

Madhavi Menon

WORKING NOTES

Bollywood filmmaker Farhan Akhtar,

interviewed by Madhavi Menon

Released in 2001, director Farhan Akhtar's debut feature film, *Dil Chahta Hai* (The Heart Desires) was a runaway commercial triumph. As its very title suggests, the film's conceptual investments are located in the question of desire – what does the heart desire? What is the name of the thing the heart desires? This meditation on desire is placed at the crossroads of two important issues. First, it looks back into the history of commercial Hindi cinema to locate patterns of desiring identifications – for example, one romantic song sequence is made up exclusively of montages from Hindi movies of the 1960s and 1970s. Second, it expands this investment in quotation expands to other cultures as well – another love sequence is filmed in the vein of Baz Luhrmann's 2001 film, *Moulin Rouge*, which is in turn indebted to Bollywood conventions. *Dil Chahta Hai* then brings together these quotations to bear on the question of desire. How does artistic debt impact sexual desire? What relationships – artistic and sexual – get named, and what happens to those that do not have a name?

In response to these questions, the film sustains at its core an interrogation of two unusual erotic relationships. The first involves an unconsummated affair between a younger man, Siddharth (played by Akshaye Khanna) and an older woman, Tara (played by Dimple Kapadia), while the second involves the tightly knit relationship between Siddharth and Akash (played by Aamir Khan). These affective relationships form the centre of the film, and in dealing with them, *Dil Chahta Hai* comments also on the traditions that make up Bollywood cinema – not only the conventions of *dosti* (male friendship) that mark the early films of Amitabh Bachan, Shashi Kapoor, and Rajesh Khanna, but also more generally the relationship between acceptable and reprehensible, artistic and sexual mores.

Madhavi Menon: *Dil Chahta Hai* is fascinated with the idea of naming and not naming. Tara's dying line in the hospital room to Siddharth, when she tries to describe their relationship – “*Kucch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota*” (there are some relationships that do not have a name) – seems important for the film as a whole, and I'm wondering if you could talk about that, about relationships that do not have a name.

Farhan Akhtar: Given the society within which we choose to exist, there are certain things that are termed as acceptable and some that are not. There are many things in the world, which are hard to describe. One word is love. How do

you describe love? It's a feeling that can be described in a hundred different ways. As things change, words will develop for all kinds of relationships, beyond the obvious. The relationship that Tara and Siddharth share in the film is purely love. But in terms of what their relationship is, they are not husband and wife, they're not dating – they're friends, but they're not even great friends. So what do you call what they share? They do share something. Which is exactly what she says in the hospital.

MM: I want to push you a little bit more on that. It's fascinating that words obviously define certain realities for us. And not just realities, but also socially acceptable or unacceptable realities. In the film, the passionate reunion between Sid and Akash in the hospital is immediately followed by Tara's line, *kucch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota*. I want to push you into thinking a little more about that line and how it structures the relations in the film, particularly among the men.

FA: If you think about Akash and Siddharth in the movie, after their fight over Tara, Akash moves on, he's met this girl who he's fallen in love with, and he has a very complete life.... But somewhere, it just bothers him that this guy who's his really good friend no longer considers him a good friend. And similarly with Siddharth, who's always very sure of what he wants, he's always very confident of what he believes in, he's suddenly in a position for the first time where the woman that he loves is about to die – he doesn't know whether she will or she won't – so he's at this very insecure point in his life. And the only people that he thinks he can reach out to are his friends, and one of his best friends was Akash, who's no longer there because Siddharth has told him that he no longer wants him. So I think *kucch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota* justifies this relationship as well. What is very interesting is that this line was not even in the first draft of the script. It was something that I put in much later when people kept commenting on the relationship between Tara and Siddharth.

MM: What would they say?

FA: People would say, "Why do you have this? You know, the story is so nice. Why can't Tara be younger than Siddharth, so it makes the relationship acceptable?" I would keep hearing this, and I thought – but why do people have a problem with a man being in love with a woman older than himself....

MM: But is it parallel? If an attraction to an older woman is a no-no in the world, then is it similar to an attraction between men? For instance, between Akash and Siddharth? Is Siddharth attracted to forbidden pleasures?

FA: I don't see anything forbidden in their relationship. A lot of people have asked me if I killed Tara in the film because she and Siddharth could not be together? No, that's not the reason I killed Tara. I think Tara had to die for many other reasons beyond the fact that she could not be with Siddharth.

MM: What were those reasons?

