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Scholars of popular romance fiction have begun to credit the genre with political and aesthetic self-consciousness, a “metatextual turn” that parallels changes in the academic reception of Hindi popular cinema. This essay brings some of these new theoretical models to bear on the Indian rom-com *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*.

My Metatextual Romance: Thinking With (and About) *Jaane Tu Ya Janne Na*

ERIC MURPHY SELINGER

Sumita Chakravaty closes her essay “Teaching Indian Cinema” with a challenge: “A Bollywood film is something to think *with*,” she writes, “even more than something to think *about*” (108, *emph.* Chakravaty’s). In this essay, I take up that challenge, thinking both *about* and *with* the Indian romantic comedy *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* (*Know it or Not*). The film, we might say, is both thought-provoking and thoughtful, built around sophisticated insights into the imaginative structures of romantic love, the sexual politics of romantic comedy, and the specifically intellectual appeal of popular romance media: crucial topics in the emerging interdisciplinary field of popular romance studies.

The idea that popular romance culture might appeal to the mind, as well as the heart, is relatively new to scholarship. For example, in the opening pages of *The Romance Fiction of Mills & Boon, 1909-1990s*, British scholar Jay Dixon insists that “to

enter the world of the romance, the method of analyzing literature which is taught in schools and higher education must be abandoned” (10). To appreciate such books, she writes, “the analytical part of the brain has to be switched off” (5) so that we can “feel every emotion, see every setting, burn at every injustice, fall in love with the hero and become the heroine” (11). By contrast, in her 2008 study *Historical Romance Fiction: Heterosexuality and Performativity*, Lisa Fletcher argues that middlebrow and popular historical romance novels deserve close reading not only as aesthetic and political artefacts, but also as sites of unexpectedly complex thinking about love, gender, and aesthetics. Romance novels “theorize and thematize” significant issues in their own right (14), she claims, displaying an unexpected degree of “analytical self-reflection” (91). Laura Vivanco’s *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* devotes a full chapter to metafictional romance novels, and several contributors to the recent collection *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays* (Frantz and Selinger) and to the biannual *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* likewise take this metatextual turn, attributing sophistication and self-consciousness to these texts, both as individual works of art and as participants in a robust and evolving generic system.¹

A comparable turn is underway in the study of Hindi popular film. The same year as Fletcher’s study, 2008, Ulka Anjaria and Jonathan Shapiro Anjaria contested the “derision” that meets clips of Indian film in academic contexts. “It is still commonplace,” they write, “for critics and lay audiences alike to describe Hindi film as excessive, formulaic, escapist and morally totalizing with an intrinsically conservative agenda” (125). Against these charges—the same still filed against romance novels—they propose a “dialectical reading” strategy, which attends to the dialogue between individual films and generic conventions. “Conformity to conventions can be generative, rather than merely restrictive, of meaning,” they write, and a properly “expansive” reading of Indian popular films would show that they “do not merely reflect social and political changes, but critically comment on them” (127). The cultural and generic competence needed to spot such dialogic subtleties comes easily to the intended audience of these films, in the Anjaris’s account. Not only do “urban Indian filmgoers of all classes, as well as many diasporic filmgoers, see nearly every film that is released, and often multiple times,” but filmmakers acknowledge this fact by integrating “metatextual commentary on viewing practises within the films themselves” (129).

I am not, of course, an Indian filmgoer. An unlikely reader of popular romance fiction (just under 10% of romance readers are men [“Readership”]), I am also a “non-traditional Bollywood consumer,” or “NBC,” to borrow a term from Edward K. Chan’s phenomenology of neophyte encounters with Hindi film and filmsong (283).

Given its exuberant, transnational allusions, however—to Hollywood rom-coms, *Waiting for Godot*, Mills & Boon novels, and more—*Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* extends a particularly open invitation to the Western viewer. I am also inspired by the example of Patricia Uberoi, who recalls that her first, utterly amateurish experiences of Indian film as a student in Australia enabled her to notice a “podoerotics and podosemiotics” in *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam* that previous scholars and critics had overlooked (117). My distance from the film may help me to take it seriously, not just as an instance of South Asian love culture, but as a “metatextual commentary” (Anjaria and Shapiro Anjaria 129) on the relationships between the representations of love in popular media and the lived experiences and cultural practices of romantic love.

