Celebrating Love

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OKAY. So I really don't watch Bollywood. Unless they are the esoteric types. Like *Maqbool or Omkara.* But sometimes, just sometimes, I give in to the cheese. The masala, the drama and the funda. As I did last weekend when I went in a herd of brownness to watch Nikhil Advani's *Salaam-e-Ishq.*

Granted, my brain stopped working for about two-hundred minutes, have to admit I found it worth my time. Not for the complexity of characters or density of plot, but for various feel-good and amusing moments.

Salaam-e-Ishq boasts a star-studded cast. A cast to end all casts. Six couples. 6 failing relationships. Twelve beautiful people. One big fat Indian wedding.

First, there was the journalistic couple of John Abraham (who needs to keep his shirt on, and not run all the time like David Hasselhoff, remember him?) and Vidya Balan (of Parineeta fame) who have a picture-perfect marriage. Until Vidya injures herself in a train-crash and suffers from partial amnesia. Leaving a gaping, John-sized hole in her memory. Try as she might, she can't remember John.

Our hot yet sentimental hero cries incessantly in anguish, but he is convinced that Vidya and he can create memories anew. Of course, forgetful Vidya is won over by the end. Too many emotional crescendos in this relationship. Gratuitously. Too many times, I felt, the combination of John's (scruffy) baby face in anguish, Vidya's captivating performance, and the score (otherwise, fabulous) were all trying too hard to force tears from me.

Then there was the Anil Kapoor-Juhi Chawla duo. Reminded me too much of the blinging couples in the Gulshan-Banani-Baridhara tri-state area, (esp. ones in which there is an element of ever-so-slight debauchery). This is a story of attractive people leading very boring lives. Anil goes to work, watches the clock of his life tick away and is in perpetual mid-life crisis mode.

Juhi is an amazing mother, wife and sister. But Anil wants more. He wants not completeness, but excitement and adventure. Which arrive in the form of Anjana, a 20-something dance instructor who throws herself at Anil repeatedly until he decides to find his escape in her.

Of course, Anil is soon caught Anjana-handed. Juhi tries to leave Anil. Anil chases her and finds her on a plane. After a tussle with flight-attendants (surprising they didn't shoot goatied Anil down in a post-9/11 world) Juhi forgives Anil and takes him back!

The most glamorous relationship by far was Salman Khan (who also needs to keep his shirt on)and Priyanka Chopra's. Priyanka Chopra is a small-town girl who starts as a dancer in shady hotels and wants to be the next Bollywood diva. She is manipulative, machiavellian, ambitious, and will do everything possible to get there.

Until she meets an equally manipulative, machiavellian, and ambitious Salman Khan, who tracks her down, blackmails her (in the process woos her, warning: this only works in bollywood) and changes her mind about her acting career. My heart broke to see lovely Priyanka on a bended knee asking muscle-man (head?) Salman's hand in marriage. Salman eventually agrees.

Also have to say Vikram Phadnis did a mighty job of dressing up this couple (except for Salman's bizarre blazers, too Ahmadinejad for me).

The fourth and last substantial relationship was between Govinda and Shanon Something (the fact that I don't remember her last name has nothing to do with her being white). Shanon Something has come all the way to India to find her Indian boyfriend who left her for a Hindustani wife.

Shanon is naive. She underestimates the hangover of South Asian traditions. Govinda encourages her naivete. Fight for what's yours, Govinda says. He himself, is an affable, chubby, love-lorn cabby, who without understanding a word of English, manages to communicate much with Shanon. He drives her across India to search for the Indian boyfriend. Shanon finally meets him, gets spurned once again, as the guy declared, "I want an NDN woman, not a blond bimbo!" Poor Shanon runs to Govinda's pudgy arms.

The 5th and 6th couples are Ayesha Takia-Akshay Khanna and Sohail-Isha. Both provide much comic relief. Akshay gets cold feet before marrying his girlfriend Ayesha calls off the marriage, stresses for a while, until he comes to his senses (like all good guys eventually do), and gets Ayesha back. Methinks lovely Ayesha Takia needs to stop playing the victimised girl whom her guy takes for granted. Breaks my heart.

Finally, Sohail and Isha are a North Indian (Punjabi?) couple. Sohail is a ravenous man who fails to consumate his marriage with Isha as one awkward interruption after another conspires and keeps *suhaag raat* at bay. Not much else here. The first four carry the movie. Last but not the least, the theme song is fun. ■