FA: For me, it was to bring Siddharth emotionally to a particular point. I think the fact that he gets his friend back before he loses something else so important to him was very crucial for me. For me the thing that *had* to happen was he *had* to meet Akash. That had to happen. It couldn't happen that Tara lived and he didn't meet Akash. That could not have happened, and I did not want to give Siddharth the best of both worlds.

MM: So why did Akash get it, then?

FA: Because Akash's story is very different. With Siddharth, what was interesting was that he loves Tara so much. For me, in retrospect, the mistake I made with Siddharth's character was introducing a love-interest at the end. That's a conceptual mistake that I made. He loved Tara, and regardless of the fact that she's no longer alive, he continues to love her. What could have been more interesting for me to have?

MM: Why do you consider it a mistake?

FA: Because I think that weakened him at the tail-end of the movie. When we see him watching Tara's luggage being moved out of the house, just standing there, we feel for him. And I think you would have left the film with his being even more of a hero, somebody who's done the right thing in terms of standing by what he believed in, and who he loved. I think now in retrospect, the final scene with a new woman came too soon; although it says "six months later", in screen time it's the next moment. Somehow I wish I had not done that.

MM: To bring it back to *kuch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota*, the idea of quotation becomes very important, because when you can't find a referent for a relationship, that's when you die. There's no name for Tara and Siddharth's relation because there's no song they can think of to sing – they can't exactly pretend to be like Raj Kapoor and Nargis. That name isn't there, and so she dies.

FA: Sure, that's one way of looking at it. Which, now we're discussing it, does make sense, now we've dug that deep. But that really wasn't it for me. For me it was really important for Siddharth to go through losing something. When Akash comes back into his life, and it becomes a complete picture all of a sudden – it can't be that complete, I don't think Sid's life can ever be that complete. I think he always needs to have something that is not correct.

MM: So you're setting up Tara and Akash as rivals for Siddharth's affection?

FA: Yeah, sure, it could almost have started out as a triangle. And in a triangle, somebody has to die, somebody has to sacrifice for the other two people to be

happy. So yes, on that level, I think for Akash and Siddharth to be happy, Tara did need to die. The minute a person in a triangle is eliminated, it makes the other relationship complete. So I think to complete their relationship, to make their union complete, I think Tara's death was required.

MM: Why did you make Tara an older woman? What was the point?

FA: I needed Akash's point of view to be the society point of view, in which Tara and Siddharth's relationship is considered odd. Why is it like this? Siddharth is a good-looking guy, he's a really good painter, why would he get into this entire married/divorcee/alcoholic suffering woman when he could have a really nice, happy life, and we can all hang out and be friends? And it also brings in a bit of the triangle element as well. And also the question of social non-acceptance, of anything that is outside the norm.

MM: To go back to your earlier comment about ending the film differently, without pairing off Sid with another woman, what would your last scene have looked like?

FA: Well, the last scene would have been exactly the same, where they're back sitting on that wall. They would have moved towards Pooja and Shalini, and Siddharth would have been in the back. And at the table, when they're all sitting around the table, instead of six, there would have been five seats. It would have been exactly the same in terms of the way it ended, but there would just not have been the other girl.

MM: Doing things over – now that we're on the subject, what role does repetition play in your film? The most significant scene of repetition in the film, of course, is Akash's speech on love, which he makes twice. In the first instance, it is set firmly in the ironic register, when he is fooling around with Shalini, and at the end, he is allegedly sincere. What do you think about this idea of repetition, and how does it play out in the movie?

FA: For me, the irony lies in Akash having to say the same words.... When you see him going and speaking to Shalini in the nightclub scene, just before he goes, he tells Sameer he's going to show the old Akash charm. So it is obviously something he's done before; it's not like this is the first time he's ever telling the story. He's cute-looking and funny, and an alive-kind of guy. Most women would have found him cute and said, "Oh, how sweet." Maybe Shalini would have too if she wasn't engaged. And for me, that's the interesting part: the use of the same words in exactly the same situation, but with completely different meaning. When he's saying it to her initially, he's saying it because he wants to be with her at that point – maybe not for the rest of his life – but he does want to be with her, and at the end he's saying it because he wants to be with her for the rest of his life. So that's the only difference. And he's saying it there to her without really knowing whether she'll say yes or no, and he's saying it there to her at the

end without really knowing whether she'll say yes or no. So for me it was just the play on words, for me it was how words that you choose to use in everyday life to a person can completely change meaning if they are said differently.