To frame the metatextual issues explored in *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*, let me begin with a passage from Roland Barthes. “Anguish, wound, distress or jubilation,” Barthes muses: “The body, from head to toe, overwhelmed, submerged by Nature, and all this nonetheless: as if I were borrowing a quotation. In the sentiment of love, in the erotic madness, if I would speak, I rediscover: Book, Doxa, Stupidity” (*Roland* 91). As Michael Moriarty explains, what feel from the inside like private, purely bodily longings are for Barthes “infused with rhetoric,” such that “to be under the influence of a passion is to be participating in the discourse of that passion,” to “enact a rite” that has been “laid down by ‘public opinion,’ by the whole world of presentations and representations, discourses and gestures by which our everyday subjectivity is structured” (177). For Barthes, therefore, “no love is original” (*Discourse* 136): an assertion which takes one frequent complaint about the representation of love in popular romance media—that it is formulaic and conventional—and turns it into an observation about romantic love as such. Indeed, conventionality, or at least a close proximity to it, has long been seen as so constitutive of romantic love that the experience of love gets framed as an experience of *repetition*, from the Greek lyrics that inaugurate the Western discourse of eros (where, as Anne Carson explains, love plays out in an oxymoronic temporality signaled by the adverb *dēute*, which means something like “right now-again” [118-19]) to Freud’s assertion that “every love” reiterates the child’s desire for the breast, so that “the finding of an object is in fact a re-finding of it,” which we might well read as an instance of this topos, rather than an explanation of it (88).²

Anglo-American popular romance culture often calls our attention to the citational, now-again structure of love. “Some things that happen for the first time / Seem to be happening again”: thus Lorenz Hart, in “Where or When,” one of many tunes from the Great American Songbook that use this déjà-vu feeling as a sign of amatory authenticity (Hart 104). The soundtrack to *When Harry Met Sally* deploys “Where or

When,” among other jazz standards, to authenticate the friends-to-lovers relationship between its title characters: we know their love is “true” because it calls so many enduring fictions of love to mind. Jennifer Crusie’s bestseller *Bet Me* invokes dozens of fairy tales, movies, Broadway shows, and popular songs, including “It Had to Be You,” another hit from the *When Harry Met Sally* soundtrack, in order to situate the “now-again” love of its heroine and hero. Such overtly fictive gestures are, I take it, a sort of lay postmodernism—that is, they recall Umberto Eco’s famous definition of the “post-modern attitude” as that of “a man who loves a very cultivated woman and knows he cannot say to her, ‘I love you madly,’ because he knows that she knows (and she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland,” so he has to say, instead, “I love you madly, as Barbara Cartland would say” (17). Postmodern, with this twist: they lack the anxious irony of Eco’s “attitude,” inviting listeners, readers, and viewers to enjoy the nostalgic certainties offered by popular romance even as they acknowledge the possibility of a less instinctive, more *knowing* engagement with the genre.³

From its opening scenes, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* encourages its viewers to adopt this double reading strategy. Written and directed by Abbas Tyrewala, the film was released in July, 2008, just months after the global publishing powerhouse Mills & Boon/Harlequin opened a local office in Mumbai, and the opening scenes of the film situate it in this transnational romance milieu. As the credits roll, we see a series of heterosexual couples sauntering through a soft-focus cityscape that Indian film critic Baradwaj Rangan calls “Mumbai by Monet.” The buoyant, breathy jazz of A.R. Rahman’s score, meanwhile, recasts this visual cue as the start of “Mumbai by Woody Allen” or “Kissing Jessica Mahant”: a signal that we are entering not just the “benevolent context” that Celestino Deleyto calls “the space of romantic comedy” (30-31), but also the quite specific context of romantic comedies, by Allen, Nora Ephron, and others, in which such music signifies an emphasis on wit, urbanity, sophistication, and a playful generic self-consciousness. As the film itself begins, an Indian filmsong reiterates the nod to convention. Four supporting characters in their twenties—Rotlu, Jiggy, Shaleen, and Bombs—are driving to the airport to pick up the film’s hero and heroine, Jai (nicknamed “Rats”) and Aditi (nicknamed “Meow”). As they drive, they sing, quite badly, a “now-again” love song from *Aa Gale Lag Jaa* (*Come, Embrace Me*), a hit from before they were born. “Tera mujhse hai pehle ka naata koi,” they warble:

You and I have a bond from yore
 That is why you make my heart soar
 Know it or not [*jaane tu ya jaane na*]
 Admit it or not [*maane tu ya maane na*].⁴

The film we are about to see, these gambits both suggest, will be a twice-told tale that *knows* it's a twice-told tale: knows—yet also potentially chafes at that knowledge, reluctant to admit or concede it.

