

MY BOLLYWOOD LOVE AFFAIR

TO DISMISS BOLLYWOOD AS SILLY IS TO MISS THE POINT ALTOGETHER

SARAH ANJUM BARI



You know that imaginary friend that every child grows up with? Mine was Rahul. Not a storybook character or a person I'd made up at random, but the Rahul of the dimpled smiles and a necklace that spelled 'COOL'. The Rahul who landed in my life about thrice a day on a chopper and danced with me until we became best friends; until I realised that *pyar dosti hain* (love is friendship). As a single child who grew up on a rich diet of Hindi movies, without any cousins close to my age, Shahrukh Khan's many Rahuls made sure I was never truly lonely until I found actual friends.

It troubles me when people criticise Bollywood, 'filmy' mainstream Bollywood in particular, of being shallow and baseless. Cheesy romances and flashy dance numbers – elements that attract the most ire – may not be to everyone's taste, but to deny their magic is akin to saying that fairy tales are silly because they lack rationality. For decades, we've looked past the singing animals in *Cinderella* to root for a girl who yearns for independence. *The Red Riding Hood's* Big Bad Wolf symbolises, even today, the classic message for children to listen to their parents, and for girls to be careful of strange men. And *Peter Pan*, as a particularly cynical and Bollywood-averse friend tells me, holds the eternal attraction of a boy who never grows up, and can escape into a Neverland where reason takes a backseat and role-playing rules all.

Isn't that exactly what the realm of Bollywood offers? Escape. Bursts of colour and music. Friendships that stall the passing of childhood. It was inside these pretty packages that I found some of my favourite stories, and some of the most vital of life lessons from commercial Hindi movies. I can recall

flashes of Sri Devi in a blue saree that seemed to have a life of its own in *Mr. India*; a young Divya Bharti searching for her roots between three mothers in *Dil Ashna Hain*; and of Sharmila Tagore searching for remnants of her deceased husband, years after the iconic train-side courting of *Mere Sapno Ki Rani*, in her estranged son in *Aradhana*.

Hooked to the television in my grandparents' bedroom, my six-year-old

Cheesy romances and flashy dance numbers – elements that attract the most ire – may not be to everyone's taste, but to deny their magic is akin to saying that fairy tales are silly because they lack rationality.

self was far too young to understand what these stories meant. But it was these years of Bollywood-binging that prepared me for my first proper theatre experience in Kolkata, when I sat awestruck at the enlarged vision of Madhuri Dixit, to this day the most gorgeous face I've laid eyes on, dreaming of her one true love in *Dil Toh Pagal Hai*. I drank in the music and drama, memorising the steps of *Arre Re Arre* on

the spot, until I felt like I would burst with awe. But more than that, I was struck by Madhuri's shameless, unrelenting optimism for life, and touched by the friendship that held all the characters in the story together. The friendship that bound Shahrukh Khan and gang in a year-long celebration of song and dance; friendship that twisted into unrequited love in Karishma Kapoor and Akshay Kumar for their respective best friends; and gave them the strength to relinquish that love to help bring together two people who deserved each other. I found the same kindness in my two other favourite movies of all time, *Kuch Kuch Hota Hain* and years later, *Kal Ho Na Ho*, where friendship in all its forms – between friends and lovers, and parents and children – arms troubled characters with the strength to make difficult choices. These iconic love stories cemented my faith, from a very young age, in the magnanimity of kindness and forgiveness, the wonder of positive thinking, and above all the certainty of second chances in life.

Misogyny, gender stereotypes and archaic social mores are among the most valid arguments thrown at pre-2000 mainstream Bollywood. I seethe, when I watch *Kuch Kuch Hota Hain* today, at the way Kajol's Anjali is taunted for deviating from the traditional feminine vision, and the way that Rani Mukherjee's Tina symbolises beauty only when she sports short skirts, while her more serious, heartfelt scenes show her at a temple or beside her father clad in a traditional *shalwar kameez*. But then I notice the ways in which this story challenges, unknowingly, the very norms that it sets store by to please a mainstream Indian audience. I notice how Anjali is taken most seriously when she is her loud, basketball-loving self;

she is teased only when she tries, unsuccessfully, to be something she's not. Years later, she has to struggle to bring out the playful and fiercely outspoken self that she's buried within an awkward and defeated facade. It is only when she is herself once again that she finds happiness, and only then that we get a happy ending.

Over the years, Bollywood has learned to promote positive messages with more confidence. As we, the audience, become more and more used to facing uncomfortable social truths, the stories we're served grow more unapologetic than ever before. On the one hand we have movies like *Pink*, laying bare the murky nuances of sexual consent. But I was most amazed by the likes of *Queen*, *Dil Dhadakne Do* and most recently *Badrinath Ki Dulhania* that used Bollywood's legacy of extravagant dance and drama to convey socially-conscious messages of open-mindedness and South Asian women's independence in their many roles.

Bollywood taught me to dream big, finishing the job that Disney started long ago. But the biggest gift it has given me is empathy. I learned, through Madhuri's dance moves and Shahrukh's syrupy romance and Govinda's shamelessly clichéd comedy, to accept the different and often bizarre ways that people choose to live their lives. I learned that someone else's cynicism and preference for gritty rationality is as valid as my reality of dancing around the house, talking to characters that I wish I knew in real life. For all its faults, Bollywood helped create an invincibly happy place in a child's mind, one that holds strong even today, come hell or high water; so it can't be all that bad.

Sarah Anjum Bari is a member of the Editorial department, The Daily Star.