

Narratives of Trust and Treachery: Love and Betrayal in *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020)

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Abstract:

Love and betrayal are timeless themes in cinema, especially Bollywood, where romantic narratives often grapple with complex emotional and social dynamics. This research paper examines the portrayal of love and betrayal in two recent Bollywood films: *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020). Both films navigate the intricate emotional landscapes of modern relationships but differ in narrative structure, thematic focus, and characterization. *Gehraiyaan*, directed by ShakunBatra, delves into the psychological intricacies of love intertwined with trauma, anxiety, and infidelity, portraying betrayal as a multifaceted emotional experience that challenges trust and self-identity. In contrast, Imtiaz Ali's *Love AajKal* explores love and betrayal across two timelines, juxtaposing traditional and contemporary attitudes towards relationships, highlighting how evolving societal values shape perceptions of commitment and disloyalty. This paper uses a comparative thematic and narrative analysis, supported by cultural and film theory, to explore how these films reflect changing Indian social contexts. It argues that both films subvert traditional Bollywood tropes by presenting morally ambiguous characters whose experiences of love and betrayal reveal the fragility and resilience of human relationships in contemporary urban India. While *Gehraiyaan* focuses on emotional depth and mental health, *Love AajKal* interrogates the tension between enduring romantic ideals and modern pragmatic realities. By analyzing cinematic techniques, character arcs, and narrative strategies, this study reveals how trust and treachery operate within intimate relationships and broader cultural frameworks. The films engage with issues of gender, agency, and emotional survival, offering nuanced insights into the complexities of love in 21st-century India. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of Bollywood's evolving portrayal of romantic relationships and the socio-cultural anxieties surrounding love and betrayal.

Keywords: Bollywood cinema, Love and betrayal, *Gehraiyaan*, *Love AajKal*, Modern Indian relationships

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I. Introduction:

The portrayal of love and betrayal has been central to Bollywood cinema, acting as a mirror to the evolving social, cultural, and psychological dimensions of Indian society. These themes are foundational to understanding human relationships and have been explored repeatedly in Indian films, often reflecting societal norms, gender roles, and moral codes. Traditionally, Bollywood cinema presented love as an idealized, often sacred connection, while betrayal was depicted as a clear-cut moral transgression warranting punishment or redemption. However, contemporary Bollywood narratives have grown more nuanced, grappling with the complexities of emotional relationships, moral ambiguity, and psychological intricacies that mirror the changing fabric of Indian urban life. This paper focuses on two significant recent Bollywood films, *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020), both of which explore love and betrayal within the context of modern Indian society but approach these themes through distinctive narrative strategies and thematic concerns. Directed by ShakunBatra, *Gehraiyaan* is a psychological drama that probes the depths of emotional turmoil, trauma, and anxiety within a love triangle, presenting betrayal as a multifaceted emotional and psychological rupture. On the other hand, Imtiaz Ali's *Love AajKal* revisits his earlier film of the same name (2009) by juxtaposing two timelines, thereby exploring generational changes in perceptions of love and betrayal, highlighting the tension between traditional romantic ideals and contemporary pragmatism. The choice to analyze these two films stems from their relevance in portraying the evolving dynamics of intimate relationships in an urban Indian context. Both films reject simplistic binaries of right and wrong in love and betrayal, instead portraying characters whose moralities and motivations are shaded with ambiguity, reflecting real-life complexities. This study seeks to understand how these films narrate trust and treachery, and how they frame love not merely as an emotional state but as an experience deeply intertwined with identity, societal expectations, and psychological well-being.

Evolution of Love and Betrayal in Bollywood Cinema

Bollywood cinema, the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai, India, has undergone significant transformations since its inception in the early 20th century. Among the many themes Bollywood has explored, love and betrayal have remained central to its narratives, mirroring evolving societal values, cultural shifts, and cinematic trends. This essay explores the evolution of these themes in Bollywood, from the classical portrayals in the 1950s and 1960s, through the more complex and darker depictions in the late 20th century, to the contemporary cinematic treatment of love and betrayal in the 21st century. In the early decades of Bollywood, love was predominantly portrayed as pure, idealistic, and often tragic. The golden era of the 1950s and 1960s, marked by filmmakers like Raj Kapoor, Mehboob Khan, and Bimal Roy, emphasized love as a spiritual and moral ideal. Films like *Awara* (1951) and *Madhumati* (1958) portrayed love as transcending social classes and material circumstances, often with protagonists embodying noble virtues (Dwyer, 2006). Betrayal in this period was generally melodramatic, often linked to external antagonists such as greedy relatives or societal constraints rather than intimate partners. For instance, in *Mother India* (1957), betrayal was connected to greed and corruption rather than personal relationships (Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 2004). Love was sacrificial and pure, often portrayed as an ideal to aspire to, while betrayal was externalized, rarely intertwined with the love stories themselves.