That reluctance soon takes vivid form. As the friends sing, a fifth supporting character, Mala, visibly winces. She is reacting to their off-key voices—the friends here are actually singing, rather than lip-synching—but also to the version of love they embrace. A cynical flight attendant, Mala has been dragged along as part of a poorly-planned date with the hapless Jiggy. Her annoyance spills over as the friends begin to pass the time, waiting for Jai and Aditi, by making up stories about people at the terminal. “I hate stories,” Mala snaps. “I hate romance. ‘Made for each other’ crap. Happens in Mills & Boon, not in real life.” The sequence of terms bears attention. By “stories,” Mala means “romance,” using the English word to dismiss it. By “romance,” she means something like what Northrop Frye describes when he speaks of romance as the genre in which “pure literary design” is most clearly visible. In romance, the narrative shapeliness that makes a “good story” gets unabashedly signaled by such strategies as “the introduction of an omen or portent, or the device of making a whole story the fulfillment of a prophecy given at the beginning” or, in Mala’s case, the device of a couple’s discovery that they were “made for each other,” another phrase given in English, even if the only providence at work is what Frye calls the “ineluctable will” (139) of the author.

Mala’s complaint establishes a threefold equivalence between romantic love, popular romance fiction, and a particular narrative pleasure: our enjoyment of “good stories” where expectations of some predestined outcome are raised and satisfied. We might characterize this type of pleasure as “pre-modern” or “anti-modern,” since the satisfactions of a “good story” in Frye resemble the “solace of good forms” denied by postmodernism (Lyotard 81). Given the conventions of romance, we already know some of those predestined outcomes: for example, if Mala starts off as a skeptic, “design” demands that Mala end up believing both in stories and in the kind of love that happens in stories, a love that is *romantic*, in its etymological sense. (According to the *OED*, the noun “romance” describes a type of literary work for more than five hundred years before it gets applied to a love affair, the latter use emerging in the eighteen-forties.)

Can we use Mala’s emerging interest in romance to track her emergence as a desiring subject? Scholars make this claim on behalf of popular romance, not least in an Indian context. “The honest expression of female desire” in Mills & Boon and other romance novels, writes Jayashree Kamble, “is a liberating concept” for Indian readers (317), enabling them to question cultural norms that silence women’s sexuality and inscribe them into patriarchal marriage. Building on studies from the late

nineteen-nineties (Puri) and early two-thousands (Parameswaran), Kamble argues that popular romance novels offer Indian readers “a veritable database of complex female desire” (334) and thus a “a means of resistance to the ideology of marriage-as-inevitability” (338).

What, though, of the ideology of *romance-as-inevitability*? Are Mala’s desires for love and love stories her own, or do they mark her re-inscription into the cultural norms of companionate love and compulsory heterosexuality—which is to say, into the capacious, adaptive discourse of patriarchy? From Tania Modleski and Janice Radway in the early nineteen-eighties to Lynne Pearce and Lisa Fletcher a generation later, Western feminist critics have balked at the claim that romance novels liberate women’s desires in any straightforward way. The more sexually adventurous and explicit romances that emerged in the nineteen-eighties, Radway asserts, “refuse finally to unravel the connection between female desire and monogamous heterosexuality,” and thus “close off the vista they open up” (16); while even gay and lesbian versions of the genre, Pearce claims, fail to display the “structural subversiveness” to be found in literary love stories (143). If Barthes is correct in his description of “mass culture” as “a machine for showing desire: here is what must interest you, it says” (*Discourse* 136-37), should we interpret Mala’s transformation didactically, as a model for the viewer, or symptomatically, as a warning about the hegemonic force of “Book, *Doxa*, Stupidity” (*Roland* 91)?

To answer this question, we must consider the story, told in flashbacks, that awakens Mala’s desire: the tale of college friends Jai and Aditi. Their friends think they are in love; so do Aditi’s wealthy parents and Jai’s widowed mother, Savitri, an activist and feminist. We, too, see how much Jai cares for Aditi. In their first scenes on screen he risks failing an exam to sit with her in the hospital and then lead a funeral service for Radha—who, we discover, was Aditi’s cat. “We found it silly,” Rotlu and Jiggy explain, “but not Jai. All he cared about was Aditi’s grief. He just wanted to make her smile.” This line cues the film’s first song proper, set at the college, which Jai sings as the others pretend to be backup dancers in a full-blown production number. As more and more students join in, mostly with joyfully awkward, unprofessional dance moves, the song comes into focus as both instance and citation of Bollywood film-song, particularly of the college-set songs of *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (*Something is Happening*), the famous friends-to-lovers romance starring Shahrukh Khan and Kajol. Unlike Khan’s initially cocky character Rahul, however, Jai seems free of male bravado. In fact, the song closes with Jai disguised as a stooped old woman in a sari, shyly smiling as he offers Aditi a kitten in a basket.

