

Critique

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Anurag Kashyap's *No Smoking* – A Film Ahead of its Time!



Anurag Kashyap's surreal thriller *No Smoking*, released in 2007, did not conform to the typical definition of a groundbreaking film. It was neither commercially successful nor received extremely favourable reviews from critics at the time of its release. And it's almost strange that, even after 16 years, the film's complex narrative has not been widely discussed in conversations about cinema that dared to be different.

In the film, protagonist K (John Abraham) is a chain smoker who enrolls himself into a suspicious rehabilitation program cum de-addiction centre at the urging of his friends and family. But this decision ends up drastically altering his life. Set under the grimy backdoor alleys of a bustling city, the program is run by an equally shady character, Guru Ghantal Baba Bengali (Paresh Rawal), who will stop at nothing to enforce his strict rules, which includes forcing K to quit smoking and punishing him severely every time he is caught lighting up.

Regarding its storytelling, *No Smoking* can be characterised as an absurd, multi-layered film with a vague and complex ending that invites various interpretations. Its absurdity is primarily conveyed

through the inclusion of elements that are bizarre, irrational, and sometimes also contradictory.

The narrative centres on a vile, arrogant, self-centred man who is so in admiration of his physical appearance that he fails to see beyond his self-destructive habits. This character is depicted multiple times as staring at his self-reflection in the mirror while holding a cigarette and wearing dark sunglasses. The story explores his struggle with himself, posing the question of whether or not he should continue smoking. This inner turmoil is heightened when he is directed to abstain from smoking, with the threat of disastrous consequences. *No Smoking* was released at a time when most Indian audiences tended to relate more to romantic heroes, the struggles of the commoner, and mostly the good and innocent characters in cinema because they represented the qualities that the people aspired to or admired in themselves and others. These characters often embody the ideals of love, sacrifice, and morality, and their struggles and triumphs are relatable to everyone.

Among the top-grossing Hindi films of 2007, *Om Shanti Om* depicted the aspirations of Om Kapoor and Om Prakash Makhija (portrayed by

Shahrukh Khan), who embody the desire for fame while also advocating for truth and justice, ultimately becoming a force to reckon with for the triumph of good over evil. The character exemplifies unwavering resolve, bravery, and selfless affection that transcended his societal status and position. Similarly, in *Welcome*, Akshay Kumar's character finds himself entangled in comically unfortunate circumstances despite being an ordinary individual striving for everyday aspirations in life.

In the film *Chak De! India*, Shahrukh Khan's Kabir Khan conveys a resolute determination and agility, displaying a strong commitment to ensuring team India's victory in women's hockey. Meanwhile, Aamir Khan's character Ram Shankar Nikumbh in *Taare Zameen Par* embodies a spirit of optimism that emphasises the transformative power of love, care, and empathy, with the potential to bring about positive change in human beings.

On the other hand, self-obsessed, obnoxious, and morally ambiguous characters challenged the core values and beliefs of the audiences, and they didn't align with their notions of right and wrong. This made it difficult for the audience to connect with K emotionally, and thus they found it difficult to root for him or care about his story, which may be one reason why *No Smoking* was unsuccessful.

The character of K, as portrayed in the film, failed to strike a chord with the audience, and many Bollywood actors also demonstrated a lack of understanding and appreciation towards the character and the screenplay when they were offered the role. Anurag Kashyap had once revealed in his now discontinued blog about cinema that both Shahrukh Khan and Hrithik Roshan had turned down the film before John Abraham accepted the part. This exemplifies that *No Smoking* was truly a film that was ahead of its time.

It is of considerable interest to note that *No Smoking* was made at a time when none of Anurag Kashyap's films had been released. *Paanch* could not overcome the censor board's scissors while *Black Friday* struggled to free. *No Smoking* could therefore be interpreted as an expression of the internal angst of a filmmaker repeatedly debarred from his freedom of creative expression. Subject to multiple

suppressions in the form of restrictions, clearances and logistical obstacles, Kashyap conceived K as a representation of himself, depicting the character as an arrogant, isolated individual at odds with his surroundings.

Thus, *No Smoking* is the filmmaker's most personal work, reflecting on his experiences and challenges. With the forceful implications on K to quit smoking, Prayogshaala preys on his worst fears and psychology, and employing that as an allegorical reference, the film provides a creative critique of the various limitations imposed on personal and creative freedom and the stifling pressure to conform to societal values.

No Smoking also challenged the conventions of mainstream storytelling in 2007, where the dominant genre of the top ten highest box office-grossing films was romance and comedy. They included films like *Om Shanti Om*, *Welcome*, *Partner*, *Heyy Babyy*, *Bhool Bhulaiyaa*, and *Namastey London*, among others. The deviation from popular content in *No Smoking* found expression with surreal elements, dreamlike imagery, and the portrayal of characters and events in a highly exaggerated manner.

The character of K is depicted as slipping into a luxurious bathtub located in his upscale penthouse, only to wake up in strange locations. The bathtub appears to serve as a portal to other dimensions, transporting K to Serbia, where he is held captive by Russian soldiers who forbid him from smoking. Similarly, when K is apprehended by the henchmen of Guru Ghantal Baba Bengali, he finds himself waking up back in his bathroom, in the tub. It is also an escape from the nightmare the centre is in.

The bathtub metaphorically represents K's subconscious mind, where his troubled soul grapples with his inner conflicts. Likewise, Ayesha Takia portrays the dual roles of K's wife, Anjali and his secretary Annie, as a distinct manifestation of K's fractured psyche. And the Prayogshaala, upon enrollment, entraps its inmates within a labyrinthine structure that mirrors the intricate, perplexing nature of K's mind. It is representative of his inability to break free from his self-destructive patterns.