MM: I'm interested in how you build up all these stories around the love relationships in the film. For instance, there's that moment at the *Troilus and Cressida* opera. Shalini drags Akash along to see true love even though the story of Troilus and Cressida is famously about the *failure* of true love. Why do you constantly bring up stories by other people and from elsewhere that don't mean what they appear to? With the "*Woh ladki hai kahan*" montage, you quote other Hindi films; with *Troilus and Cressida* sequence, you're quoting another art form; with the "Much Ado" phrase on the rear of the boat in the "*Jaane Kyun*" sequence, you're quoting Shakespeare.

FA: That's very interesting. All of these – the "*Woh Ladki Hai Kahan*" sequence, the opera – are all areas that have actually fascinated me when I was growing up. Not that I could understand a single word of what was being sung, which I also intended to be reflected in the film, because Akash doesn't understand the words of the opera. But it's enthralling. Nothing can take you back in time like music does. For me, it would be interesting because, somewhere, how Akash reacts to the opera would be how I would today if I were to hear it. At first, I would find it all very over the top, and eventually I know I would get into it. And that's really how it happened, the whole opera sequence, and the whole Shakespeare thing is a bit of a coincidence! But the research for it was done by the person who we commissioned to do the opera; I gave him the situation – I told him I need something that will be about love, about somebody pining for love, which is essentially what the sequence leads up to, where the guy gets stabbed.... For Akash, that is the end of something – and the beginning of something new. So for me, that was the crucial part about Akash's character; much more than Shalini's, it was a lot more for me about just him.

MM: I'm also thinking about Siddharth's song sequence when he is painting Tara, which seemed very Baz Luhrman-like, with all the dolphins jumping –

FA: Right.

MM: In all three cases – "*Woh Ladki Hai Kahan*," the opera, and Siddharth's song – the film seems to be linking the quotation of art and the process of falling in love.

FA: Visuals tell you a lot more than dialogue; dialogue tends to get monotonous. After a while, it tends to get very ordinary. But if I can show you – which is why in the song, whenever you see Siddharth in real life, he's never singing; he's just sitting, or just painting, or walking or whatever, you never see him singing. But in his imagination, he is singing, when he thinks about where he wants to be right now, when he thinks about what it is he'd love to be

experiencing at this point, he's completely free. Because Siddharth's character in the film is not a very out there kind of guy, so for him to be singing while he's painting is so great. His creative juices have gone completely out of control. So it's a great space for me to take him where you can actually see him stretching his arms, and twirling, which he'd never do in real life.

MM: You say this movie is in part a tribute to the influences you were exposed to when you were growing up. So what are the politics of channelling things that have influenced you, and then remaking them? Do you bear the burden of the past – are you feeling guilty that someone else has done it before you? Or is it freeing – are you taking something and making it your own?

FA: It's liberating. (Pause) It's sort of both – I think the question is never, will I do it better or will I not be able to do it as well. I think the interesting part for me lies in attempting to do it. I think if anything excites me enough, I should do it. Even these influences – they're not something you sit and think about so consciously; they come to you as solutions almost. You know when you're thinking of how to bring these two people together, you just sit and you think.

MM: But what about the question of originality then?

FA: At the end of the day, what I take is so generic – like dancing on a hill, which has happened before, or like driving a car with back projection, which has happened in hundreds of films; everything that I've shown is really generic. And there is something very attractive about generic, you know. We normally tend to diss it; as creative people, we normally tend to “diss” things that are generic, saying *nahin*, I want to do something that is different. If I say I am thinking of going to Lonavala to shoot a song, people say “*arre yaar*, a hundred people have done it, why do you want to do it?” But there is something interesting there – why *did* so many people do it? – there's something interesting about why it was shot there. So for me, I don't think of it as a question of originality at all; I think even “tribute” is too serious a word; I think it's just sharing the enjoyment I had watching it.

MM: So Tara's line, “*Kucch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota,*” equally names your relationship with your precursors. You can't name these relationships because it's not a tribute exactly, but it's a relationship nonetheless.

FA: It's a relationship, of course! And it's not really a question of originality; I think it's sharing – it's sharing what you enjoy.

MM: But supposing someone was to borrow from you – in fact, they have done so already. For instance, all the nightclub scenes in films these days are trying to recreate the nightclub scene in *Dil Chahta Hai*. What does that mean to you? What do you think constitutes ownership?

FA: It doesn't bother me at all. I've seen so many songs after *Dil Chahta Hai* that have been done like the nightclub song, or the "Jaane Kyun" song. So many ad films are made that are *Dil Chahta Hai*-like. And it doesn't bother me at all; I think it's great! I think it's really good; if people have enjoyed the film, and they want to share that enjoyment with other people, please go ahead. I think it's a great thing – I have no problem with it at all.