The socio-political turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s, including the Emergency period and rising urbanization, introduced complexity and darker shades to Bollywood narratives. Love began to be shown with more conflict, reflecting changing societal attitudes and increased individualism. Films like *Deewaar* (1975) and *Kabhi Kabhie* (1976) featured love as fraught with tension, misunderstandings, and moral dilemmas (Chatterjee, 2012). Betrayal started becoming more intimate and psychological. Infidelity, manipulation, and deceit entered the narrative canvas, portraying love as a fragile and vulnerable state. For example, *Umrao Jaan* (1981) depicts betrayal both in romantic and societal dimensions, where love is constrained by class and honour, leading to emotional heartbreak (Virdi, 2003). The rise of the anti-hero in this era further complicated the portrayal of love, as characters were no longer idealized but flawed, capable of both love and betrayal.

The liberalization of the Indian economy in the 1990s brought new optimism and global influences into Bollywood. The romantic genre surged with films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Hum Aapke Hain Koun* (1994), where love was celebrated as joyous, playful, and aspirational, blending traditional Indian values with modern sensibilities (Raghavendra, 2009). However, betrayal took on subtler forms. While outright betrayal was less common in mainstream blockbusters, themes of misunderstanding, parental opposition, and societal pressures often created dramatic tension. The notion of honour and family loyalty intertwined with love, and betrayal often involved family members or external forces rather than lovers themselves (Mishra, 2002). This decade's Bollywood largely upheld love as redemptive and pure, though vulnerability to societal betrayal was acknowledged. The new millennium saw Bollywood experimenting with narrative structures and character psychologies. Love was no longer purely idealized; it was portrayed with ambiguities, complexities, and realism. Films like *Kabhi Alvida Naa Kehna* (2006) and *Devdas* (2002) explored themes of extramarital affairs, unrequited love, and emotional betrayal in a nuanced way (Kaur & Sinha, 2005). This era's depiction of betrayal was more internal and psychological, involving infidelity, emotional neglect, and personal ambitions. The rise of multiplex audiences encouraged filmmakers to tackle unconventional stories, showing characters who struggle between societal norms and personal desires. Betrayal was portrayed as both a consequence and cause of the complicated human condition, reflecting the evolving socio-cultural landscape (Ganti, 2012).

In the 2010s and beyond, Bollywood's treatment of love and betrayal has become more diverse and inclusive, reflecting globalization, digital media influences, and changing social norms. Love stories now include queer narratives, inter-caste and inter-religious relationships, and urban-rural dynamics (Banerjee, 2020). Films such as *Ek Ladki Ko Dekha Toh Aisa Laga* (2019) challenge traditional notions of love, while betrayal is explored in multiple dimensions, including emotional, digital, and psychological forms. Modern Bollywood also interrogates betrayal in the context of power dynamics, gender politics, and mental health. For instance, *Queen* (2013) and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) portray women's experiences of love and betrayal in patriarchal settings, reflecting broader conversations about autonomy and identity (Chakravarty, 2018). The complexity of relationships today is mirrored in cinematic storytelling that avoids clear-cut moral binaries, instead embracing the messiness of human emotions. Stylistically, the evolution of love and betrayal in Bollywood cinema is marked by shifts from melodrama and musical extravagance to realism and psychological depth. Early Bollywood used songs and dramatic dialogues to express romantic idealism and emotional betrayals, while contemporary films often employ subtle performances, non-linear narratives, and visual metaphors to depict nuanced relationships (Dwyer, 2014). The portrayal of betrayal, in particular, has transitioned from exaggerated villainy to intimate emotional fractures, reflecting a more mature understanding of human relationships. This evolution underscores Bollywood's responsiveness to changing audience sensibilities and its role as a cultural mirror.

***Gehraiyaan* (2022): Psychological Depths of Love and Betrayal**

Gehraiyaan, directed by ShakunBatra and released on Amazon Prime Video in 2022, stands out for its introspective and layered approach to love and betrayal. The film revolves around Alisha (DeepikaPadukone), her boyfriend Karan (SiddhantChaturvedi), and her friend Zain (AnanyaPanday), whose intertwined relationships form a complex love triangle. Unlike traditional Bollywood love triangles that often polarize characters into heroes and villains, *Gehraiyaan* presents its protagonists with psychological depth, emphasizing emotional vulnerability and mental health struggles, especially Alisha's battle with anxiety and past trauma.