Jai's devotion to Aditi and her bond to him mark the two as a couple. What stands in their way? One possibility dangled by the film is that Jai is gay. "I'm Gay," Aditi scrawls on his deltoid with a Sharpie. "Rats, are you looking for a guy?" she asks when Jai pledges to "find him [a man for her]." Other films from the two-thousands toyed with the idea of a gay romance hero, including Shah Rukh Khan's *Kal Ho Naa Ho* and, most elaborately, *Dostana (Friendship)*, released just four months after *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*, in which the ripped, gorgeous stars of the action blockbuster *Dhoom*, Abhishek Bachchan and John Abraham, pretend to be a gay couple in order to share the Miami apartment of Priyanka Chopra. In the end, she chooses neither, and the two find themselves, on a dare, compelled into a passionate, coyly not-*quite*-visible kiss. In the closing scene, they drift into a flashback of that kiss—at which the film cuts to a bizarre dream sequence where a man in sunglasses, dressed and bearded like Tolkien's Saruman, declares "your son is gay" to the comically wailing mother of Bachchan's character.

In *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*, however, what makes Jai seem gay to Aditi is not his friendship with another man; rather, it is his passion for nonviolence. Obeying his mother—and through her, Savitri insists, his late father, a prince from Rajasthan—Jai Singh Rathore is a radical pacifist Rajput: a combination played for humour, so that even an NBC like me can see that this is like being an "understated Texan" or "hot-blooded WASP." "Gandhi would weep with joy if he knew Jai," Rotlu explains, but to Aditi, Jai's principles mark him as a coward. Jai's father's ghost concurs. No pacifist, we learn, Amar Singh Rathore was actually "The Terror of Ranjhore," savouring combat and dying in an impossible fight that he picked for the bragging rights. From a portrait in their apartment, Amar haunts his widow with the promise that someday Jai will fulfill his destiny by thrashing a man, going to jail, and riding a horse: the three "conditions of Ranjhore manhood," he explains.

In the trailers for the film, Aditi rather likes Jai's version of masculinity. The teaser for the film pokes fun at the hypermasculine posturing of hits like *Dhoom* and *Dhoom 2*, contrasting the boyish appeal of Imran Khan, from *Jaane Tu*, with the muscular heroes played by Bachchan, Abraham, and Hrithik Roshan. The pumped-up heroes, ominous music, and fetishized motorcycles of those hits are all on display in the teaser, as the camera pans in on a shirtless Jai, looking unnaturally buff, from behind. Aditi hits the lights, the music stops, and a teasing slap to the head sets a fully-clothed Jai scrambling out from behind the cardboard cut-out of action hero bodily perfection. *She*, that is to say, frees *him* from a flimsy construction of masculinity, and the two chase around the soundstage, playfully knocking over the cut-out as the teaser ends. In the film itself, however, Aditi says she wants to marry an alpha male: a "tough stud" who will come to her defense. "If I'd wanted a sweet boy, I'd have fallen for you,"

she tells Jai. “I want a man. A man who can take care of me. Who’d knock out a guy’s teeth for messing with me.”

The film suggests two sources of Aditi’s desire. The first is from film: when Jai tells Aditi that he’s “meeting somebody just like that tomorrow,” the man he’s going to meet is “Bond. James Bond,” in his Daniel Craig incarnation. The second source comes from the Mills & Boon novels Mala disdains. When Aditi throws herself into an arranged engagement with the wealthy son of one of her father’s friends, this man, Shushant, has the arrogance, cruelty, and previous lovers typical of Mills & Boon heroes from the nineteen-sixties and seventies: the kind that still populate a series of Indian-authored historical romances, *Kama Kahani*, rolled out in 2009 by Random House India. “Was the first man you fell for a brooding desert prince?” each jacket demands. “Or, better still, a cruelly handsome feudal lord? Are you a spirited beauty, your fire contained—but only just—by the clinging brocade of your lehenga’s choli? A delicious *Kama Kahani* is sure to strike your fancy” (Shahbaz). Cocky, muscular, older, a Black Belt alpha male, Shushant is “exactly the guy Aditi wanted,” Jiggy explains. “Let’s just say, when you’re with me, no one will mess with you,” Shushant declares, and Aditi is delighted—only to learn, eventually, that Shushant is also jealous, manipulative, selfish, and abusive: in every way, the opposite of Jai.

