

India: Dream Girl 2': The Box Office Drags Ayushmann Khurrana Down to the Lowest Common Denominator

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The actor has a record of posting back-to-back hits, but this regressive film may turn out to be his biggest one yet.

By 2019, Ayushmann Khurrana had been working for more than seven years and had delivered seven consecutive hits in a span of three years. This included monsters like *Andhadhun* and *Badhaai Ho* in 2018 alone. Ahead of *Shubh Mangal Zyada Savdhaan* (2019), when I ventured out for a routine vox pop assignment in one of Delhi's most heterogeneous localities - Connaught Place - and asked two college students about Ayushmann Khurrana. They stared blankly back at me. A few seconds later, one of them recognised him as 'Pooja', and it took me a minute to come out of my ivory tower and realise they had placed him from *Dream Girl* (2019), one of Khurrana's biggest hits and a rare film of his which I had outright disliked.

Raaj Shaandilyaa's 2019 film, which earned approximately Rs 200 crore at the box office, is arguably the most regressive film in the filmography of an actor who has made a career out of social conscientiousness. Playing a man who is able to conjure an impeccable woman's voice - because of his practice with playing female characters (like Sita) in his town's local Ramleela - Khurrana's Karamveer Singh lands a cushy job of chatting up strangers in an adult entertainment call centre. The film wears the skin of Khurrana's 'social issue' template - touching upon sexual repression amongst men in small towns, also grappling with loneliness - but *Dream Girl* was ultimately too satisfied with picking the lowest hanging fruits available with its premise.

Now comes *Dream Girl 2* - also directed by Shaandilyaa and starring Khurrana - and it is even more bald than the first. The plot is practically the same - Karam and his father (Annu Kapoor) are riddled with debt, and Karam must use his special ability to change their fortunes. If he was an adult entertainment call centre employee in the first, he's tasked with becoming a bar dancer, a psychiatrist, and a daughter-in-law in the sequel. In Shaandilyaa's universe, all men almost instantly become slippery in front of "Pooja" - Karam's female avatar.

The premise, again, is ripe for commentary on gender fluidity or transpersons on screen. However, Shaandilyaa uses it to laugh at lecherous men and hapless women desperately seeking love. Vijay Raaz as Sona Bhai - the owner of a dance bar - falls in love with Pooja. Seema Pahwa, an aunt undergoing divorce, lusts after a younger man. Annu Kapoor as Jagjit Singh - Karam's bumbling, silly father - is as entertaining as he was in the first film.

Like in the original *Dream Girl*, even the sequel opens with jokes thick and fast. The one-liners are so frequent that it even seems promising for a bit. Khurrana is a riot in one scene, as he helps his father dodge a credit card recovery agent's call with his ingénue routine as Pooja. However, the film shows its true colours soon enough - it reveals itself to be a film that is only interested in the laughs,

no matter how it gets them, whether it's with gags around mistaken identities, or older actors (Annu Kapoor and Seema Pahwa) sportingly playing fools in more than one situation.

The film wants to appear progressive, given how Khurrana frequently and effortlessly cross-dresses or wears lipstick, and also when a character is revealed to be queer. But the filmmaker's intent is laid bare with lazy, transphobic lines. "Laane gaye the Shipla Shetty, mil gaya Suniel Shetty," a character says at one point. The queer coding in the film seems insincere, given how ultimately the gaze of the film deals with stereotypical identities of men and women. Kapil Sharma is mentioned at one point, allowing the viewer to draw a direct parallel about why cross-dressing is always seen as something to mine 'humour' from. The film's unnecessary fixation on oranges almost seems like a throwback to tasteless Govinda comedies of the 90s.

Dream Girl 2 is surely a few steps backwards for someone with Khurrana's body of work, who, through his choice of films, has dabbled in most social issues Indian society has to offer. Even when they haven't worked - like in Amar Kaushik's *Bala* or Anubhav Sinha's *Anek* - rarely have the films appeared unsophisticated on the thought level. They're intended to uncover something new or break new ground on screen, even if the execution may not always match up.

Khurrana is one of the most perceptive actors working today. And it's visible in his films like *Dum Laga Ke Haisha* (2015), where he plays an unheroic male protagonist. In one of that film's best scenes, Khurrana's character fat-shames his wife in front of his friends, rightly getting slapped for it. But then, he also slaps her back. It's how his character would have naturally reacted. Khurrana has shown similar awareness in films like *Chandigarh Kare Aashiqui* (2021) and *Doctor G* (2022) ceding the spotlight to commit to the film's bigger picture. Playing unlikeable characters, Khurrana has often offered himself up as a vessel for middle-class enlightenment. His awareness of a project is strongest in a film like *An Action Hero* (2022) - where he mercilessly takes pot-shots at the inflated self-importance of his own ilk.

But the audience's reaction to Khurrana's relatively more sophisticated releases in the past couple of years might explain why he's now returning to his career's most flippant film and trying to turn it into a franchise. If the audience in my theatre was anything to go by, *Dream Girl 2* might once again tickle its way to significant box office numbers. And if that happens, Khurrana might be incentivised to choose limp, crudely-written films over well-meaning, trailblazing ones. It's almost like mainstream Bollywood finding a way to bring the best among us down to its level. Nevermind if he birthed his own genre only a few years ago.

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