The film uses the love triangle to explore not just romantic betrayal but also emotional isolation, trust deficits, and the fragile nature of human connections. Alisha's anxiety disorders are crucial to understanding her experiences of love and betrayal, as her trauma shapes her perception of trust and emotional intimacy. The narrative does not cast blame simplistically; rather, it acknowledges that betrayal is often the result of unmet emotional needs, miscommunication, and individual psychological wounds (Roy, 2022). Batra's cinematic style complements the thematic concerns, employing muted color palettes, water symbolism, and fragmented narrative structures to evoke the emotional turbulence and psychological disarray experienced by the characters. The film's title itself- *Gehraiyaan*, meaning "depths"- alludes to the emotional and psychological abyss into which the characters descend, highlighting the profound impact of betrayal on their identities and relationships. Critics have lauded *Gehraiyaan* for breaking away from Bollywood's usual melodramatic depictions of infidelity and instead presenting a mature, realistic portrayal of emotional complexity. The film resonates with contemporary urban audiences who recognize the nuances of mental health and relational fragility, marking a significant step in Bollywood's narrative sophistication (Sharma, 2022).

***Love AajKal* (2020): Generational Perspectives on Love and Betrayal**

Directed by Imtiaz Ali, *Love AajKal* (2020) revisits the themes of his 2009 film of the same name by interweaving two narratives: one set in the present day with Jai (KartikeyAaryan) and Meera (Sara Ali Khan), and another set in the past featuring Veer (Arjun Kapoor) and Harleen (Bhumi Pednekar). The film examines how love and betrayal are understood and experienced differently across generations, emphasizing the cultural shifts that influence notions of commitment, trust, and emotional loyalty.

Love AajKal foregrounds the challenges of maintaining relationships in the face of modern-day complexities such as career ambitions, changing social norms, and evolving gender roles. The present-day storyline grapples with the dilemmas of casual relationships, emotional unavailability, and the fear of commitment, whereas the past timeline presents a more traditional view of love bound by familial and societal expectations. Ali's film interrogates betrayal not just as acts of infidelity but also as emotional neglect, miscommunication, and the failure to meet changing expectations. The dual narrative structure allows the audience to reflect on how the meaning of love and betrayal has transformed over time, suggesting that trust is fragile and continuously negotiated within socio-cultural frameworks (Desai, 2020). Visually, *Love AajKal* contrasts the two timelines through distinct cinematic techniques—warm, nostalgic tones in the past and cooler, more dynamic visuals in the present—underscoring the thematic dichotomy between tradition and modernity. The film's soundtrack and dialogues further reinforce this tension, capturing the emotional uncertainties faced by contemporary youth (Malhotra, 2020). While the film received mixed reviews, it was praised for addressing contemporary relationship issues and for its attempt to contextualize love and betrayal within evolving cultural landscapes (Desai, 2020).

Comparative Perspectives: Trust and Treachery in the Two Films

Bollywood's narrative treatment of love and betrayal has evolved significantly in the 21st century, reflecting the complexities of modern relationships against the backdrop of India's rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape. Both *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020) engage deeply with themes of trust and treachery but do so through markedly different storytelling methods, character portrayals, and thematic emphases. This comparative analysis explores how these films narrate love and betrayal, examining their narrative structures, character dynamics, cinematic techniques, and cultural contexts to understand Bollywood's contemporary engagement with these timeless yet evolving themes.

One of the most striking differences between *Gehraiyaan* and *Love AajKal* lies in their narrative construction. *Gehraiyaan* employs a fragmented and nonlinear narrative style, reflecting the internal emotional states and psychological turmoil of its characters, particularly Alisha. The film's storytelling is intimate and introspective, using flashbacks and disjointed timelines to unravel the emotional depths and betrayals within a complex love triangle (Roy, 2022). This approach invites the audience to experience the instability of trust and the confusion wrought by betrayal from the perspective of a character struggling with anxiety and trauma. In contrast, *Love AajKal* adopts a dual narrative timeline that juxtaposes the past and the present, tracing two parallel love stories across generations. This narrative strategy foregrounds the evolution of love and betrayal, highlighting cultural shifts and contrasting romantic ideals (Desai, 2020). By comparing the courtship and challenges faced by Veer and Harleen in the past with Jai and Meera's modern-day relationship, the film

emphasizes how societal norms and personal expectations shape trust and acts of betrayal. The dual narrative thus functions as a meta-commentary on the mutable nature of love and fidelity. While *Gehraiyaan* centres on psychological and emotional betrayal deeply embedded in individual trauma and relational dynamics, *Love AajKal* broadens the lens to examine betrayal within shifting social and cultural paradigms. This difference underscores the former's focus on emotional interiority and the latter's exploration of cultural continuity and change.