And it is possible for Guru Ghantal Baba Bengali to keep a close eye on his patients, even in their most secret and private moments and regardless of their geographical affiliation. Merely lighting a single cigarette can trigger a series of misfortunes upon K, which can only be attributed to Baba Bengali's deeds. Here, Baba Bengali is depicted as a human being with god-like superpowers. Thus, interpretations can be made about a scene in the movie where K is seen deliberating with Guru Ghantal Baba Bengali about his smoking addiction, as K negotiates between life and death with Yamraj, the Hindu god of death tasked with the responsibility of meting out justice and punishment to those who have committed sins in his realm, for Guru Ghantal Baba Bengali smoking is no less than a sin.

Perhaps during its theatrical run, the audiences found such absurdities of *No Smoking* to be too confusing or off-putting as they failed to appreciate the film's more experimental nature or avant-garde aspects. In fact, to this day, it seems that our audiences have limited appreciation towards cinematic works that are unconventional in innovative ways. The tepid reception to Rajat Kapoor's recent release, *Rk/Rkay*, which is yet another creative experiment on characters and the power dynamics between the creator and his creation, serves as a bright evidence for this claim.

While there is a growing audience for non-mainstream and unconventional films in India, most movie-goers still tend to prefer more traditional narratives and commercial movies. The humungous success of *Pathaan*, followed by box office successes like *Tu Jhoothi Main Makkaar* and *The Kerala Story* in recent times, only proves this point. Stories like that of *No Smoking*, which Stephen King's *Quitters*, Inc. inspires, are often difficult for the general audiences to connect with because they challenge their expectations and require them to suspend their disbelief in ways that may be uncomfortable or disorienting.

The film's exploration of the psyche of a disturbed individual, its gritty and surrealistic visuals, and philosophical themes were not common in Bollywood films of its time. The film's central character, K, is a complex and flawed individual who

is forced to confront his inner demons as his internal conflicts are portrayed in contrast to the external world, leading him to question whether the world is insane or if he is.

Towards the end, K finds himself in an alternate dimension, where his soul is held captive in jail, separated from his true self by a glass window. The soul silently observes his past actions and experiences, which reeks of arrogance and ignorance. As he realises his mistake, he tries to influence his past efforts for a change without success. Eventually, his soul is consumed by a raging fire, leaving the audience to interpret the ambiguously complex ending. *No Smoking* is one of those movies where the protagonist miserably fails, and the opposing forces win (Kashyap has also later repeated such an ending with *Ugly*).

The burning of the soul here brings major implications to K's reality. Like his friend Abbas Tyerwalla (Ranvir Shorey), who had initially suggested K visit Prayogshala, K also loses two of his fingers at the end of the movie. In the film, there is a condition to regain one's lost fingers - convincing and referring someone else to the program. Abbas Tyerwalla had regained his fingers by referring K, and in the end, K, in a manner akin to the formally attired purveyors of network marketing schemes, exhibits an attempt to convince another individual to partake in the program. He has completely lost his sense of self as his soul seems to have departed from his body. He is now fully integrated into the system. In *No Smoking*, the climax also adds to its self-indulgent nature, making *No Smoking* one of Kashyap's most enigmatic films yet. In fact, the movie faced one of its foremost criticisms due to its perceived self-indulgence and the unclear progression of events, which made it a difficult exercise for the audiences to comprehend.

Self-indulgent films of filmmakers often become cult classics decades later because they often contain unique and innovative ideas that challenge the norms of mainstream cinema. But as time passes, the social and cultural context in which these films were made changes, allowing audiences to view them in a different light and appreciate their true significance. In that light, it would probably take a

few more years for audiences to truly appreciate the kind of movie that *No Smoking* is, and that too only if audiences can connect with its twisted themes of nihilistic admiration and existential individualism.

Operating on the boundaries of several limitations, including financial and artistic, Kashyap has succeeded in delivering a Kafkaesque treatment to *No Smoking*. It delivers an aesthetically dark and gritty treatment that perfectly captures the bleak and oppressive atmosphere of the story. Prayogshaala is situated amid the grimy and congested ghettos, marked by shabby and unkempt interiors, which starkly contrasts with the pristine and refined ambience of K's luxurious penthouse. There is a bathtub that acts as a portal to an alternate dimension where people's fingers are amputated, and they inexplicably lose their hearing abilities after returning to reality.

Indian audiences did not accept these ideas and techniques of storytelling at the time of its release. But *No Smoking* was lauded by foreign critics, demonstrating our limited comprehension of cinema and why we can never produce talents like David Lynch. Putting all its complexities aside, *No Smoking* fairly works as a concept-driven character study. K manifests an insufferable sense of self-importance, oblivious to anything beyond his ego and pride. He lacks affection towards his wife, friends,

and all loved ones, showing little interest in the affairs of society as he remains consumed by his own self-absorption and business pursuits. However, his way of life is tested when confronted with the ultimatum of sacrificing his smoking habit, potentially risking the lives of those close to him. This challenge forces him to confront his pride, deeply ingrained in his being, as he grapples with the idea of someone leaving him. Because nobody leaves him, thus, he reluctantly decides to give the de-addiction centre a chance, unknowingly setting in motion a transformative journey that forever changes his life. Perhaps this aspect of the film was overshadowed by the weight and prominence of the central concept, thereby hindering the viewers' perception and understanding of it.

Despite the film's challenging storyline, unconventional presentation, and the director's efforts to expand storytelling possibilities in India, *No Smoking* has yet to receive recognition. However, as time passes and our collective understanding of cinema evolves, the film's themes and ideas may become more relevant or even prophetic, and its techniques may be acknowledged as influential or visionary in the coming times. Also, in the country's current political climate, the film's larger commentary on freedom of thought and creative expression may hold larger significance.

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