

**“LOOK LIKE A NORMAL JODI”: HOW QUEER IS
SHUBH MANGAL ZYADA SAVDHAN?ⁱ**

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Ever since its nationwide release on 21 February 2020, *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhan* (henceforth abbreviated as SMZS) has garnered reviews that are politely supportive, the average rating being three stars. Few reviewers have considered it a cinematic masterpiece, but most agree that it is an important film because of its desire to “normalize” homosexuality. Till date the film has made over 75 crores worldwide.ⁱⁱ So clearly the Indian movie-goer is not averse to two men kissing each other not once but twice. The film ends with most of the characters watching the news as Section 377 is read down on 6 September 2018. By ending the narrative of the film with the reading down of Section 377, the film attempts to send out a clear message that sex between consenting adults in private is now nationally legal irrespective of the gender of the persons involved. The film tries hard not to come across as too didactic and therefore packs in as much humour as possible, even if sometimes the humour seems forced. The film does not shy away from homosexual intimacy, showing us two kisses, both of them taking place in a public place (a train and a wedding). That the two kisses are happening in public places is a marked departure from previous mainstream Indian cinematic representations of men kissing each other such as *I Am Omar* (2010), *Bombay Talkies* (2013) and *Aligarh* (2015). Also noteworthy is the film’s intelligent referencing of previous Hindi films such as *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka* (1989), and *Sholay* (1975)ⁱⁱⁱ, and by doing so, queering them.

Yet, for all its good intentions, there are ways in which the film shies away from depicting *homosexuality* in the way that heterosexuality is depicted in *Jism* (2003) or *Murder* (2004). Instead what we get is perhaps *homoromance*. By playing up love and friendship and playing down sexuality, the film may have wanted to appeal to the sentimental side of the Indian audience, but in so doing participates in the same covert patriarchal politics which energises the hashtag #loveislove when it more correctly should be #sexissex.^{iv} The paper hopes to read the film as a sincere but unconsciously patriarchal attempt at mainstreaming the queer.

The film opens with Kartik Singh (Ayushmann Khurana) and Aman Tripathi (Jitendra Kumar) trying to sell a toothpaste inside a mall. Aman asks members of the public, “Kya aap ke toothpaste mein pyar

hae?” (Does your toothpaste have love in it?) This question may be taken a clue as to how ‘love’ is going to be foregrounded through the rest of the film. Kartik and Aman are not only selling a brand of toothpaste. They are also selling love. Love is a product that one can presumably buy in a tube of toothpaste inside a shopping mall. The film is also selling love. Just as a buyer may buy the brand of toothpaste but will also get love in it, the film is being bought into for entertainment but those watching it will also get a message of love in it. The film and the toothpaste are both products produced for a capitalist society. But whereas the ‘love’ in the toothpaste is not the emotion but an attention-grabbing way of speaking about the ingredients in the toothpaste, the ‘love’ that the film is trying to smuggle into the audience’s mind is not the love that Indian audiences have been watching since *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). The parallel between the film and the toothpaste in the film is synecdochic: the toothpaste is doing at a micro level what the film is doing at the macro level.

Soon we are introduced to the happy chaos of the Tripathi family where a wedding is imminent. It is the day of the haldi (ritual application of turmeric on the bride-to-be). Aman and Kartik help one of their friends run away from her house. In a blink-and-you-miss-it moment, the friend looks at Kartik and tells him that this is not the first time she has fallen in love. The suggestion being that she used to be in love with Kartik (and perhaps the sediment of that love still remains in her heart). The two men catch a train from Delhi to Allahabad and from there they board (in a sequence that clearly references the scene in *Dilmale Dulhaniya Le Jayenge*, in which the male lead, standing on the footboard of a train leaving the platform, reaches out and helps the female lead to get on the train) a train on which are Aman’s family heading to the wedding of Aman’s cousin Goggle. In this film’s reworking of the famous DDLJ scene, it is Aman who reaches out and pulls Kartik into the moving train. In boarding the train, Kartik also enters the Tripathi family, unbeknown to either him or the family. The train seems to be moving towards heterosexual matrimony (it is the Vivah Special Express and carries the number 0337!), but is in fact leading heteronormativity into a queer future.

