

About one-third of the way through in *Kabir Singh*, which is now out on Netflix, the protagonist (Shahid Kapoor) charges into a college campus with his girlfriend Preeti (Kiara Advani). Some students of that college harassed Preeti with colours during Holi celebrations. As Kabir drives his bike and then storms furiously into the campus with a demure Preeti carrying a wooden stick in her hand, you experience one of the only moments in the film when you want to cheer in support—it genuinely appears that Preeti is going to be allowed to beat up the boys who harassed her. Alas, she simply stands in the background and cries while Kabir threatens the perpetrators against ever bothering “his girl” again. That’s pretty much the entire movie.

Director Sandeep Reddy Vanga’s Bollywood adaptation of his Telugu

uncomfortable and guilty for sticking through 174 minutes of well-directed, well-depicted toxicity.

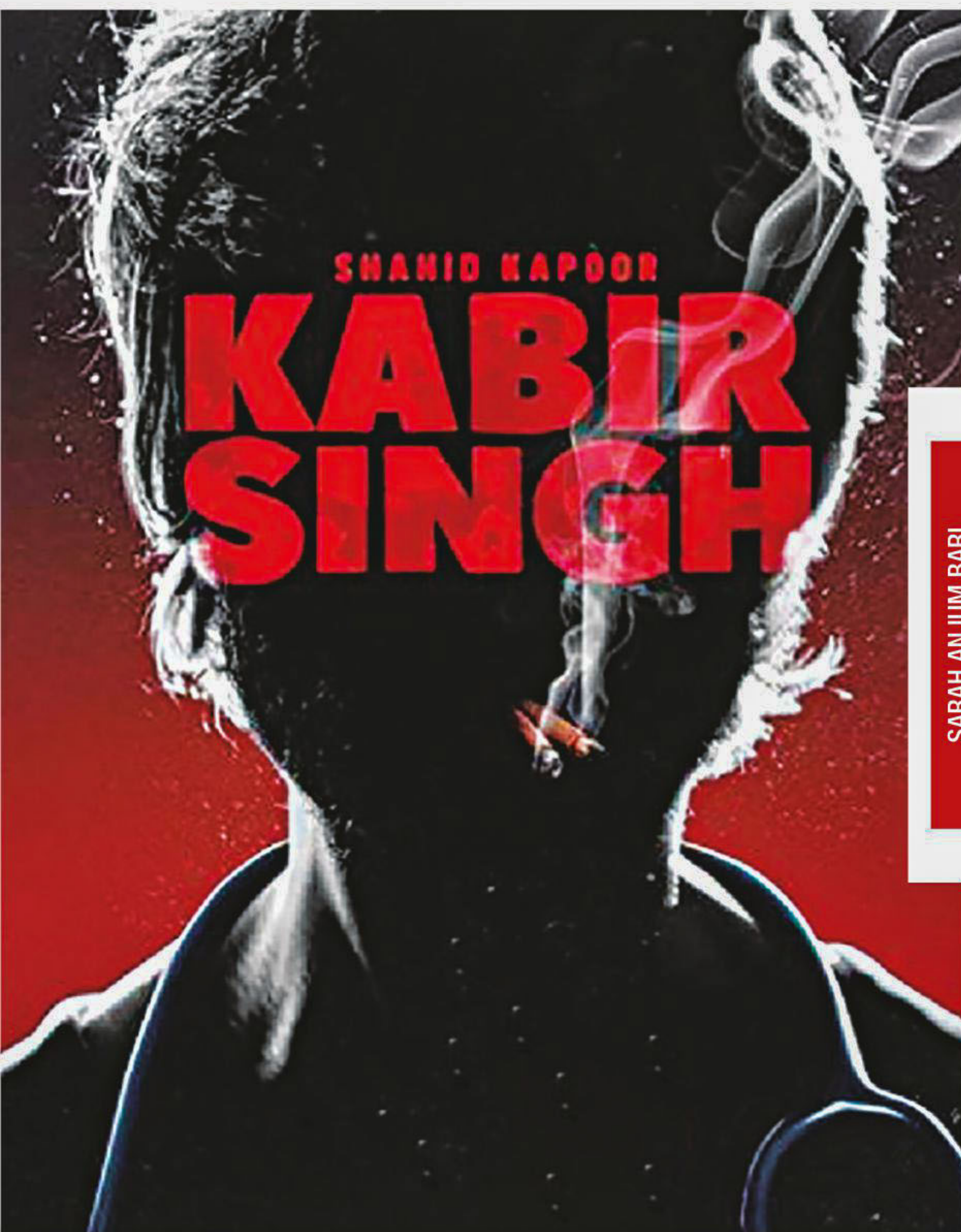
Despite his ageing boyish face, Shahid Kapoor does a convincing job of playing the arrogant, erratic Kabir Singh, a brilliant medical student who bullies everyone from classmates to the college dean, and goes on to become a drug-addicted, alcoholic orthopaedic surgeon at the Delhi Institute of Medical Sciences. There, he continues to bully his employees and patients alike. The flashback-driven first half explains the reason behind his sorry physical state (but not his abusive nature): shortly before graduating, he falls in love with Preeti only to lose her to another man whom her father forces her to marry. What Kabir believes to be caste prejudice is in fact her father’s reaction to Kabir barking

spoken to her) that Preeti is “his girl” and therefore off limits to everyone else, even as he orders Preeti to befriend a slightly chubbier girl because they make for good companions for the “pretty ones”, you hesitate to blame Kabir at least as a partner, because you sense that Preeti *likes* it all. She falls in love with this domination and remains in love with it even at the film’s climax, even after she has been slapped, shoved, threatened, cursed at, and abandoned, by Kabir. And so with the actors doing such a convincing job, with the screenplay offering clever dialogue, with the cinematography and music creating an entertaining, compelling visual product, what you’re forced to find fault with is the film itself, and the thought that went behind making it.

