

The subject of this review is PK. PK is a movie made in 2014 by Director Rajkumar Hirani, featuring Aamir Khan and Anushka Sharma as protagonists. It revolves around themes of religion and superstition, and seeks to dispel common myths propagated by godmen, questioning the structuring of religion as a whole in 21st century India.

### Why PK?

PK is an unusual pick in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender, as those are not its primary themes. But for reasons discussed later, it ends up inevitably interacting with gender archetypes in a distinct way. While most discourse around PK revolves around its positions on religion, the idea of having a "non-social" alien adapt to our society, involves diving into *all* cultural customs, not just those of religion.

PK is a movie that actively focuses on social constructionism, with its critique of religious essentialism. In the framework of PK, there are two Gods – the God who created us, and the God who we created. This institutionalisation of a new, fabricated reality is very similar to the institutionalisation of gender essentialism. The question that comes in my mind when I think of PK is – how well can this representation of social constructionism in PK hold in its portrayal of gender?

### The Naked PK as the 'natural' Man

Religion, Gender, and Sexuality are social constructs. They are something cultivated as a result of social interactions (Berger & Luckmann). Furthermore, we do not know what the *natural* state of a person is, in a world without socialisation, because everyone alive has been subjected to it. J.S. Mill argues that the product of punishment and reward leads to the universal habituation of an archetype of being (for women), which is then touted as *natural*, when it is in fact constructed<sup>1</sup>.

What PK (and aliens in fiction very often) represents is a *tabula rasa*. It is a state of being free from social conditioning, which is thus presented by the writer as his or her interpretation of the "natural" state of being. From WALL-E's naive emotional attachments, to E.T.'s smart and powerful yet childlike nature, aliens in cinema are used to represent the 'adult child'. These aliens adapt quickly due to their intelligent but childishly curious natures, and are used by the writers to juxtapose the blank slate against a socio-emotionally developed character. In fact, the director himself admits that he wanted PK to be played by someone who 'looked like a child'. These are depicted as capturing the best, not the worst of human values, and capable of effectively discerning virtue from vice; thus carrying implicit moral messages in their actions.

### Jaggu Janani

In the mother-diva dichotomy of female protagonists in India media, Jaggu falls into the latter category (juxtaposed against, say, Vidya Balan's casting in Mission Mangal). She is almost always seen in Western attire with short hair, and is presented as the archetypical "independent woman". She has a job as a journalist (but also an anchor?), drinks wine, has sex (but only implicitly, off camera), rides her own bicycle, travels alone on the Delhi Metro, rebels against her boss, has a terrible relationship with her parents, and laughs at condom

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<sup>1</sup> - "men, with that inability to recognise their own work which distinguishes the unanalytic mind, indolently believe that the tree grows of itself in the way they have made it grow, and that it would die if one half of it were not kept in a vapour bath and the other half in the snow."

jokes. In an era bygone, she would've been an underling of some grander villain, but in 2014, she can stand as a protagonist in her own right. N. Menon speaks of this phenomenon as the "convergence of 'heroine' and 'vamp' figures", which creates this new archetype of a woman.

### Chaar Kadam

Chaar Kadam's lyrics give us insight into the ups and downs of an inter-religious relationship. It's written as a ballad which explores the theme of forbidden love.

"Without asking me my name or address, leaving the rituals aside" - Their love is seen as forbidden because Jaggu is an Indian Hindu woman, while Sarfaraz is a Pakistani Muslim man. We see later the Godman Tapasvi refer to her choice as "suicide", and claims that the man will use her for her body and then leave her. This is a clear-cut anxiety of control. These anxieties of control, felt by Hindu society against the stereotypical Muslim man, are also addressed N. Menon. More recently, we see them awaken in conspiracies such as 'Love Jihad'

The actions within the song also tell us a few things. The montage shows them courting, reading books together. He makes her laugh, while she looks at him dotingly. They subsequently kiss and (are implied to) have sex. This is shown as the progression of a 'healthy' relationship. This progression will be directly contrasted against PK's 'romance' montage later.

### PK and the Making of a Man through Habituation

PK lands in the nude in a desert in the middle of Rajasthan. In spite of not understanding the human concepts of sex or gender, we see him clothed in stereotypically masculine clothing, and acting stereotypically male for a large part of the movie. Why is this?