After the two men have got out of their toothpaste-selling costumes and into travelling clothes, we notice a heart-shape design on the t-shirt that Kartik is wearing. The message is being repeated as a motif: love. This is about love. (It may be mentioned that when it seems clear that Aman will get married to a woman of his parents’ choice, Kartik’s t-shirt bears the despairing slogan: Game Over!) Amidst the celebratory marriage party chaos in the railway carriage, the two men manage to sneak out and find a secluded spot near the vestibule for some physical

intimacy. Hesitant, scared Aman gives in to Kartik's pleading and they kiss. That the film would have a kiss between Kartik and Aman is something that was advertised from 20 January onwards when the trailer was released on YouTube. The audience knew that there would be a kiss right at the venue of the wedding in front of all the guests and the bride's and groom's parties. The kiss on the train is one that the audience is not prepared for. In many ways this kiss performs a politics which is partially the politics that the much more famous kiss performs. In this case, space functions as a complex site. The entire train, bedecked with ropes of marigold, is an overt celebration of heterosexuality, because it is dedicated to transporting marriage parties. The train, therefore, is a stridently heterosexual space and a matrimonial space. For Kartik and Aman to find a few metres of space within this space to perform their love for each other, which is neither heterosexual nor destined for matrimonial sanction, is subversion. But this subversion is still a tentative one because when they kiss, they do so in the belief that no one is watching them. The film goes into dramatic high gear when unwitting Mr. Tripathi, Aman's father, catches a glimpse of the two men in a passionate kiss and reacts by vomiting.

Notwithstanding the strain that this puts between the father Tripathi and his son, Kartik determinedly dances and sings on the evening of Goggle's wedding. Towards the end of the dance sequence when father Tripathi effectively throws Kartik to the floor, the latter is helped up back on his feet by Aman in a repeat of the way he had helped Kartik board the marriage party train earlier. It is then that to the general horror of everyone present, Kartik and Aman kiss. It is Aman who initiates a kiss with Kartik this time, in a reversal of the way Kartik had initiated the kiss on the train. By situating this gestural reversal in the first half of the film, the narrative is clearly seeking to underline the reciprocity of the love between these two men.

Till this point, only Aman's father seems to be having the knowledge of his son's sexuality. Now the relationship becomes public knowledge. The template which is used subsequently is one that is familiar to popular culture: lovers against parents, and the parents in turn are metonymically the society at large. But unlike in most other narratives, the parents of Aman (Kartik is estranged from his homophobic and abusive family) are revealed as persons whose own love stories were aborted by marriage. The fact that Aman's description of love makes his mother remember the time she too had felt love for someone in the past, and his father is made to recall the time he too had planned to elope with his beloved, suddenly sprouts a connection across homophobic parents and

gay son. But this connection is not strong enough yet to overpower the homophobia that remains supposedly insurmountable.

If Kartik and Aman have an ally in Aman's family it is Goggle. Outspoken, hell-raising Goggle has known about Aman's sexuality since they were children and asks Kartik not to leave Aman behind when a friendship develops between them on the over-bridge of a railway platform. Goggle understands what it must be like to be undesirable in society. Her false left eye has marked her out as unsuitable for a handsome young man. She understands what social ostracism feels like. She does not want Aman to go through it alone as she seems destined to. Intersectional feminism checked.

