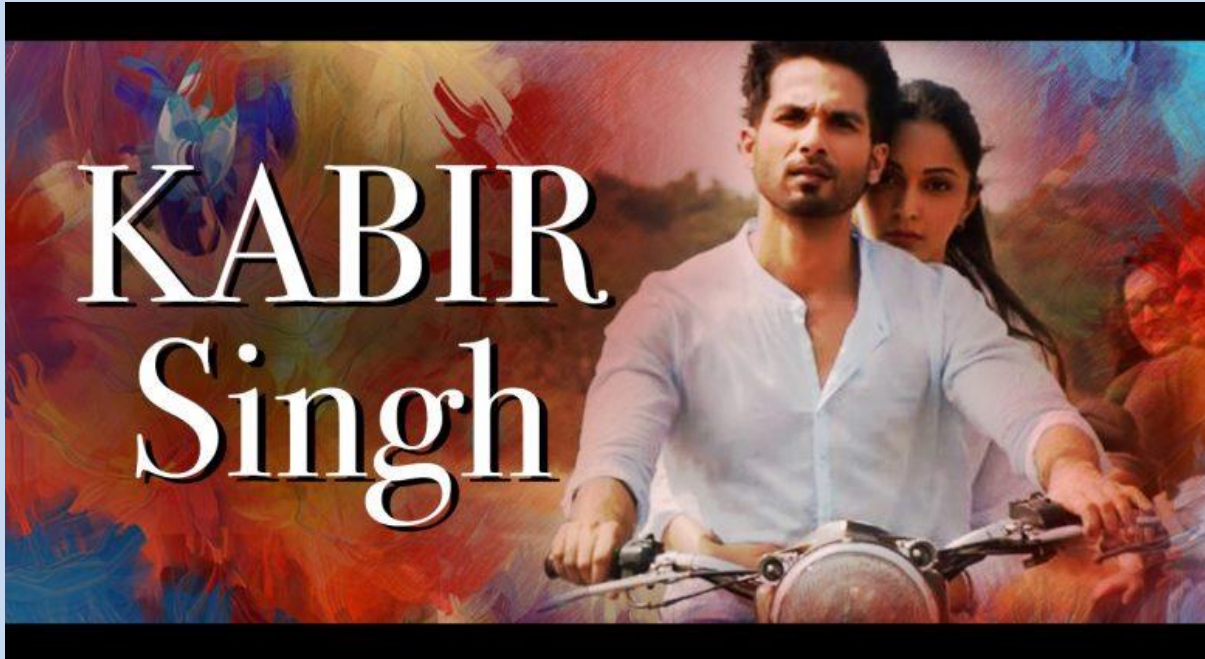


Film Review

MK Raghavendra

Kabir Singh as a Failed Romance



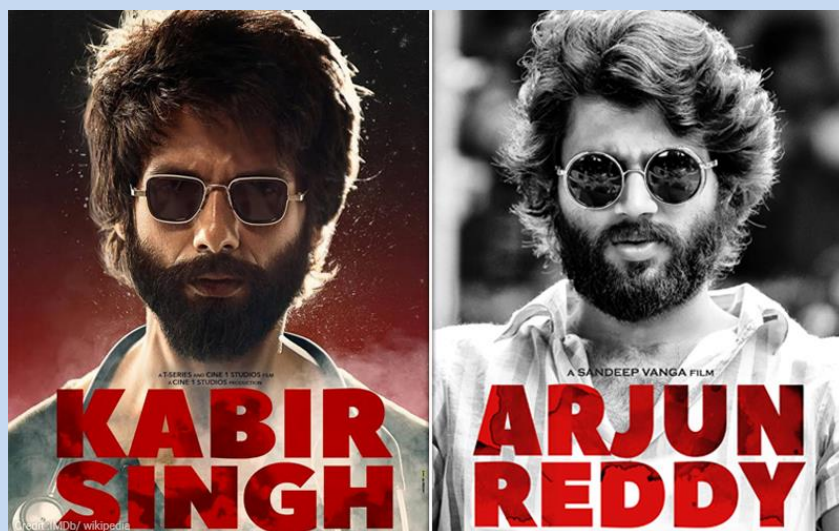
Hindi films are often described as ‘love stories’ but that is not a description – since all films are love stories. Romance is a motif in films across the world but in few cinemas outside India does it feature as such a staple of plot construction. If one studies plot construction across cultures it would appear that a story inevitably closes with a transition in the condition of the protagonist(s). The protagonist may have gained in experience or may have been defeated in an undertaking but the conclusion of a narrative must nonetheless signal a transition of some kind. A historical moment – like victory in battle – would be an appropriate moment of transition but since Indian popular film narrative does not attach itself to universal time, it uses only moments in the life of the individual for the transition. Even a war film like *Haqeeqat* (1964) is a romance which concludes with the lovers dying holding hands as they fight the Chinese. The culmination of a romance is a widely accepted concluding moment in stories because it signifies a transition from the unmarried or single state to a married state.