The first person PK observes is visibly male. When he sees the man, he focuses on the turban and the moustache, both seen in society as symbols of masculinity. After entering a town, he observes the varying 'skins' (clothing) of people, and infers it's dependence on context. He steals garments, and puts them on indiscriminately. However, when he does this, he's ridiculed by the people around him. He is being laughed at for wearing a man's shirt with a woman's chaniya (skirt). PK has a vague understanding of gender now, in the sense that he can differentiate people as men and women by their clothing.

PK is yet to see anyone's genitals, or understand what chromosomes mean. Yet, he can differentiate between two categories of people, men and women. Without any perception of 'biological sex', he is able to observe gender. This goes to show how an understanding of gender precedes one of sex (C. Delphy). Also, it displays the importance of clothing in the social construction of gender (J. Lorber).

A few scenes later, we see Bhairon driving PK to his house. PK grabs Bhairon's hand so as to read his memories, and thus learn his language. This is met with a loud, sudden, and instinctive interjection, following which he pushes the brakes. Bhairon looks at PK with anger, and says "Has losing your memory made you forget the difference between a man and a woman?" Then he shows his driving license, which shows his sex as male. The hand-grabbing is seen not just as a *possibly* sexual action, but a *positively* sexual one.

The homosexual attraction thus implied is presumed as inappropriate before even addressing it by its name. The response to this action is not, "are you gay?" It is, "has losing your memory made you blind to sex?". It is assumed that PK was heterosexual, and losing his memory is *why* he is showing homoerotic behaviour. Not only that, it is assumed that said behaviour is not because losing his memory has made him *gay*, it's because losing his memory has made him *blind to a person's sex*. It is implied that heterosexuality is rooted in a person's mind even more deeply than their perception of sex. Such presuppositions are deeply ingrained in our culture, as explained by A. Rich.

### Tharki Chokro (Sleazy Boy)

Women scream whenever PK grabs their hands. This is seen by the band as troublesome (consequentially), but not problematic. Bhairon tries to stop him, not because what he's doing is lecherous, but because what he's doing will get the band in trouble. While the song lyrics say that he's unable to differentiate between men and women, he very clearly is. During the sequence, PK doesn't grab the hand of a single man. Bhairon's reprimand from earlier has already ingrained in him the idea that grabbing a man's hand is really bad, which leads him to the inevitable conclusion of trying to grab a woman's hand. This action is not reprimanded with yelling or lecturing, but with humorous and playful requests. Thus, he continues with his actions. He is repeatedly called 'sleazy' during the song.

At the start of the song, PK stares at them with wide-open eyes. This is a sign that he's unable to understand their antics. In the next scene, he looks at the troupe with a more controlled (yet still a bit alert) expression in his eyes. At the end of this cut, he folds his hands and bobs his head to the beat, mimicking their behaviour. After this scene, his eyes are no longer wide open. He looks at the band dancing normally. He copies their dance moves. The scene cuts. Now we see PK wearing the band dress, bearing a trumpet, and wearing sunglasses. He mimics their dance moves, and even pretends to twirl his moustache (even though he doesn't have any). This blind obedience to the social norm shows a clear-cut pattern of habituation. The scripts of gendered male behaviour, presented by Bhairon's band, are re-enacted by PK in his actions. This pattern of re-enactment of existing scripts is endemic to gender, and is referred to as performativity<sup>2</sup> (J. Butler).

Subsequently, he tries to grab a bride's hand during her wedding rituals, and is chased out by an angry mob. Bhairon once again comes to his defence. After the crowd leaves, he consoles (what he sees as) PK's perversion, and takes him to a brothel.

### Sidenote - The Brothel Scene

The brothel scene gives us some insight into the culture around sexuality in Rajasthan. While the happenings in the 'honeymoon room' are underwhelming, a more relevant incidence is observed at the end of this scene.