In a Mills & Boon or *Kama Kahani* romance, Shushant would get tamed and transformed by love. Here, however, it is *Jai* who must change. To become an unequivocally straight and properly phallic romance hero, Jai must reject his mother’s ideals in order to thrash the abusive Shushant (the first of the three “conditions of Ranjhore manhood”), spend the night in jail for his assault (the second), and then, in a deliriously improbable climax, gallop off to the airport on horseback (the third) to stop Aditi from leaving for film school in New York City. All this seems an unambiguous victory for Jai’s father—not just because the paternally-identified “destiny” is fulfilled, but because that destiny is *structural*, giving shape to the narrative as a whole. Recall Frye’s dictum: one hallmark of romance is its embrace of prophecies, coincidences, and the like, which demonstrate the will-to-form of the genre and the author (139). This film, we might say, *psychoanalyzes* that aspect of the genre, linking Father and Form in a way that recalls Julia Kristeva’s equation of “father, form, schema” (23). For Jai to get the girl, for the story to be shapely, and for Mala to blossom from cynic into an eager listener, the Father’s will must be done. Tyrewala’s script makes sure that we connect structural symmetry (prophecy/fulfillment) to the patriarchal order. As Jai gallops through the streets of Mumbai, he passes Savitri and a female friend. “Is that your son?” the friend asks. “No, my husband’s son,” Savitri ruefully replies.

As I have read it so far, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* illustrates many of the feminist charges made against popular romance fiction. Although it does not endorse the broody Alpha male hero so memorably described by Germaine Greer and Tania Modleski, the film does seem to grant a formal victory to heteronormativity (Jai is rescued from being gay) and to patriarchy (Jai is rescued from his mother's Gandhian values, and restored to manhood). Likewise, it insinuates that Mala's initial resistance to love and stories (including Mills & Boon romances) has been overcome precisely by this triumph of the father's will. We learn of the "three conditions," after all, just before the film's intermission, at which point Mala vocally objects to the storytellers' taking a break for snacks, she frantically tries to anticipate the next moves of the fated plot. To be a desiring woman is to be under the Father's spell, and if the film has dangled alternatives, it has also foreclosed them, endorsing none with citational echoes or aesthetic shapeliness.

Yet even as the film hands this ostensible victory to the father, it complicates his triumph. The script gives voice to the loss, fear, and regret that the father's bravado has caused his widow. When Amar complains to Savitri that "you want him to be a coward," she says, simply, "Yes," explaining that she would rather have seen her husband humiliated than killed for the sake of honour. The affectionate chemistry between the couple (played by real-life husband and wife Naseeruddin Shah and Ratna Pathak Shah) grants pathos to the exchange, keeping us from unequivocally endorsing the father's actions or desires. The film also underscores what a boyish, even childish version of "manhood" the father's "three conditions" represent. The characters who reveal them to Jai are a pair of clownishly threatening "cowboys" we meet three times in the film; they turn out to be his childhood playmates, nicknamed Bagheera and Ballu. When they call Jai by his old nickname, Mowgli, they turn his thrashing of Shushant into one more version of Mowgli's victory over Shere Khan in *The Jungle Book*: hardly an authoritative echo, or one that secures his status as a romance hero. (In the Disney film, *Jaane Tu* reminds us, Mowgli's human love life begins only when his life in the jungle ends.)

Finally, if paternal form gives shape to the middle of the film, its ending actually depends on Jai's *refusal* to repeat his father's behaviour. Amar Singh Rathore rode off to die in an impossible fight, and Jai, too, rides off on a quest: to stop Aditi at the airport, where he is confronted by a host of airport police and security guards. Convinced that he is a terrorist, they try to stop him from reaching the gate, but rather than fight them, he flees, tucking himself into a fetal position to ride the baggage X-ray through security. Surrounded, pinned down at gunpoint, he again refuses to fight, instead shouting Aditi's nickname to get her attention: "Meow! Meow! Meow!" "The terrorist is meowing, sir," the lead security officer crisply reports on his walkie-