If one looks at the various acknowledged states in the life of the individual, those listed are childhood, the juvenile/ adolescent state, adulthood and retirement. The transition in the state of the individual in stories often focuses on an awakening or maturity of some sort which may be taken to imitate the transition from the juvenile state into adulthood. Marriage, although important, is not usually a key moment of individual transition in cinema and one can cite romantic films which continue after the wedding as in *Sound of Music* (1965). Moreover, romances also come to fruition after the lovers understand each other more deeply, indicating a growth in maturity – and a model may be Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*. The romance culminates only when interpersonal issues are fully resolved and a stable relationship negotiated. Other kinds of individual transitions are also allowed as narrative conclusions but since cinema looks at the potential for drama, those like the one into retirement do not offer the same possibilities. *Bicycle Thieves* (1948), for instance, may be understood as concluding with the boy's evolution out of childhood.

But when we look at the 'ashramas' or states traditionally acknowledged by Hinduism, we find that they are as follows (after allowing for a two year period of infancy): *brahmacharya* or the student/unmarried state, *ghrihastha* or the life of the householder, *vanaprastha* or the retired life and *sannyasa*, the life of renunciation. What is significant here is that there is no state corresponding to 'adulthood'. The transition into adulthood, one may therefore gather, is not the way a popular Hindi film story could conclude and the closest available transition is that of the *brahmachari* into householder or, in other words, the culmination of a romance. In Hindi cinema we are aware of films in which a 'romance' also takes place after the marriage when other tensions are resolved as in *Rab Ne Bana Di Jodi* (2008). But the important transition here is not into maturity (or adulthood) but into the life of the householder. Since 'adulthood' is not an acknowledged state for the individual, stories cannot revolve around notions like work and the transition can take place only through romance. It should be possible to have a story dealing with the transition into *vanaprastha* or *sannyasa* although one cannot think of appropriate examples at this juncture.

Romance is ubiquitous in Hindi cinema but, paradoxically, successful romances rarely contribute much to the drama. If we list out the most memorable melodramas in Hindi cinema we find that, rather than romance, it is the *failed*

romance which contributes to the dramatic impact. The failed romance can be defined as a heterosexual relationship involving the protagonist, which does not or cannot culminate in her/his transition to householder. Devdas, the most durable of Hindi film characters, lives in people's hearts because of his failed romance. Many Hindi films are remembered not as love stories but because they are about failed romances and one can cite *Aadmi* (1939), *Andaz* (1949), *Mother India*, *DhoolKaPhool* (1959), *Deewar* and even *Sholay* (1975) as examples. Some of these films provide a parallel romance taken to fruition but the drama comes from elsewhere. In *Andaz* it emerges because the protagonist mistakes the feelings of the woman for love when her heart is given elsewhere. In *Sholay* it comes out of the unrequited feelings that Jai and the Thakur's widowed daughter-in-law Radha have for each other and not out of the story of Veeru and Basanti. *Kabir Singh* has many of the elements of the failed romance although the lovers are finally united.

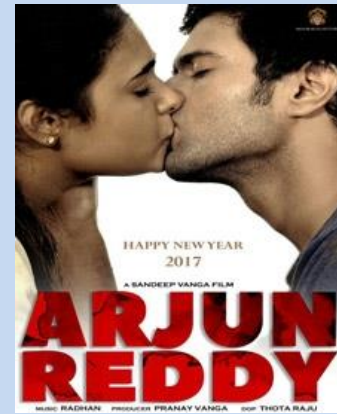


Kabir Singh— which is a remake of the Telugu film *Arjun Reddy* (2017) by the same director Sandeep Vanga— is a development of *Devdas* in narrative terms except that, rather than being a self-pitying drunkard, Kabir Singh (Shahid Kapoor) is a brilliant surgeon with ‘anger-management problems’. This sounds like criticism but the camera photographs the protagonist from below to make him tower above us when he is out brawling or accosting women students in his medical college - implying that he is to be admired. The noisy music is also highly charged when Kabir Singh goes on the rampage, once again underscoring this glamour. Also conspicuous is the respectful responses he receives from everyone including the women, the associates always around attentive to his smallest whim. When he is held by the police and chided for

smoking in their presence he continues to do so without being penalized. Kabir Singh, it can be argued, emerges as someone exercising feudal authority, seemingly out of place in cosmopolitan Hindi cinema but at home in the Telugu milieu.

Andhra is the region in South-India with greatest incidence of landed wealth. Land relationships are different from those under capitalism in that they are not

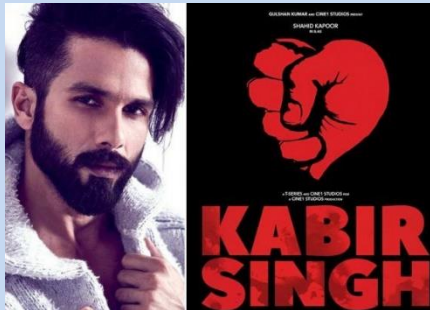
contractual but create all-round dependencies and subservience; landowners are like absolute monarchs within their territory. Even the officials of the state fawn upon feudal landlords because of the political influence they exercise. Kabir Singh is a 'brilliant doctor' where Hindi films might have 'inventor' (*3 Idiots*) or 'fund manager' (*Zindagi Na MilegiDobara*). The allure in the 'doctor' can be traced to medical graduates fetching the highest dowries in feudal Andhra.