PK refers to Phuljhariya as 'sister' in passing. "Sister? Go say that to your mother!" Phuljhariya, an escort, is vehemently offended at being called 'sister' by PK. Having her hands

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<sup>2</sup> - "The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it..."

held for six hours while she fell asleep was not offending, and neither was the premise of prostitution to begin with; yet she holds great contempt with being referred to as 'sister'. There is something entirely damning about incest in her mindset. This grave societal taboo around incest is also reflected upon by feminists in kinship theory. Structuralists like Levi-Strauss consider the near-universal taboo nature of incest as a method of implementing exogamy in society.

#### The Condom Kerfuffle and Societal Shunning of non-marital Sexuality

PK finds a condom lying on the ground and asks various people in the news studio if it is theirs. All of them deny ownership anxiously, and even call him a creep for asking. Jaggu says that it is Cherry's (her boss), and a comedic dialogue between him and PK ensues. While a slapstick scene, the humour relies on satire of existing sociocultural beliefs. The hypocrisy around sexuality in Indian society is exposed by PK in the following two lines:

"When money drops from a person's pocket, people rush to claim it. But when a condom drops from a person's pocket, people run away from claiming it. Why is it so?"

"Why do we explode fireworks, and play bands on the day of marriage, to announce that we are having sex?"

In this interaction, we see a reflection of a repetitive occurrence in popular culture. Sexuality is supposed to be a 'private matter', unless it is marital. Sania Mirza's controversy after recommending safe sex, only to later correct it to safe pre-marital sex, showcases this phenomenon.

#### Love as Waste of Time - The Male Emotional Repression

"keep listening to your nonsense... love is waste of time"

He stares at her through the telescope, watches her on the news regularly, stares at her while she's gardening (responded to with merely discomfort). They go to an adventure park. He intentionally gets himself in trouble (getting foam above his lips) to get her to wipe it off. Jaggu meanwhile seems to be only mildly disturbed at this behaviour which would be very creepy to any other woman. While the montage with Jaggu and Sarfaraz shows their conversations as intellectual equals, aiding each other and sharing creative insights, this montage shows more of a relationship between a mother and a child. There are disturbing elements here.

There is an emotional numbness and self-denial seen in PK's approach to love, when he coyly speaks of his love as a 'waste of time'. This is further seen when he's bashful about loving Jaggu, or when he records *hours* of footage of her speaking and lies to her about it. Later, he says that 'no one will marry him', expecting a contrary response from Jaggu. This emotional repressiveness endemic to men is a product of patriarchal conditioning<sup>3</sup> (b. hooks).

During the sequence, PK is also seen repeatedly re-adjusting his appearance. The goal of this activity is to become an 'attractive' man, to win Jaggu's affection. But the means by

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<sup>3</sup> - "Patriarchal mores teach a form of emotional stoicism to men that says they are more manly if they do not feel, but if by chance they should feel and the feelings hurt, the manly response is to stuff them down, to forget about them, to hope they go away."

which this beauty is achieved is also rooted in societal biases. He feels shameful about his ears, which are larger than 'normal', and his scruffy hair, which is 'abnormal'. He puts on volumes of deodorant to smell 'attractive', and changes his clothing repeatedly, reflecting an insecurity in appearance. While standards for beauty are greatly fictitious, his actions to achieve this fictitious standard of beauty lead to real consequences. This reflects the 'Beauty Myth', a corollary of the Thomas Theorem.

#### Endnote: The Broader Narrative

In his writing, Mill predicts that gender will be the last social injustice to be corrected. The reason, he says, is that the dichotomy of sexes is maintained through a master who does not want just the obedience of his slave, but the *willing* obedience. Patriarchy is built on a web of socialised truisms – what is 'natural', what is 'normal', and what is 'beautiful'. PK, while depicting the perils of religious hegemony coming from *Godmen*, is unable to escape the perils of gender hegemony coming from *mere* men.

While religion is practised occasionally, in prayer or pilgrimage, gender is performed in every moment of public existence. One cannot as much as cross the street without being reminded of the hegemony of gender. Religious hegemony is implemented in PK through lies and fear (so-called Wrong Numbers), but the gender and sexual identities that he chooses to conform to are also habituated in him through the same fears. The movie intentionally tells us the gravity of deception using which superstition plagues society. But without remarking on it willingly, PK drives home that gender hegemony is inscribed *even more deeply* in our culture. So much so, that the biases are not even questioned by this ever-contrarian alien.

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