Both films challenge Bollywood's traditional clear-cut moral binaries by portraying characters whose actions evoke empathy despite their flaws, complicating conventional understandings of trust and betrayal. In *Gehraiyaan*, the central characters—Alisha, Karan, and Zain—exist within a moral gray zone where betrayal is not simply a question of infidelity but is tangled with emotional need, mental health struggles, and personal insecurities (Sharma, 2022). Alisha's anxiety disorder colours her perceptions and reactions, illustrating how betrayal affects trust at both an interpersonal and intrapersonal level. The film refrains from casting any character as a villain; instead, it portrays betrayal as a painful consequence of unmet emotional needs and vulnerabilities, complicating the audience's moral judgment (Roy, 2022).

Conversely, *Love AajKal* portrays betrayal through the prism of generational and cultural conflict. Jai and Meera's relationship in the present is characterized by emotional ambivalence, fear of commitment, and competing life goals. Veer and Harleen's past romance reflects a more idealistic, yet equally fraught, notion of love. The betrayals in both timelines are subtle and often linked to misunderstandings, shifting priorities, or societal pressures rather than overt infidelity (Desai, 2020). This ambivalence highlights the fragility of trust within the evolving expectations of modern romance. The characters in both films navigate a landscape where loyalty is complex, and betrayal can be emotional or circumstantial rather than simply physical. Such nuanced characterizations reflect contemporary Bollywood's move away from moral absolutism, engaging audiences in the messy realities of love and treachery.

Cinematic style plays a vital role in reinforcing the thematic concerns of love, trust, and betrayal in both films, although each employs distinct visual and auditory strategies. *Gehraiyaan* uses muted colour schemes, tight framing, and symbolic imagery such as water to evoke the emotional states of its characters. Water often symbolizes fluidity, depth, and emotional turbulence, aligning with Alisha's psychological struggles and the instability of trust within the film's narrative (Roy, 2022). The fragmented editing style mirrors her anxiety and the fractured nature of her relationships. The film's use of close-ups intensifies the intimacy and vulnerability of the characters, allowing viewers to engage with the emotional betrayals on a visceral level (Sharma, 2022). By contrast, *Love AajKal* employs a more vibrant and varied visual palette, using warm hues to depict the past timeline and cooler, more dynamic visuals for the present. This contrast visually delineates the shifting cultural contexts and emotional atmospheres of the two eras (Malhotra, 2020). The film's soundtrack, featuring nostalgic and contemporary music, further enhances the emotional resonance of love and betrayal across generations. The camera work fluctuates between steady, romantic shots in the past and more frenetic, handheld movements in the present, emphasizing the tension and uncertainty faced by modern lovers. Together, these stylistic choices reflect each film's thematic focus: *Gehraiyaan* on psychological depth and emotional fragmentation, *Love AajKal* on cultural transition and relational flux.

Both films critically engage with gendered experiences of love and betrayal, though in divergent ways that reflect contemporary Indian social realities. In *Gehraiyaan*, Alisha's character embodies the intersection of emotional vulnerability and gendered expectations. The film foregrounds her mental health struggles and portrays the emotional labour she endures within her relationships. Her anxiety and trauma highlight how women's experiences of love and betrayal are often compounded by societal stigmas surrounding mental health and emotional expression (Sharma, 2022). Alisha's emotional journey critiques traditional Bollywood depictions of women as passive victims or virtuous sufferers, instead presenting her as a complex individual navigating the intersections of desire, pain, and resilience. *Love AajKal*, meanwhile, addresses gender through the contrast between past and present. The female characters—Harleen and Meera—are depicted negotiating evolving gender norms. Harleen's storyline reflects the constraints of traditional expectations around marriage and loyalty, whereas Meera embodies a more modern, independent woman grappling with career ambitions and emotional autonomy (Desai, 2020). The film examines how shifting gender roles complicate trust and betrayal, as both men and women renegotiate power dynamics and emotional commitments in romantic relationships. This engagement with gender dynamics in both films reveals Bollywood's growing sensitivity to contemporary debates around gender, mental health, and emotional labour, offering a more layered representation of how love and betrayal are experienced differently by men and women.