MM: So you don't see yourself filing a suit against someone who might copy you?

FA: Not at all. If they take a clip from my film and use it, I'll have to, because that's a legal issue with the producer. I won't, but the producer will. But if someone comes to me and says did you hear they've used your *Dil Chahta Hai* ka tune for the Cadbury's ad. – you know they're all singing the Cadbury's song in college – I would think it's great!

MM: So what does it mean to have "A Film by Farhan Akhtar" on posters for your films? I'm fascinated by that idea of naming, because obviously naming implies a certain amount of ownership: "kuch rishtey aise hote hain jinka koi naam nahin hota" – if I had a name for this relationship, then I could inhabit it, but since I don't have a name for it, one of us has to die.

FA: Or it can't be.

MM: Or it can't exist so one of us can't exist either, because if both of us existed, then how is the relationship going to end? So what does it mean for you to have your name in relation to this product? Would it be the same if there was no name?

FA: That's not possible. But there is a difference between, say, *Dil Chahta Hai* and *Lakshya*. In *Dil Chahta Hai*, it wasn't "A Film by Farhan Akhtar." In *Dil Chahta Hai*, it was just very to the point – "Story, Screenplay, Dialogue, Direction by Farhan Akhtar." So it was very much like – these are the four jobs that he has done for this film. In *Lakshya*, it became "A Film by Farhan Akhtar." With *Dil Chahta Hai*, there was a certain reluctance to say, "this is mine"; with *Lakshya*, it became "A Film by..."

MM: How and why did you make that transition?

FA: Actually, the transition was made because after *Dil Chahta Hai*, for whatever it's worth, people were really keen on seeing what was made next. So, the producers and distributors wanted me to put my name so it would be clear to somebody who would want to come and see it. For *Dil Chahta Hai*, my name was in the fine print! I am still a lot more comfortable with it being "Story, Screenplay, Dialogue, Direction by Farhan Akhtar," and I'm going to go back to that with *Don*.

MM: Why are you more comfortable with that template?

FA: Because I think that a film is bigger than who's made it; everything is bigger than who's involved in it. It's such a collaborative effort, so "A Film by..." or "A Farhan Akhtar Film" – it's weird, it's a trap. It starts making you think that actually you have done everything in the film; eventually you start believing it. And I don't think that is true – I think you should be credited for what you do.

MM: One last thing, about the title of the movie: what do you think of it? Whenever I translate it for people, I call it "The Heart Desires," or "The Heart Longs for..."

FA: No, it's not that.

MM: Then what is it?

FA: *Dil Chahta Hai* for me, in a very literal translation, is "Because I Feel Like."

MM: Oh I see: *kyun kar rahe ho? Kyunki dil chahta hai!* (Why are you doing it? Because I feel like it)

FA: *Hahn*; for me, that was the real translation. For me, anything that happens in the movie is because the person feels like it, so that was a literal translation. They made it "The Heart Desires," which is quite troublesome...

MM: Really? Because yours is actually not the literal translation – it's the more associative translation.

FA: But nobody ever says.... In Hindi, yes, the literal translation would be "The Heart Desires." But when you use [it] in everyday language, you don't use it like that.

MM: Do you use it in everyday language?!

FA: If ever. You won't say "*kyunki main chahta hoon ki main*" (because I think that I want to). You'll say "*dil chahta hai.*" "Because I feel like it" is actually the meaning of the line for me.

MM: But what is fascinating about both the literal and your spoken meaning of it, is that the "it" is never defined. The heart desires ... what? The heart longs for ... what?

FA: That's right – "it" can't be defined.

MM: And that seems to me the whole purpose of the film. You can say it ends happily ever after – they’re sitting at a dining table together. You tie up all the knots, but you still don’t know what the “it” is; you still can’t quite pin it down.

FA: Because you can’t, you can’t pin it down. Because what it is that you want, what it is that you don’t want, is changing every minute. If you think about it; you’re sitting here having this conversation, but you would really like a cup of coffee. (Actually, would you like a cup of coffee?!) What you want is constantly changing; you’re constantly changing what you want, so how do you define it?

MM: No coffee for me, but let me just check that this has all been recorded. . . .

FA: Oh my god, nothing has been recorded.

MM (panicking): What do you mean?

FA: Talk about not having an “it.”

Uproarious laughter

Madhavi Menon is Assistant Professor of Literature at American University. She is the author of *Wanton Words: Rhetoric and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Toronto, 2004), and has just completed a manuscript on historicism, sexuality, and global Shakespeare, entitled *Unhistorical Shakespeare: Studies in Homo-history*.

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