talkie. “No, sir. Meowing. Like a cat.” At which description, another pattern emerges in the film, this one aligned not with the father and his prophetic “conditions,” but rather with a second, feminine prophecy. As he meows, Jai reminds us of the scene that introduced his friendship with Aditi: the funeral of Aditi’s beloved cat, Radha, at which Jai prayed that, wherever she was, Radha would someday learn to catch a mouse. There is a gender-bending shaggy-dog joke here that even a non-Indian viewer can catch. In the film’s climactic moment, Jai, nicknamed “Rats,” turns out to be Radha the Cat, while Aditi, “Meow,” is the mouse he’s learned to catch. Death turns to life, loss to love, loose thread to neatly-tied chiasmic bow.

However tentatively—and here, as a neophyte Western viewer, I am on shakier ground—let me hazard one last reading of the scene. If Jai is in some sense Radha the cat (identified with her by metonymy, as is common in the displaced myths of romance [Frye 136]), then might Jai also be linked with Radha the *gopi*, the most famous and revered of the young women enraptured by love for Krishna? This may seem a stretch, like reading every character named David or Mary as a Biblical reference, but in Heidi R.M. Pauwels’s account, the love of Radha for Krishna stands as an exemplary instance of *bhakti*, or devotion, including the kind of devotion that flies in the face of gendered social norms (16, 245); Krishna, too, is a god “known for his mischief in breaking the laws of conventional morality (*dharma*) in the name of love” (13). Read in this light, Jai’s rejection of his mother’s teachings does not signal that he has abandoned a maternal order in order to secure his place in patriarchy. Rather, it marks him as a sort of devotee of Aditi, willing to step out of the morality he has been taught (as his father refused to do) and even to humiliate himself (as his father never would) by hoarsely and gracelessly breaking into song. “Tera mujhse hai pehle ka naata koi,” he croaks to Aditi past the circle of machine guns:

You and I have a bond from yore
That is why you make my heart soar
Know it or not [*jaane tu ya jaane na*]
Admit it or not [*maane tu ya maane na*].

This is, of course, the song that we heard as the movie began. Hearing it now (or *now-again*), we understand why Rotlu and Jiggy and the rest insisted on singing it on the way to the airport—and we recognize, as well, that this is the song that Jai briefly sang earlier in the film, when the friends discussed what Bollywood hit each would croon as a declaration of love. We might even hear it as the fulfillment of a vow Jai took in passing in the film’s first proper song: “Gaana toh aata nahin hai magar,” he tells Aditi then, “phir bhi hum gaate hain”: “Can’t hold a note, but I still sing for you.”

Retroactively, the scene thus reveals yet another overlapping “design” (in Frye’s sense) that shapes the film’s central love story, again undercutting our inclination to associate form with the Father. No wonder Mala, back in the frame tale, responds with a shout of delight, throwing herself into Jiggy’s lap to give him a hug. “I’m so happy!” she cries: a delight inspired in equal parts by the sweetness and extremity of Jai’s devotion, by the “now-again” feeling we associate with love, and by the joy of living, however vicariously, in the playful, surprising, *orderly* universe defined by Jai and Aditi’s romance. (“I feel like I’ve known you guys for years!” Mala gushes to them in “now-again” giddiness as the movie ends.)

In the closing shot of *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na*, the camera lingers on an old, white, bearded man in Western clothes, who sits on the ground and listlessly watches arriving travellers stream out of the airport terminal. In his hands is a plaintive, hand-scrawled sign: “Mr. Godot.” The allusion fits a pattern we have seen throughout the film, which has gleefully invoked a mix of Western texts (Mills & Boon, Kipling, jazzy urban rom-coms, even a nod to Cinderella, with Jai as heroine) and Hindu religious figures and stories (Krishna and Radha, and perhaps also the *Mahabharata*’s Savitri and her dead husband Satyavan, whom her love and eloquence bring back to life). The *way* that Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* is brought into the picture, however, seems oddly jarring, and maybe even a bit pretentious. Rangan calls it “too-clever,” and he is right. If we are going to think *with* this film, as well as *about* it, we need to ask one last question: why this gesture at the close?

