feminism and the Politics of the Hindu Goddess,” from *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, edited by Marianne DeKoven (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001) pp. 212-214.
40. Interestingly, though her family celebrates Christian festivals, murmured prayers are regular occurrences, and rosaries are frequently flashed, no one ever seems to notice the icon, which is hung high in the room.
41. Kumar. *History*, p. 44-45.
42. Ibid.
43. Paromita Kar, “Halo Mother! An apology for *Kya Kehna!*” in *Manushi*, No. 119, August 2000, pp. 41-42.
44. Ibid., p. 41.
45. Flavia Agnes, “Redefining the Agenda of the Women’s Movement within a Secular Framework,” in *Women and the Hindu Right*, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995) p. 138.
46. Ibid.; this quote and the one immediately following are taken from p. 139.
47. Ibid., p. 141.
48. Sikata Banerjee, in “Hindu Nationalism and the Construction of Women: The Shiv Sena Organises Women in Bombay,” in *Women and the Hindu Right*, edited by Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1995) p. 222.
49. I am grateful to Sonora Jha-Nambiar for bringing these films to my attention.
50. Jaganath Guha, “Conflict as Masala,” in *Himal South Asian*, August 2000, <http://www.himalmag.com/march2001/analysis.html>, accessed 1/8/2002.

51. Mishra, *Bollywood*, pp. 217-219. He develops this idea even further, insisting that the Muslim presence in Bombay film has been extremely marginalized and subject to excessive stereotyping.
52. Respectively, Fareeduddin Kazmi *The Politics of India's Conventional Cinema* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1999) p 216, and Guha, "Conflict."
53. Mishra, *Bollywood*, p. 233.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid. The riots after the Ayodhya incident represented the worst sectarian violence throughout India since Independence. For a detailed account of the rioting in Ayodhya and Bombay see Stanley J. Tambiah, *Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
56. Guha, "Conflict."
57. *Dil Se* ("From the Heart," 1998) and *Bombay* (1995) both by Mani Rathnam, *Maachis* (Sampooran Singh Gulzar, 1996), *Border* (1997) and *Refugee* (2000) both directed by J. P. Dutta, *Terrorist* (Santosh Sivan, 1999), *Sarfarosh* (John Matthew Matthan, 1999), *Fiza* (Khalid Mohamed, 2000), and *Mission Kashmir* (Vidhu Vinod Chopra, 2000).
58. In Sanjeev Srivastava, "Storm Over Partition Love Story," in BBC News South Asia, 6/27/01, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/world/south_asia/newsid_1410000/1410142.stm, accessed 1/8/2002.
59. Ibid.
60. Guha, "Conflict."
61. See Prasad, *Ideology*, especially Chapter Seven, for extensive discussion of middle-class cinema.
62. Respectively, "Sometimes Things Do Happen" (Karan Johar, 1998), "The Heart is a Wild Thing" (Yash Chopra, 1998), "Those With a Heart Win the Bride" (Aditya Chopra, 1995).
63. Prasad, *Ideology*, p. 67. See also Chapter Three for a full discussion of the feudal family romance.
64. See Patricia Uberoi, "Imagining the Family: An Ethnography of Viewing *Hum Aapke Hain Koun...!*" in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, editors (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 308-351. The HAHK phenomenon has received much attention; see also Kazmi (1999) chapter three, and Vitali, Valentina, "The Families of Hindi Cinema: A Socio-Historical Approach to Film Studies," in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, No. 42, published

exclusively online, Summer 2000, <http://www.frameworkonline.com/42vv.htm>, accessed 8/27/01.

65. Uberoi, "Imagining," pp. 308-351.

66. Ibid., p. 311-313. Uberoi is not the only writer to comment on the HAHK phenomenon; see also R. Bharucha, "Utopia in Bollywood: *Hum Aapke Hain Koun!*" in *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 15, 1995, pp. 801-804.

67. Uberoi, "Diaspora," p. 165.

68. Ibid. p. 173.

69. The film was delayed and received much free publicity because Bharat Shah, the film's wealthy, diamond-merchant financier, was arrested amid allegations of financial irregularities in his funding of the film, as well as charges the Pakistani Secret Service was involved.