Bollywood has always depicted misogyny in some form or another. The countless item songs objectifying the female body are testament to that, as are the decades of stories in which the man chases, terrifies, and taunts the woman into reciprocating his love. Throughout these rituals, the woman is supposed to uphold the right blend of chastity, attractiveness, and vulnerability to qualify as a heroine worth rooting for. Since the turn of the century, however, the films worth talking about have at least tried to infuse some semblance of a narrative arc even when they’re set in a patriarchal, extremist

father has ordered Badri to drag Vaidehi back home, where she will be hung from the neck at her almost-in laws’ doorstep as punishment. Badri manhandles Vaidehi into the trunk of his car in Singapore. Kicking and screaming, Vaidehi screams words of reckoning at a miserable and morally confused Badri: You can follow me to Singapore, force me into the trunk of a car, and hang me at your doorstep, but you can’t tell your father that your wife will have a profession? Will you stand up for me if I agree to go back and marry you?

That this love story, even after instances of financial blackmail and attempted kidnap, finds a happy ending is what remains wrong with Bollywood still. But that it tries to tackle issues of dowry and a woman’s right to work after marriage in India, that it convinces a domineering, archaic-minded head of the family to change his views on these issues, represents all that that’s changing in the industry for the better. Two years from this movie, and two decades after the redemptive arcs in films like *Tere Naam* and *RHTDM*, *Kabir Singh* offers no rationale for its protagonist’s addiction to violence. It offers no arc in Kabir’s character, no room for his self-reflection. Even as he humiliates both his and Preeti’s families, even as he hurts anyone who offers him support, the circumstances miraculously forgive him in an instant, and fall into place to grant him



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On Kabir Singh

A three-hour dose of Stockholm syndrome

film *Arjun Reddy* is a three hour paean to poisonous masculinity. The trailers promised: the protagonist ordering his submissive love interest to sit on the front bench in class and wear her *dupatta* (scarf) properly across her chest; the protagonist ordering another woman to strip at knife-point; the protagonist chasing a hysterically terrified domestic worker down flights of stairs and out of his neighbourhood, just for kicks. The infusion of a melodic, romantic soundtrack and some seemingly heart-

wrenching scenes between the leading duo seemed to imply that there would be more to the story—some context to Kabir’s abusive nature, some form of narrative redemption perhaps—and yet all that the film accomplishes is to make you feel

profanities at all of Preeti’s family.

Of Kiara Advani, the script demands hardly anything besides being a passive recipient of Kabir’s volatile anger, affection, possessiveness, and abandonment. As if their relationship weren’t disturbing enough already—with Kabir calling all the shots, always—the only time Preeti shows any agency is when she slaps Kabir across the face. Apparently this is the only way the couple knows how to communicate, in crises.

Kiara does, however, portray quite truthfully this character of a woman who simply happens to be submissive, as some people in life tend to be. As Kabir courts Preeti by kissing her in public without consent, as he announces to the entire college (before he has ever even

environment.

Kabir’s domineering senior college student profile is similar to Salman Khan’s Radhe in *Tere Naam*, as well as R Madhavan’s Maddie in *Rehna Hain Tere Dil Mein*. All three men are bullies on campus, have anger issues despite coming from decent, loving families, and all three try to win the love of a meek, innocent woman. Unlike *Kabir Singh*, however, in the other movies, the narrative forces retribution upon their violent protagonists. Radhe and Maddie are bowed into kinder, softer versions of themselves in the face of love. Whether Maddie deserves Reena (Dia Mirza) over Saif Ali Khan’s Rajiv is open for argument; but he is nevertheless forced to not only own up to his lies, but show compassion to his college arch nemesis and gain control over his ego and rage before he can find happiness. In *Tere Naam*, despite turning over a new leaf, Radhe’s past violence still catches up with him, haunting him into absolute physical, emotional, and psychological destruction.

Similar themes of abusive patriarchy were explored more recently in *Badrinath Ki Dulhaniya*. Jilted at the altar for his father’s sexist and arrogant ways, a besotted Badri (Varun Dhawan) follows Vaidehi (Alia Bhatt) to Singapore, where she is training to become an air hostess. The

a happy ending.

Director Vanga told film critic Anupama Chopra in an interview that such characters exist in real life. His film points out that they, too, can find a happy ending. But a film isn’t a news report; it doesn’t just deal in facts, it fictionalises and dramatises them to have an emotional and intellectual effect on the audience. When the film is made well—as in the case of *Kabir Singh*—the effect is to encourage the audience to empathise with violence. By using music, words, lighting, costume, and a host of other artistic disciplines to facilitate a happy ending for a story like Kabir Singh’s, the filmmaker advocates, even if unwittingly, the idea that physical and verbal abuse are acceptable in a relationship as long as there is love, that cruelty and selfishness can be forgiven for mental acuity and brash transparency. That too in front of an audience that has for decades allowed film tropes to steer their lifestyles and beliefs, even when they justify cruelty, corruption, rape, and murder. For all the progress Bollywood’s intelligent filmmakers have been trying to bring over the past two decades, a film like *Kabir Singh* threatens to undo their efforts.

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