Both *Gehraiyaan* and *Love AajKal* are deeply rooted in urban middle-class settings, reflecting the socio-economic and cultural anxieties of modern Indian city life. *Gehraiyaan* situates its narrative within a milieu marked by cosmopolitan lifestyles, psychological pressures, and the dissonance between personal desires and social expectations. The film's focus on mental health and emotional fragility resonates with growing awareness and dialogue around these issues among India's urban youth (Roy, 2022). The betrayals portrayed are as much about emotional alienation and internal conflict as about interpersonal relationships, underscoring the

psychological toll of contemporary urban life. In *Love AajKal*, the socio-cultural backdrop extends across two eras, highlighting the rapid transformation of Indian society. The past timeline reflects a relatively conservative India where love and marriage were tightly interwoven with family honour and tradition, whereas the present timeline depicts a fragmented society negotiating globalization, modern career demands, and changing social mores (Desai, 2020). The betrayals in the film—emotional and circumstantial—mirror these broader cultural shifts, underscoring the challenges of maintaining trust in a world of competing priorities and evolving values.

The films thus not only tell personal stories of love and betrayal but also function as cultural texts that critique and reflect upon contemporary Indian realities. A significant point of divergence lies in the films' primary modes of engagement with the themes of trust and betrayal: psychological realism versus cultural commentary. *Gehraiyaan* is fundamentally a psychological drama. Its narrative and stylistic choices immerse the viewer in the inner lives of its characters, portraying betrayal as an emotionally devastating experience that fractures identity and trust. Mental health is central to this depiction, offering a rare Bollywood narrative that prioritizes emotional and psychological authenticity over melodrama (Sharma, 2022). The film's refusal to simplify its characters' motivations or moral positions reflects a broader cinematic trend toward realism and complexity in depicting relationships. *Love AajKal*, while also concerned with emotional depth, leans more heavily into cultural commentary. Its dual narrative explicitly contrasts historical and contemporary understandings of love, framing betrayal as a fluid concept shaped by social norms and cultural change (Desai, 2020). The film interrogates the tension between enduring romantic ideals and the pragmatic realities of modern relationships, highlighting how trust must be continuously negotiated amid shifting expectations.

Both approaches enrich Bollywood's engagement with love and betrayal, offering complementary perspectives that address individual psychology and socio-cultural context. *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020) stand as compelling examples of Bollywood's evolving portrayal of love, trust, and betrayal. Through distinct narrative strategies, characterizations, and cinematic techniques, these films illuminate the multifaceted nature of romantic relationships in contemporary India. While *Gehraiyaan* delves into the psychological depths of emotional betrayal and mental health, *Love AajKal* broadens the discourse to encompass cultural shifts and generational contrasts. Both films challenge simplistic moral binaries, offering nuanced explorations of trust and treachery that resonate with modern audiences. Their emphasis on gender dynamics, urban realities, and emotional labour further enriches their narratives, reflecting Bollywood's increasing willingness to engage with complex social issues. Together, these films signify a significant shift toward mature, layered storytelling in Indian cinema, capturing the contradictions and complexities of love and betrayal in the 21st century.

II. Conclusion:

Analyzing *Gehraiyaan* and *Love AajKal* provides insight into Bollywood's evolving representation of romantic relationships, moving beyond idealization toward complex, realistic portrayals. These films reflect broader societal changes, including increased awareness of mental health, changing gender norms, and the tensions between tradition and modernity. This study contributes to the field of film and cultural studies by highlighting how Bollywood narratives negotiate trust and betrayal within contemporary Indian contexts. It also opens avenues for further research into the intersection of mental health, gender, and relational dynamics in Indian cinema. *Gehraiyaan* (2022) and *Love AajKal* (2020) stand as compelling examples of Bollywood's evolving portrayal of love, trust, and betrayal. Through distinct narrative strategies, characterizations, and cinematic techniques, these films illuminate the multifaceted nature of romantic relationships in contemporary India. While *Gehraiyaan* delves into the psychological depths of emotional betrayal and mental health, *Love AajKal* broadens the discourse to encompass cultural shifts and generational contrasts. Both films challenge simplistic moral binaries, offering nuanced explorations of trust and treachery that resonate with modern audiences. Their emphasis on gender dynamics, urban realities, and emotional labour further enriches their narratives, reflecting Bollywood's increasing willingness to engage with complex social issues. Together, these films signify a significant shift toward mature, layered storytelling in Indian cinema, capturing the contradictions and complexities of love and betrayal in the 21st century.

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