

EK LADKI KOH DEKHA TOH AISA LAGA – THE FIRST MAINSTREAM LGBTQ+ FILM IN INDIA



It was inevitable that, with India shifting into the modern era, that a mainstream film focusing on the topic of homosexuality in India had to be made. This is a society with still very traditional and rigid family and societal expectations, especially placed on women. Film was historically the way to break down said expectations, and, especially over the last 20 years, it is safe to say that some of the most influential films in Indian cinema have played a part in addressing issues which negatively affect millions, covering female empowerment to class struggles.

However, homosexuality was a topic which was a step always out of reach in film. Far from being properly addressed and explored, when it wasn't being made it into a cheap gag, it would be completely ignored, having no place in the minds of the audience. Very much like how it has no place in the traditional family idea.

It was only in 2018 which homosexuality was (once again) decriminalised in India. Even more interestingly, the film which is the topic for this piece was released only a year after this event.

Unsurprisingly, Ek Ladki Koh Dekha Toh Aisa Laga (ELKDTAL) came under some scrutiny. The story is centered around Sweety (Sonam Kapoor), a girl who has to battle an overprotective family's desire for her to be married off, and societal pressure, so that she can find a place for her relationship with Kuhu (Regina Cassandra). It is a tale which culminates in Sweety's father's (Anil Kapoor) acceptance of her sexuality and a generally happy ending, with the message that love, regardless of who it is, and the familial love a father has for his daughter, trumps all expectations and prejudices. It is a beautiful premise which the story grounds itself in, and the ideas are there. The part where they express their relationship through theatre, for example, is a nice touch.

However, this film of course is not perfect. The biggest disappointment of the film is the Sweety and Kuhu's relationship, which is barely explored on screen. Kuhu is absent for

half of the film, and for the other she is a background character. For a film industry which loves passion, romance and star-crossed lovers – Kuhu travelled all the way from London to reunite with Sweety – this titular, crucial relationship was tepid, ineffective in pulling anyone's heartstrings, and even forgettable.

Part of the reason why it feels this way is because their fight to be recognised by Sweety's family was not entirely their doing. It was a variety of characters which did a lot to help them out, the most obvious being Sahil (Rajkummar Rao) who was the "brains" behind the play and the one who had to encourage Sweety to persevere. The relationship's fate was held on the father, in which there was no direct influence from the main couple, rather than some old childhood diaries.

Sweety felt reduced as a character because of this, as she was not the main driving force behind this story, rather feeling powerless and passive. Maybe this was intentional, to emphasise how little of a voice women have, and how difficult it is to come out in many closed-off society reminiscent to the small village Sweety lived in. But as a story it makes it shallower and less worthwhile, even less empowering.

Another factor to consider could've been the audience intended for the movie. As mentioned earlier, homosexuality was only decriminalised a year before ELKDTAL's release. It is undeniable that, at the time of the release, and today, LGBT stuff is still a taboo subject, and this film is targeted for the mainstream, featuring a well-known experienced cast and a reasonably large budget, made for the cinemas. There must have been many discussions, reservations and difficult decisions to think how far they can go on such a sensitive topic such as this.

It was brave to even make a movie focusing on this topic, but there are some parts which this film lacks which could make the message just a little bit more impactful, such as the main relationship's portrayal. This was a film which had to be made, and the staff knew this. They got the ball rolling for the theme, and when more are made in the future, they could delve deeper than ELKDTAL ever could.