

# Letters to Daddy

by  
**Mukul Kesavan**

*Bobby, Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak, Maine Pyar Kiya* -three hugely successful films on the theme of beleaguered young love. These films and others like them do not make up a genre; when Raj Kapoor made *Bobby* in the early seventies, his achievement was both more modest and more precise: he invented a recipe, or a formula.

We all know the formula in broad outline. A girl and a boy in their late teens fall yearningly in love; their union is thwarted by variously bigoted parents; they tackle adversity with a kind of vulnerable heroism and in the end either die or are reconciled with their chastened parents.

More specifically, the formula lays down that the young lovers be fresh faces -innocence requires a debut. Rishi/ Dimple; Aamir/Juhi; Salman/Bhagyashree had never starred in films before. It is also the norm that the boy's father is a wealthy man who has made his money in business. The girl's father is generally poorer, lower middle class but genteel. Where this is the case, the match is opposed by the young hero's father for reasons of family status. But there are variations. In *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* Raj and Rashrni {Aarnir and Juhi} both come from Thakur families and their parents are equally matched. Here the problem is clan feud, not class difference.

The boys always have motorbikes and at some stage in the film rescue the heroines from danger: a runaway horse in *Bobby*, villainous harassment in the other two films. There is no female character in any of these films who works for a living. The heroine is generally too young to be doing a job but there is never any indication that she may want to. The heroes, when they work, are restfully employed by their fathers' firms.

The sexual ethic of these films is conservative. There is dalliance, sometimes sexually charged flirtation underlined by meaningful songs but the boy and girl remain virgin till the end. Of all the films based upon this formula, it is the first, *Bobby*, which is the most voyeuristic. This is not surprising -Raj Kapoor's films make it obvious that he never came to terms

with being weaned. So right through the film Sonia Sahni, Aruna Irani and Dimple Kapadia have their deavages haunted by the camera. In sharp contrast Juhi Chawla and Bhagyashree remain demurely covered up in *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* and *Maine Pyar Kiya*. In the latter film, Salman Khan makes his preference for conventional *Bharattyaa* modesty explicit:



Bhagyashree models a series of outfits he has bought for her, including one that shows a lot of skin. When it comes to this one, Bhagyashree emerges swathed in a sheet, in an agony of embarrassment. With her back to the camera she takes the sheet off. Salman Khan looks his fill, then tenderly wraps the sheet round her again. It is one of the more nauseating moments in this film.

For all the abandon of young love, the young lovers are not equally responsible for their common destiny. The boy is in charge. At every turning point in the narrative -defiance, confrontation, rebellion, flight - the initiative (like the motorbike) belongs to the hero. In *Maine Pyar Kiya*, Salman Khan wins Bhagyashree by labouring with his hands for a month and

earning Rs 2,000 - as stipulated by her father. In the meanwhile Bhagyashree wrings her hands at home and looks anxious. In *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* Raj and Rashmi set up house in an abandoned temple. Their idyll of domesticity is derived from a prepubescent fantasy about home making. It reminded me precisely of the time I used to play 'House, House' with my female cousins. We would rig up a roof, using a chatai or a sheet and crouch under it. Then nothing would happen for a long time. The action advanced only when I went off hunting and shot some game. This gave the girls something to do they cooked what I brought home. In the film, the temple is roofless, so Raj and Rashmi build a makeshift roof. Rashmi takes charge of the kitchen (not very successfully) while Raj forages for food in between plunging into the jungle with an axe to chop down kindling. It is, almost literally, an infantile scenario, and it is a tribute to the extraordinary charm of Aamir Khan and Juhi Chawla that for the duration of the film, we suspend disbelief.

The formula on which these films are made, is designed to seduce its audience on two counts. One, we're meant to identify with the unqualified intensity of first love. Two, their innocence and vulnerability are meant to disarm us by making us feel protective towards them.

The world for love! But their rebellion is limited to affirming their love. In no other way do they try to take autonomous charge of their lives. The only reason they run away is because their parents will not let them get married in the conventional way and if the lovers don't die in the end, the boy returns to the bosom of his family (and Daddy's business) and the girl goes with him. Each film is basically a letter to Daddy, who will either see the light or repent. "We'll show him" is one possible motto; "He'll be sorry" is another.

In a culture where rebellion against parents has no institutionalised sanction, children cannot respond angrily, only desperately. And in an economy where children begin working fairly late, young rebellion or dissent is crippled by dependence and must express itself tragically, or through the self indulgence of the reckless gesture.

Here it is worth noticing that the pivotal confrontation is always between the boy and his father. Generally, the girl's father is more understanding, only he is forced into retaliating in kind when the hero's father insults him. But even if the girl's father is overbearing, as he is in *Qayamat Se Qayainat Tak*, the heroine never takes him on, never resorts to the kind of open defiance that marks the hero's relationship with his father. The mothers on both sides count for very little.

These films are not narratives based on event and ordinary feeling. Jealousy, wrong-doing, debt, injury, ambition have very little work to do within the young love formula. These films are set pieces about the impossibility of legitimate dissent. In this respect, they are very similar to the "action" films to which they are often contrasted: the melodrama of retributive justice through individual violence, made famous by Bachchan. The premise of both is the impossibility of justice from Daddy. Only in the case of Bachchan, there's one father, not two: Daddy has been institutionalised into the System, Politics or the Stale. And the girl, unequal in the *Bobby* type film, is peripheral in this sort.

Beneath the facade of equal time for the heroine in young love films runs an extended conversation with father. And all the women in the film and all the women watching it, are eavesdroppers, overhearing a privileged, all male conversation. Women are incidental in this world or at best instrumental, channels for getting a message across to Dad. In the midseventies when I was an undergraduate, the hottest story on tragic young love was based on a real life incident. Some years before, in a coffeehouse on campus, a young man had first shot dead the girl he loved and then killed himself. Before that he had been careful to play a popular film song on doomed love (*Mere Mehboob Qayamat Hogii*) on the juke box. His love, it turned out, was unrequited; it hadn't been a suicide pact, she hadn't wanted to die. But he had killed her anyway because he needed to set the stage for his tragic gesture and she was a necessary prop. He had used her to write one last letter to Daddy.