70. Sudhanva Deshpande, "Hindi Films: The Rise of the Consumable Hero," *Himal South Asian*, August 2001, <http://www.himalmag.com/august2001/essay.html>, accessed 11/30/2001.

71. See Lise McKean, "Bharat Mata: Mother India and her Militants," in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, edited by John Stratton Hawley and Donna Marie Wulff (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) for an examination of the use of symbols and songs (including this one) by Hindu revivalists.

72. Bharucha, "Utopia," p. 802.

73. Ibid., p. 803.

74. Vitali, "Families."

75. This, and the following quotes are taken from Sagarika Ghose, "E-mail Nationalism," in *The Indian Express*, 12/8/01, <http://www.indian-express.com/ie20011228/ed4.html>, accessed 2/20/02.

76. Shamita Das Dasgupta, in Lavina Melwani, "Towards Stronger Women," *Femina*, September 15, 1996, quoted in Vijay Prashad, *The Karma of Brown Folk* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) pp. 149-50. *Pativrata* means devotion to one's husband.

77. Deshpande, "Hindi."

78. Ibid.

79. See, for example, Radha Hegde, "Sons and Mothers: Framing the Maternal Body and the Politics of Reproduction in a South Indian Context," in *Feminist Locations: Global and Local, Theory and Practice*, Marianne DeKoven, ed. (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers, 2002).

80. Bharucha, "Utopia," p. 804.
81. See Robinson, *Tradition*, particularly Chapter Three, for a thorough account of the early efforts towards women's uplift, as exemplified by the efforts of Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu. These women helped to set the tone for subsequent dealings with the "women's problem" during the period of increased nationalist activities in the run up to independence.
82. Purnima Mankekar, *Screening Culture, Viewing Politics: An Ethnography of Television, Womanhood, and Nation in Postcolonial India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).
83. *Ibid.*, p. 165.
84. *Ibid.*, p 107-114.
85. *Ibid.*
86. *Ibid.* pp. 118.
87. *Ibid.*, p. 120-21, and p. 153.
88. *Ibid.*, 120.
89. *Ibid.*, p. 137.
90. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
91. Rosie Thomas, "Melodrama and the Negotiation of Morality," in *Consuming Modernity: Public Culture in a South Asian World*, Carol A. Breckenridge, ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), p. 163.
92. Unnamed viewer, quoted in Priti Barman "Kya Kehna hai Lucknowites Ko," *The Times of India Online*, <http://www.timesofindia/200600/20mlkn26.htm>, June 20, 2000.
93. Anonymous, "Bollywood, Hollywood, Womanhood," on *indiaslady.com*, <http://www.indiaslady.com/features/womanhood.html>. This site, claiming to be "India's first online magazine for women" is akin to an online Indian Cosmopolitan magazine that champions a perspective usually associated with a sexually-liberated, career-motivated woman, in other words a woman from the "West."
94. This was my experience in India, when I went to see the film in Mussoorie, Uttar Pradesh, with a mixed group of Hindus and Christians.
95. Kundan Shah, interviewed by Sharmila Taliculam, "My Film Needs Actors," on *rediff.com Movies*, 5/29/00, <http://www.rediff.com/entertai/2000/may/29kund.htm>, accessed 1/20/02.
96. Choudhary, "Preity," p. 34.

97. Ibid.

98. Aradhika Sekhon, “*Kya Kehna!*” in *The Sunday Tribune Spectrum*, 6/11/2000, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/20000611/spectrum/main2.htm>, accessed 5/2/2001.

99. Raveena Tandon, in an interview with Mini Chandran-Kurien, “Has Bollywood Made Unwed Motherhood More Acceptable?” in *The Times of India Online*, 3/18/01, <http://www.timesofindia.com/180301/18comm1.htm>, accessed 5/6/2001.

100. Ibid.

101. Kamala Visweswaran, “Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and its Historiography,” in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 86.

102. Ibid., p. 92.

103. Nicholas B. Dirks, in “The Home and the Nation: Consuming Culture and Politics in *Roja*,” in *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, editors (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001) pp. 175-176.

104. See *Pleasure and the Nation: The History, Politics and Consumption of Public Culture in India*, Rachel Dwyer and Christopher Pinney, editors (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001)

105. Thomas, “Melodrama,” p. 169.

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