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Om Shanti Om

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Om Shanti Om

Abstract

This is a review of *Om Shanti Om* (2007).

The tagline for the Hindi cinema/Bollywood film *Om Shanti Om* (dir. Farah Khan, 2007) is, “For some dreams, one lifetime is not enough!” Set in the disco heyday of 1970s Bombay, *Om Shanti Om* is a tale of two star-crossed lovers, Om and Shanti. Om is a small-time actor with two big dreams: to become a star and to become the love of leading lady Shanti. To help her son achieve his goals, Om’s mother undertakes a typical Hindu vow and ties a string blessed by a guru around her son’s wrist, telling him that now his wishes will surely come true. At the premiere of “Dreamy Girl” shortly thereafter, Shanti’s sari becomes entangled with Om’s string as she walks down the red carpet. Their lingering exchange of glances upon this first auspicious meeting suggests that the pair is destined to fall in love.

Later that evening, Om drunkenly rehearses before his friend Pappu the speech that he plans to make when he becomes an award-winning star, stating in poetic verse, “I have wanted you so much and so badly, it’s true, / That the entire universe has conspired for me to get you” (Hindi: *Itni shiddat se meine tumhe paane ki koshish ki hai / Ki har zarre ne mujhe tumse milane ki saazish ki hai*). This verse reveals the underlying theme of the film: the belief that there is a cosmic force that holds us accountable for our individual acts and responds to our deepest desires.

A fairy-tale romance sparks as Om courts Shanti, until Om overhears a heated conversation between Shanti and film producer Mukesh Mehra, in which Shanti tells Mukesh that she is pregnant and demands that he publicly acknowledge

their secret marriage. Mukesh refuses, claiming that it would end their careers, as no one would invest in a film starring a married heroine. When Shanti insists, Mukesh lights the film set on fire, locking Shanti within it. Om runs to her rescue, but is too late: with hands extended toward one another across the burning room, Om and Shanti are separated as an explosion throws him from the building. Om lies on the road outside the studio, witnessing the fire consume the set and his love, when he is suddenly hit by a speeding car and eventually dies.

Here, with the death of both hero and heroine, those who are unfamiliar with Hinduism and Indian cinematic conventions might expect the film to end. But *Om Shanti Om* is not just a tragic love story; it is also a tale of reincarnation. Hindu texts like the *Bhagavad Gita* teach the doctrine of rebirth, stressing that the individual soul goes through numerous lifetimes before attaining liberation. Hindu texts also teach the doctrine of karma, stressing that one's actions and attachments in this lifetime determine the conditions of the next birth. Particularly important are a person's final thoughts, thus pious Hindus seeking liberation are instructed to meditate upon God at the moment of death. As Om lies dying, a montage of quick cuts of Shanti dancing and smiling are interspersed with cuts of her screaming as she burns to death. Thus, given Om's love for Shanti and his desire for vengeance, his death is not the end, but the beginning of the second half of the film.

Thirty years later, the megastar Om Kapoor, or “OK,” proclaims in his acceptance speech for the Filmfare best actor award: “I have wanted you so much and so badly, it’s true, / That the entire universe has conspired for me to get you.” OK, who was born with a scar in the shape of the Hindu symbol “Om” on his wrist in the very place where Om had the symbol tattooed, begins experiencing flashbacks from his former life while on a film shoot at the ruined studio where Shanti died. When OK is introduced to a gray-haired Mukesh at the Filmfare ceremony, he finally accepts that he is Om reborn, and realizes that it is his karmic destiny to pursue justice for Shanti’s murder. Conspiring with Pappu, Om’s mother, and a Shanti look-alike, OK creates a film called “*Om Shanti Om*” that enacts the events of thirty years ago, hoping to guilt Mukesh into confessing his crimes. The climax of the film takes place during a song and dance sequence, when OK sings to Mukesh, “The circle of life, death, and karma well known / Is the saga of ‘Om Shanti Om’.”

In the end, when an unrepentant Mukesh refuses to confess and tells OK that reincarnation will never be admitted as evidence in court, Shanti’s ghost appears and proclaims that it is Mukesh’s destiny to die. In a dramatic finale, OK and the ghost of Shanti share a lengthy lovestruck gaze as a chandelier falls, killing Mukesh on the very spot where he had buried Shanti’s remains after the fire thirty years ago. It took two lifetimes, but Om eventually achieved both of his dreams,

and Mukesh received his karmic just desserts. As both Om and OK were fond of stating, “just like in the films, in life too finally in the end everything is okay.”

Om Shanti Om was the highest grossing Hindi film of 2007. Fans of Hindi cinema will delight in the numerous insider jokes and references in this blockbuster (for instance, the recreation of a scene from the classic 1957 film *Mother India*) as well as the guest cameos by over thirty Indian stars (see the song “Deewangi Deewangi”). Those who have never before seen a Bollywood film will find it an apt and enjoyable introduction to the distinctiveness of Hindi cinema with its numerous song and dance sequences, its occasional reversal of the “male gaze” (especially during the song “Dard-e-Disco”), its melodrama, and its intentional flouting of the conventions of continuity editing.

Om Shanti Om provides a thought-provoking introduction to the Hindu doctrines of karma and rebirth. Yet it also generalizes its message by presenting Om/OK not as a stridently devout Hindu hero, but as an everyman. This is perhaps most notable in his prominent necklace, which is comprised of three religious symbols: the Hindu Om, the Muslim crescent moon, and the Christian crucifix. Whether or not one believes in reincarnation, the film suggests that all religions agree that there is a cosmic force that holds us each accountable for our individual acts and responds to our deepest desires.