

Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Contest 2022: Winner of the Certificate of Merit

Ankita Rathour

***Kabir Singh* Bothers?**



A lot has been said about the 2019 Bollywood film *Kabir Singh*—good, bad, and ugly. In a vast pool of conflicting discourses, this is just a drop and perhaps unnoticeable. *Kabir Singh*, arguably, is one of the most powerful divisive forces in the Indian cultural context. Heated arguments still shroud major social media platforms when its name is mentioned. Some say the film glorified gender-based violence, while others claim, "it is all fictional, so why bother?" I want to tap into that vexation here.

In its one hundred-and-seventy-two minutes of screen time, director Sandeep Vanga's Bollywood directorial debut, *Kabir Singh*, shocks and entertains in parts but mostly offends. A remake of his own Telugu blockbuster, *Arjun Reddy*, from 2017, *Kabir Singh* is certainly not a gender-conscious film. Although Shahid Kapoor's portrayal of Kabir differs from Vijay Deverakonda's Arjun in some ways, their

obnoxious violent Indian masculinity remains the same. When I began watching this over-the-top regressive saga of male rage, I struggled to enjoy this (so-called) love story in our present times when almost a hundred women get sexually assaulted every day. The solution, I think, was a psychological distance. Being a feminist, I was able to engage with *Kabir Singh* critically and enjoy a few moments. Those moments though, were constantly overshadowed by Kabir's violence in the past and its possibility in the present.

If art is an investigation, then *Kabir Singh* attempts to investigate fragile masculinity. While treading the familiar Bollywood "angry young man" trope, the film cuts deep—especially if you are an Indian woman watching it—like me—one who has been on the receiving end of male violence and its deep-seated desire to possess the non-mother female

identity. Hence, the onscreen glorification of male rage is familiar, grotesque, and claustrophobic. Like Amitabh Bacchan in *Shehenshaah* (1988), our Kabir helps the weak and fights evil (or so he thinks!). This misguided rebel works as a surgeon, saving lives even while inebriated. He is possessive of his lady and guards her “purity” at every instance. He reminds her “*chunni theek karo*” (cover your bosom). Masked as her saviour, he takes advantage of her vulnerable position and makes her move in with him at his med-school boys-only dormitory. His love oscillates between protection and puppeteering. No one, not the hundreds of other students, nor the administration, dares stand in his way. On this formulaic masculinised ride, one wonders, what actually is Kabir’s cause?

Although the film is fiction, it reflects quite uncannily the war on women taking place in India today. Jilted lovers lash out in anger against women every day. Women are burnt, stabbed, ostracised, gang-raped, and killed. Within this context, how should a female continue watching this film where a man is trying to have sex with a woman at knifepoint? Or did Vanga make this film with no female audience in mind? One must not forget that during his interview with film critic Anupama Chopra, Vanga confessed that he does not believe in love without violence. Kabir’s rage reminds me of men I’ve met or heard about from my fellow women in the secluded corners of college campuses. Times when women reveal to each other how their male partners are brutalising them and who then make them swear on secrecy. As I watched the film, I kept reminding myself not to let the gender violence on screen affect me. I reminded myself that certain cinema makes us uncomfortable. And for the sake of my cinephilic ethos, I continued watching.

Vanga’s film follows Kabir Rajdheer Singh, a star medical student with a chip on his shoulder. Women either adore or fear him, and we witness his fall from grace. The film opens with Kabir already in a haggard state. After failing to have sex with a woman, he summons his best friend to help him get another girl. He yells at his female housemaid for no good reason. Later, he chases her down the street

when she accidentally breaks a glass. Then we go back in time to the origin of his rage. We see him as a brilliant student at the Delhi Institute of Medical Sciences, where he slays the opponent team in football. Always angry, even in his college days, Kabir singles out a meek and virtually inaudible new student, Preeti Sikka (Kiara Advani). He marks her as “*meri bandi*” (my girl) in front of his group of ardent male followers—the likes who would follow Kabir’s model of masculinity.

Preeti is claimed by a stranger in front of his friends, in class, and the entire college as if auctioned. Drugged with upper caste and upper-class Hindu machismo, Kabir tells Preeti to make friends with a “chubby girl” as they make better friends with pretty women like herself. As if struck by divinity, Preeti obeys his benign misogynist orders blindly. A pretentious tale follows love, separation, agony, and self-realisation. Kabir is a rebooted, angry young man of the 1980s, and his downfall comes from his primary flaw: his fury.

Despite its unusual length and regressive gender politics, the film boasts of few saving graces. Actor Shahid Kapoor once again proves that he can make a film work wonders virtually on his own. He is raw, wild, funny, intelligent, rude, chauvinist, polite, aloof, passionate, and above all, convincing. The music, cinematography, and editing work well too. The film has become a blockbuster mainly because it has all the ingredients of a good “*masala*” film: an interesting male hero, a fast-paced plot, engaging conflict, humour, music, and a lone wolf fighting against the odds. Eroticised male anger has always pulled vast crowds; Vanga’s remake makes perfect sense. Kabir’s helplessness and loneliness strike a chord, irrespective of gender. His deterioration has an arc, and a few instances hint at his better side.