The film progresses through to a rapid succession of events, involving the ritual death of Aman so that he can be 'reborn' as a marriageable young man, the planned wedding of Aman, Kartik's refusal to go quietly, Kartik standing on the rooftop, the Pride flag tied around his neck as a cape (making him a superhero born to take on and defeat the evil of homophobia), and shouting into a megaphone that Aman's father has a severe case of a dreadful disease called homophobia. As the word 'homophobia' echoes around the Tripathi courtyard and indeed across the cinema hall, one of the members of the Tripathi family makes the remark that this must a Dolby disease (Dolby bimāri lagti hae!). In writing that line into the script, the writer-director of the film accomplishes one of the many metafilmic acts in the narrative. By calling homophobia a Dolby disease, the writer and director Hitesh Kewalya makes it obvious that just as the technology of Dolby sound is not natural but is technologically produced by science, homophobia is not natural but is carefully produced by patriarchy by invoking science. The fact that as children we are taught that our sexual organs are only for reproduction and not for pleasure is an example of how biology is used by patriarchy to contain and heteronormatize the meaning and use of our genitalia. Just as Dolby technology allows us to experience sound in a more rounded, layered, multi-directional way, homophobia surrounds us in layered, multiple ways. Homophobia does not have only one channel of transmission or circulation. It is continually produced, transmitted and consumed in multiple ways simultaneously from ambient sources. What must be noted is that it is science, often abused and co-opted by patriarchy to serve its divisive agenda that is invoked by Aman when he describes love to his parents. By explaining love as a combination of chemical reactions, Aman uses science to erase the homophobic distance at which heteronormative persons keep homosexuality.

As Kartik is beaten up by Aman's father, in presence of the entire family, the soundtrack comes alive with a mash-up that references

the song “Kya Karte The Saajna” from the film *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka*. By quoting a song from a Gulshan Kumar film, SMZS accomplishes an intertextual act which ticks the box of postmodernity (through its knowing use of kitsch), and suggests to the T-Series consumer that if they had no problem feeling for the heterosexual couple in that 1989 film, they should not have any problem feeling for the homosexual couple in the 2020 film.

Aman and Kartik accomplish a task that most people think impossible: cure homophobia. Their accomplishment gives them an aura not unlike that of superheroes. The film suggests their superheroic status with characteristic postmodernist humour. When we first see them they are fighting the germs that attack our teeth and gums. At one point Kartik tells Aman that he is busy because he has to do battle with germs. As Kartik appears on the rooftop, barebodied and resplendent in a Pride flag tied around his neck as a cape, his transformation from a superhero fighting dental germs to one fighting homophobia is complete. By invoking the concept of the superhero, the film not only further underlines its pop culture credentials but also attempts to reach out to children and nip homophobia in the bud, as it were. On the two occasions that I went to watch the film, my friend and I were astonished and amused by the number of children in the audience. We speculated on the level of the parents’/guardians’ awareness of the film’s content. But if the film secretly desired a 7-to-70 age bracket as its target audience, then one can say that it has succeeded.

The film nears its conclusion as the stage is set for Aman’s wedding. As Kartik is revealed to be the ‘bride’, the police turn up to arrest the two men under Section 377. As Kartik and Aman make their seven circumventions around the fire, Kartik sings “Ye Dosti” from *Sholay* (1975). It is interesting that marriage of two men was mentioned in the context of this song ten years ago, in R. Raj Rao’s novel *Room 131*³. Whether or not the makers of SMZS were aware of the novel while making the film, the fact remains that the film accomplishes a queering of the Jay-Veeru friendship in the exact way that R. Raj Rao did ten years previously. It should also be noted that the Jay-Veeru friendship is used as a template in the film not only during the Bappi Lahiri song that plays during the closing credits, but is also mentioned by Jitendra Kumar in an interview⁴.

Since the wedding is happening on 5 September 2018, the Tripathi family requests the police to wait till the morning for the Supreme Court verdict. 6 September 2018 dawns. Members of the Tripathi family huddle around a tablet on which they watch as news breaks of the Supreme Court verdict that consensual sex between adults in private is no

longer a criminal offence. Celebrations all around. Kartik is accepted as a member of the Tripathi family.