A key difference between Devdas and Kabir Singh is the latter's desirability to women. The very first image in the film shows him in bed with an unknown young woman. He pursues the heroine Preeti Sikka (Kiara Advani) as if there was no possibility of her saying no to him but there is also the feeling deliberately created that he can have any woman he desires. This motif of the hero not fearing rejection is familiar and Shammi Kapoor clowned his way confidently after the heroine in films like *An Evening in Paris* (1967). Popular films earmark hero and heroine as only for each other by making the audience pair them off through filming/editing strategy. Never is the issue of who is to be paired off with who left in suspense. The hero's confidence in his sexual desirability therefore rests in his knowing about the 'pairing-off'.

But Kabir Singh is different in that he is made the glamorous object of *universal feminine desire* and not made to doubt it. When he sets about wooing Preeti, she is in dread of him initially but he forces his attentions upon her continually, warning everyone else that she is only for him. But this encounters no resistance from her side and he ultimately seduces her. What should be disconcerting here is the unfairness of his project, as one-sided as that of the villains in *Pink* (2016). That film, to remind the reader, was focussed on the woman's right to say 'no'. Preeti eventually marries someone else due to parental compulsion and Kabir Singh takes to drugs, but his allure remains intact. A celebrity patient of

his, an actress, also falls in love after being initially agreeing to a ‘no-strings relationship’. But even his failure to win Preeti is only temporary because he gets her at the end and the child inside her is his. It is evidently impossible for someone as authoritative as Kabir Singh to suffer Devdas’ fate.



Kabir Singh should rightly be shunned but it a super hit among young audiences composed of both sexes. Looking at some youth films that became blockbusters – *Bobby* (1973), *Ek Duuje Ke Liye* (1981) and *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988)– one finds the protagonists to be fragile, not even capable of defending themselves. Youth films are usually about rebellion and that is true of the films of James Dean (*Rebel Without a Cause*, 1955) and Marlon Brando (*The Wild One*, 1953) as wellbut in Indian youth films rebellion is manifested entirely in who the protagonists wish to marry. But considering that popular films are set in a world where family and romance are the key aspects and socio-political aspects rarely play a part, rebellion-through-romance should be treated as metaphor, i.e.: that it points to socio-political implications even though it does not invoke them explicitly. In *Bobby*, for instance, it points to the class differences between Mr Nath and Jack Braganza. Kabir Singh’s treatment of women should also be treated as a metaphor implying a world beyond family relationships.

Kabir Singh is a ‘rebel’ in that he wishes to marry someone whose family is averse to the idea, but this goes along with his doing everything else without meeting resistance from his family, friends or even the law. While he often articulates untenable positions, never are they contradicted or met with counter arguments. In one sequence after his disappointment with Preeti’s marriage he urinates on the terrace of his friend’s apartment, the latter’s family notwithstanding exception – “that’s his way and it should be allowed,” is the indulgent impression. Given that each act of Kabir Singh spells domination over others, his rebellion should be interpreted socio-politically, as a eulogy of those breaking social codes simply because they can. Conventions and codes are for weaklings, is the message.

The first sense anyone gets in democratic society is that one cannot have one’s way even if one believes he or she right, since right and wrong have to be tested

in the public space and duly judged as such. *Kabir Singh* contradicts this notion by making its protagonist immune to such processes and its success makes it seem that there is an aspect immensely attractive to Indians today (especially the young) in personal authority exercised unchecked. One cannot imagine a film like *Kabir Singh* made in another country and this leaves us wondering if there is not something that makes Indians favour the ‘might is right’ maxim. *Kabir Singh* suggests that getting one’s way without opposition can itself be immensely glamorous in today’s milieu and this valorization of brutal strength also has implications in the political space.

But the film is essentially a romance and can only take this romantic side forward and, given its uncompromising protagonist, it must work as a failed romance. Failed romances and youth films with their fragile protagonists appear a far cry from *Kabir Singh* but they have aspects in common. My proposition here is that the ‘romance’ in the film ends with the woman being married to someone else, as in *Devdas*. The protagonist has also reached the nadir of his life when his blood tests positive for alcohol and cocaine he loses his license to practice as a doctor; he seems as finished as Devdas was. But if this had been allowed the glorification of feudal power in the film would also suffer. The protagonist must hence be extended a lifeline and the film begins to do this by arranging for his reconciliation with his father. His subsequent meeting Preeti does not follow from this and that too must be reordered.

This brings us to how the reunion with Preeti and his acceptance by her family should be treated and my proposition here is that rather than signify the end of the *brahmacharya* phase, this signals the beginning of the *grihastha* phase and Preeti’s pregnancy lends this support; the couple has moved on and for all practical purposes this is not the ending of *Kabir Singh* but the commencement of another film altogether, perhaps to be named *Kabir and Preeti*. I am not suggesting that such a film will actually be made but that in order to provide emotional satisfaction to the audience, Sandeep Vanga tags on the beginning of an imagined sequel – since the internal logic of *Kabir Singh* makes the film a failed romance.

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