He asks Preeti to stand up to her father and fight for their relationship as passionately as he—“like a woman.” He criticises the caste system: “*Caste ko lekar sab pagal hain yahan*” (Everyone is crazy about caste here). He denounces arranged marriage: “*Arrange marriage me pyar hota hai kya?*” (Is there love in an arranged marriage?). He criticises

people's lack of understanding of private space. At times he is logical and polite.

When he speaks with Preeti's father, he asks him not to think of him as a "roadside Romeo" and to respect his intentions towards his daughter. Probably the best scene that takes us into the mind of Kabir after a falling out with Preeti's family. He overdoses and pees his pants in an honest and emasculating scene that deserves applause. To show a hyper-masculine hero in his most vulnerable state undercuts the glorification of hyper-masculinity that this film otherwise is. When his best friend "offers" his sister up for the resurrection of Kabir's bruised ego, Kabir says, "I am not right for her." He is wrong, and he knows it. We see him crying, apologising to his father, and coming around towards the end with a determination to improve his life. This is precisely where the movie should have ended! But sadly, it goes on.

Kabir resembles Joe Goldberg, the protagonist in Netflix's American TV series *You*. Like Joe, Kabir is obsessive. He thinks that if he loves Preeti enough, she will join him on his crusade of being an imprudent rebel. Together, they will be like Bonny and Clyde. Unfortunately, Preeti is too opaque to investigate what she believes. Bonny and *You*'s Beck at least fight. Preeti is simply mute. Even when she slaps Kabir, she follows with crying. She must make her retaliation likeable. She is "nothing without him," as she says, yet she marries another man. She gives up. As a character, she remains unexplored, reduced to mere filler in a film that has been promoted as a love story. Despite the promise of being one of the few blockbuster Bollywood films investigating toxic masculinity, Kabir Singh chooses to side with the old formula of limiting the heroine's cinematic space in an angry young man's world. Moreover, it creates one of the most frustrating leading ladies in Bollywood cinema—Preeti Sikka. It seems as if she is trying to remind us that being coy, submissive, and silent are the only approved ways of asserting Indian femininity.

In the 2002 Bollywood film *Kya Yahi Pyar Hai*, Amisha Patel's weak character had a much better voice and arc than Preeti Sikka. If, twenty years

ago, a movie could write a female character better, I wonder why the writers were so uninterested in Preeti. Certainly, actresses had little agency in Bollywood's "angry young man" movies of the past. Still, even among those, I cannot remember a female lead being this mute and dependent as Preeti. Jaya Bacchan's almost silent character in *Sholay* (1975) exuded confidence and had much more agency than Ms Sikka. The struggle is not so much watching a raging male on screen but rather an almost invisible heroine in modern Bollywood cinema, especially after the successes of women-centred films like *Lipstick Under My Burqa* (2016), *Parched* (2015), and others. Kabir Singh's masculine order is strengthened because of the male supporting cast. Preeti's father is another patriarch whose solution to "save" his daughter is to force her into an arranged marriage. "She is my daughter," yells Preeti's father at Kabir. "I will marry her to whomever I want.". Equally worse is Kabir's best friend, Shiva, who fans Kabir's ego by saying, "Even if you go out and stand, many naked girls will still fall for you." Shiva vilifies Preeti and is ready to sacrifice his sister to Kabir's desires.

I like Kabir Singh for its honest portrayal of toxic masculinity and hate it for not critiquing it enough. Kabir is a complicated character. But his chaos is too familiar. I wish Kabir's rage had not made things easier for him. He suffers. Yes. But still has things taken care of for him. His elder brother confidently tells him that he will get out of trouble when he has committed severe medical negligence. His friends act as enablers when they should be intervening from the very start. Preeti, with her purity intact, comes back to him. I wish the film had ended when Kabir, with his neat countenance, rides his bike away with his new fervour toward life. I wish the film had not used Preeti as a trophy for Kabir, reminding us once again that a man's rage is always valid and gets him whatever he wants. Do we make such socio-cultural allowances for angry women?

Bollywood is still reluctant to explore female rage. We still have no takers for angry young women in mainstream Bollywood. That is probably why #metoo fails to hold the industry's abusive men

accountable. Alia Bhatt's valiantly attempted *Darlings* (2002) encouraged boycott calls from the ones who call themselves protectors of the Indian culture. Bhatt's gritty, enraged performance in *Highway* (2014) is not enough to make it a blockbuster. *Gulaab Gang* (2014) bombs as well. In both films, the actresses' tempers cost them dearly.

Similarly, Preeti suffers way more than Kabir and has no support from family or friends. Unlike Kabir, no one takes an active interest in Preeti's rehabilitation. She does not have things taken care of for her. Kabir's suffering was a choice; Preeti's

leaving her family still was a punishment inflicted by others—including Kabir. Bollywood must reorient and learn from the past. We can all enjoy a movie about toxic masculinity. But let's not do it at the cost of female silence, female mockery, and female punishment.

Film: Kabir Singh
Director: Sandeep Reddy Vanga
Year of Release: 2019
Language: Hindi
Genre: Drama

✿ Ms. Ankita Rathour lives in LA, USA.