One answer, based on the gesture’s context, has to do with the aesthetics and cultural positioning of romance. As a “good story” (Frye 139), reassuringly patterned and sentimentally satisfying, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* has pledged its allegiance to a version of art that has been *déclassé*, at least in the West, since the advent of modernism, that “aesthetic based on the uncompromising repudiation of what Emma Bovary loved to read,” in Andreas Huyssen’s well-known formulation (45). By alluding to *Waiting for Godot*, the film encourages its audience to recognize two stark alternatives in modern transnational culture—the pleasures of pre-modern aesthetics, embodied in popular romance, or the well-known waiting, without narrative satisfaction, embodied in Beckett’s theatre of the absurd—and to profess, or at least ’fess up to, a preference for the former. To do so, the gesture suggests, may not *necessarily* mean to set aside our critical or cultural intelligence. Rather, we might say that this ostentatious literary wink gives us one last, unmistakable invitation to shift from an instinctive, credulous mode of reception and enjoyment into a more reflective, lay-intellectual mode, enjoying the film still more by thinking metatextually about it, and about the genre it exemplifies.

This reading accounts for the substance of the gesture—an allusion to this particular play—but not, I think, for its oddness, for the self-conscious way in which writer/director Tyrewala brings it into the picture. That oddness makes sense, however, if we attribute the gesture not to Tyrewala himself but rather to the film-maker who is hinted at *within* the film itself, as though *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* were the novice effort, fresh out of film school, by one of its own characters. That character, you may recall, is Aditi, who was heading off to New York City to study film when Jai rode off after her. Before they broke up, Aditi had spoken to Shushant about delaying her marriage for three years in order to study film-making at NYU, and she had been strongly encouraged in this ambition by Jai’s mother, the feminist. “We really need some intelligent film makers,” Savitri tells Aditi: people to make something other than the commonplace “masala” films she disdains as much as Mala does Mills & Boon novels. In the frame narrative, where Mala and the other friends welcome Jai and Aditi back from their honeymoon, it is hard to tell exactly how much time has actually passed since the story that we heard, but a span of years seems possible. Certainly Jai looks a little stockier and Aditi has a new, chic, adult haircut; if we compare the inset and frame tale versions, we note that Jiggy has a full-grown moustache now, Rotlu has taken to wearing a hairpiece, and, of course, there is the new character of Mala, whom neither Jai nor Aditi knows.

Say, at least provisionally, that we are meant to take this as “Aditi’s film” all along, with the sudden sign for “Mr. Godot” an aspirational, slightly awkward, fresh-out-of-film-school device. What might this new interpretive frame, however fictional, add to our understanding of the film, and how might it help us think with this film about the issues that it has raised? If this were, in some sense, Aditi’s film, made to show her credentials as an “intelligent film maker,” this would make new sense of its characters, subplots, and song lyrics, including several that I have not mentioned so far. There is, for example, an elaborate subplot involving a woman named Meghna, whom Jai dates before realizing he loves Aditi. Just as Sushant is a foil for Jai, Meghna counterpoints Aditi, not least by delighting in Jai’s ability to conjure violence-avoiding fictions. They meet, in fact, when Jai rescues Meghna from the two “cowboys” by pretending that she is an old girlfriend who has given him AIDS, a plot that she plays along with, flirtatiously asking later when he will “rescue” her again. Meghna puts fiction to multiple uses, making up stories about the people and scenes she sees so that, as Rotlu explains in the frame-tale, “The world is not what it seems; everything is magical.” When literal-minded Aditi tries to join in Meghna and Jai’s “what’s this?” verbal game, she fails: a failure that suggests her need to develop that creative capacity, as she might well do at film school.

For most of the film it seems that Meghna uses “stories” the way Mala thinks people use Mills & Boon novels: as a way to evade love’s unhappy reality. Meghna repeatedly tells Jai, for example, that her parents are hopelessly in love, but it is obvious to him, and to us, that their marriage resembles Mala’s worst accounts of romance. Her father, Mahesh, has repeatedly cheated on her mother, Sheila, and now the two do not sleep together, cannot stand each other, and salt their wounds, verbally, during an awkward dinner with Meghna and Jai. “After 25 years of marriage, tolerating each other is good enough,” a drunken Mahesh tells Jai. “And if one can’t tolerate, one learns to ignore,” Sheila bitterly adds. If the Shushant subplot points out one risk of taking romance narratives naively to heart, blinding yourself to the real-life consequences of alpha-heroic behaviour, the Meghna plot underscores the risk of blinding oneself so completely with the fictions of romantic love that one can no longer see the plain, hard facts of its failures.

