

The Occidentalisms and Orientalisms in the Bollywood film „Khabhi Khushi Khabhi Gham“

Tradition and Modernity in Indian Mainstream Cinema

Globalization and its implications on Indian culture and society are a recurring theme in Bombay cinema. Bollywood films are instrumental in transcending the necessarily partial and limited experience of larger social change, engaging the audience by mapping the lived experience of globalization and transnationalism, while they frequently focus on the worlds and issues in the lives of urban-middle class Indian and non resident Indians. In addition, Bollywood films are often on the forefront of recognizing social change, portraying issues that reflect dynamics in society (Srinivas 2010:21).

This is also the case in the film „Khabhi Khushi Khabie Gham“ (directed by Karan Johar in 2001). In this film, traditional Indian family values are questioned and contrasted to modern phenomena. The plot follows the lives and tragedies of a wealthy family, whose familial bliss is destroyed when the elder son chooses to marry a woman his father does not approve of (Uhl 2004: 96).

The Reciprocity of Orientalism and Occidentalism

The storyline revolves around orientalist and occidentalist dichotomies that are expressed through visual symbolism, metaphors, narratives and rhetorics in the film.

The concept of orientalism denotes the West's construction of an oriental Other to constitute the western Self, whereas occidentalism denotes a construction of the West by the non-West in order to constitute the oriental Self (Venn 2000: 147).

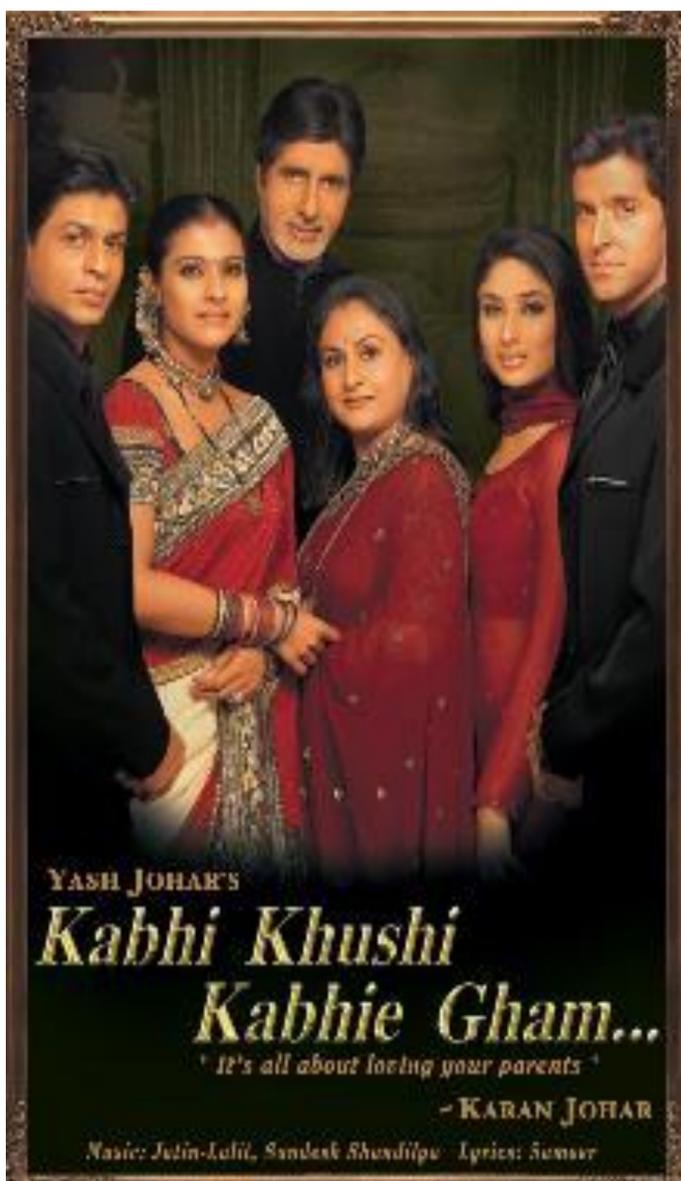


Image source:

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/0/0d/KabhiKhushiKabhiGham_Poster.jpg

The narratives in this film are built on a foundation of binary concepts and dichotomies, in which the West is associated with modernity, and India is associated with tradition. These binary concepts are portrayed in direct contrast to each other, be it in terms of clothing, wealth & poverty, language or setting. While the circumstances surrounding the main conflict of the movie are represented as opposing each other, it is clear that the underlying motive of the film is the desired harmonic fusion of modern and traditional elements.

The director's representation of Indian culture and Indian customs in contrast to Western culture and customs sends a clear message: wealth, consumer products, mobility, individualism are associated with the West, which in turn is associated with modernity. On the other hand, traditional Indian rituals such as the Diwali festival and the Karva Chauth festival, traditional Indian clothing, familial loyalty, and arranged marriage are associated with Indian culture, which in turn is associated with tradition.

By portraying the West in clear symbols and metaphors, the director accomplishes an occidentalist Other to constitute an Indian cultural identity, and vice versa, pointing to a mutually referential and mutually dependent relationship between occidentalism and orientalism.

The underlying motive of the story in this film is clear: while Indian society is dealing with generational conflicts, this film attempts to portray an ideal fusion between tradition and modernity, east and west – because in the end, the father realises his mistake after all, and finally accepts that the tradition of arranged marriage is no longer modern.