As if the narrative of the film did not make it obvious enough that this is primarily about love, Bappi Lahiri appears with the main members of the cast as the closing credits start to roll. The song is “Pyar Bina Chain Kahan Re?” In so doing, the public is asked to accept (and here is the hidden contradiction of the film) homosexuality as an expression of love. It is here that the film unconsciously falls into the patriarchal trap that it seemed so anxious to avoid all along. To collapse sex with love is perhaps one of the most effective ways in which sex can be denied its own dignity. Sexuality becomes acceptable to middle-class morality only when justified as love. Therefore ‘having sex’ becomes ‘making love’. Although we are shown two kisses, we are not shown Kartik and Aman having sex or enjoying prolonged sexual pleasure in the manner that a Bipasha Basu- or an Imraan Hashmi-starrer once used to. Hindi film industry seems to have turned its back on sex and gone back to celebrating love. This turn may be a strategy of containment, the colonization of sex by love. So, this film about homosexuality effectively becomes about the homoromantic.

And yet, it is not as though sexuality is erased completely. But instead of it operating on its own terms and getting a certain amount of screen time, it is articulated and quickly shut down. This happens twice in the film. On the first occasion, when Aman has an animated conversation with his parents about his love for Kartik, he says that when he saw Kartik “Meri badi ho gayi thi” (Mine got big). His parents look scandalized. He quickly reads their minds and corrects them, “Ankhon ki putli badi ho gayi thi” (My pupils were enlarged!). This writing in of sex and immediately erasing it by invoking love accomplishes the classic deconstructive act. Sex is written and then a line drawn over it, crossing it out. But this crossing out does not render the word invisible. Under the line, the word remains. But society stipulates that the word should be crossed out. If sex is to remain in our “civilized” society, it must remain as a palimpsest, under the word love, written over, crossed out, barely hidden, but hidden nonetheless. The second instance is the scene when Kartik falls face down unable to bear the beating of Aman’s father anymore. His last words before passing out are, in English: “My sexuality is my sexuality. It is none of your sexuality.” The word ‘sexuality’ finally appears and when it does it appears three times in two consecutive sentences. The word has been repressed so long that it even replaces the word presumably meant by Kartik in the second sentence: “It is none of your business.” After which he does not speak for long and at one point is also presumed dead.

This message is pushed out even on the instagram accounts of Ayushmann Khurana, who in one photograph wears the t-shirt that bears the covertly patriarchal message “Love is Love.” What is forgotten is that Section 377 is not against any kind of love. It was expressly against certain sexual acts. These sexual acts may be expressions of love, but they need not be. By hijacking the Supreme Court verdict and turning it into a verdict that allowed some people to *love*, what the media has successfully done is demean sexuality just when it should have been celebrated. *Shubb Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* means well. But however well-meaning these supposedly liberal products of popular culture may be, they must always be subjected to queer feminist scrutiny lest these products turn out to be unsuspecting carriers of the virus of patriarchy.

Notes:

1. This paper was greatly helped by discussions with Kaustav Manna, especially his drawing my attention to the use of the song “Kya Karte The Saajna” from the film *Lal Dupatta Malmal Ka*.
2. According to *The Telegraph* T2, 19 March 2020, (p. 6.7) out of the thirteen films released in the first quarter of 2020, apart from *Baaghi* and *Tanaji*, *Subb Mangal Zyada Sabdhan* has grossed the highest at the Box Office. Made on a budget of 40 crores, it made 80 crores. *Tanaji*, made on a budget of 150 crores, made 370 crores. *Baaghi* earned 130 crores.
3. In R. Raj Rao’s novel *Hostel Room 131* (Penguin, 2010), Siddharth introduces Sudhir to the homoerotic men who shun the company of women. ...The lovers speak of eating and drinking together, living and dying together, for life. ...Isn’t this kind of domestic arrangement we call marriage?” (p. 93)
4. In an interview to *The Telegraph*, 21 February 2020. P. 14. Jitendra Kumar answered the question “How did you create this amazing chemistry?”, by saying, “The director told us that it should look like a normal *Jodi*. People love Jay and Veeru or Munnabhai and Circuit...people love these pairs, right? They love them because they are good friends. He told us, “*Romance and sexuality hum baad mein dekkenge*, first they should look like good friends’. It was easier to create that chemistry of friendship and bonding.”