In the end, however, it turns out that Meghna knows exactly what she is doing. (“I’ve shut my eyes tight. Don’t force me to face reality yet,” she asks Jai after the family dinner.) And because she is so adept with fiction, she knows how to put lies to honest use. When she tells Jai that they should break up because he is in love with Aditi, for example, she does so as though it were a joke, just one of her “stories.” A truth told slant, this fiction enables him finally to see and act on his own desires.

In Meghna’s subplot, then, we can see the filmmaker (whether Aditi, Tyrewala, or both) thinking through both the threat and the promise offered by fictions of romance. On the one hand, romance supplies an ineffective, neurotic, self-destructive escape from harsh reality. On the other, it describes the world not as it is, but as we want it to be, bodying forth our desires so that we can know and acknowledge them. “Dil ki yahi khata hai, dil ko nahin pata hai,” the song “Nazrein Milana” declares: “The heart is naïve, not a liar / It knows not its own desires” (thus the subtitles—elsewhere, more poignantly, I’ve found it rendered thus: “The heart’s mistake is that it does not know what it desires”).⁵ “Where is that world,” demands a later song (“Kahin To. . .”), “where my life isn’t such a stranger to me?” From Mills & Boon to Krishna and Radha, the stories we call “romantic” offer us glimpses of that world, and the film suggests that we can be freed *by* them, if not *of* them, to the extent that we are able to hear these texts in dialogue and debate with one another.

In *A Lover’s Discourse*, Roland Barthes defines mass culture as “a machine for showing desire: here is what must interest you, it says” (136-37). To “think *with*” *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* about this maxim is to see both the film and Barthes’s insight freshly, free of the Mala-like wariness that tells us to rage against that machine, aspiring to some impossible autonomy of longing. The “mass culture” Barthes describes is made

up of many competing, even conflicting lessons in what to desire and, as we have seen, that multiplicity can persist within an individual mass-cultural production. If *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* instructs us that certain types of men and women must interest us, they are a varied, motley bunch of multiple generations and different versions of attractiveness. (Rotlu's goofy youth and charm stand quite a distance from Savitri's passionate, elegant middle age.) If it says that we must take an interest in heterosexual love stories with a happy ending, it also teases us with multiple alternatives to that normative plot: hints at same-sex relationships (Aditi's brother Amit clearly has a crush on Jai, Shahleen seems more interested in women), which are left unresolved, attracting our curiosity; an array of marriages, some happy, some sad, some bitter-sweet; a straight woman (Meghna) who would rather be alone than in a relationship based on a lie; and more. *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* does not consist of "one story and one story only," as the poet Robert Graves might say (1), but rather of a dialogic mix of stories, songs, narrative patterns, and intertextual echoes, and the film suggests that a comparable complexity subtends many an ostensibly simple love story. No wonder, at the end of the film, as Jai asks Jiggy to tell "the whole story" of his relationship with Mala, Rahman scores the scene with a Bach-like weave of counterpoint.

Most urgently of all, however, *Jaane Tu Ya Jaane Na* tells us that we "must" take an interest in the ways we use the culture of romantic love—its films, songs, stories, and even sacred texts—in order to recognize and articulate what are otherwise inchoate and oppressive experiences of longing and affection. What Judith Butler says of the self in general is thus particularly true, this film suggests, of the self in love. "If I am always constituted by norms that are not of my making," writes Butler, "then I have to understand the ways that such a constitution takes place," and through that understanding to discover "an improvisational possibility within a field of constraints." For Butler this "possibility" is a matter of "sexuality," not of love (15), but the two are overlapping categories, at least in popular romance texts. (As Aditi coyly tells her girlfriends after the honeymoon: "I never knew Jai was so *romantic*" [emph. mine].)

We are already used to thinking of high art and experimental texts as doing this sort of liberatory cultural work.

Know it or not, admit it or not, so can a Bollywood romance.

NOTES

1/ See, for example, the essays by Selinger, Frantz, Veldman-Genz, and Whyte in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*.

2/ For an extended discussion of love and repetition in both theory and popular fiction, see Lynne Pearce's "Romance and Repetition: Testing the Limits of Love" (*Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 2.1 [2011]: n. pag. Web. 3 Dec. 2013).

3/ I am grateful to An Goris for suggesting this connection between Eco, postmodernism, and the poetics of popular romance.

4/ This translation is from the film's subtitles, as are all others, except where noted. Other, non-rhyming translations of "Tera Mujhse Hai Pehle" are readily available online.

5/ The latter is Nazrein Milaana's translation in *The Bollywood Fan* (21 May 2008: n. pag. Web. 5 Dec. 2013).

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