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## From Race and Orientalism in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to Caste and Indigenous Otherness on the Indian Screen

**Abstract:** The article discusses an Indian film adaptation of William Shakespeare's play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* entitled *10ml Love* (dir. Sharat Katariya, 2012). There is little scholarship on *10ml Love*, which has been studied mainly as an independent film in Hinglish that depicts the lives of the cosmopolitan youth in urban India. Drawing upon recent readings of the play that identify elements of racism and whiteness as well as an analysis from an Orientalist lens that sees India as a gendered utopia, I suggest that the film adaptation highlights not racial/white supremacy but caste supremacy; furthermore, it indulges not in Orientalist tropes but tropes of indigenous Otherness based on religion, gender, caste, and class. I argue that this film presents two opposing political utopias—a right-wing utopia that stands for the maintenance of traditional values and a left-wing utopia that attempts to challenge, question, and subvert the conservative order. However, *10ml Love* seems to endorse neither of the two utopias wholly; its reality appears to lie between the two utopias, a reality that is marked by stereotypes of Otherness. This paper analyses the audio-visual depiction of the tension between the utopias at both the ends of the political spectrum, as well as the realities of Otherness created by the presence of various social locations and identities in Indian society.

**Keywords:** *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *10ml Love*, Indian cinema, independent film, film adaptation, race, Orientalism, Otherness, caste, religion, gender, class, utopia in film.

### Introduction

Multiple interpretations of the concept of utopia have been suggested with respect to William Shakespeare's 1595 play *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—or the *Dream* as it is commonly known. Jonathan Gil Harris points out: "Utopia,' after all, is not only a pun on the Greek *eutopos* (a good place) but also *utopos* (no place). As Theseus reminds us in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 'behind

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a local habitation and a name' is 'airy nothing' (5.1.17, 16)" (173). Hugh Grady proposes a reading that identifies the green world in this play as consisting of "two separate realms: a utopia and a dystopia [...] one of them an idealised but momentary disturbed aesthetic realm, the other a jungle of dangerous sexual desire" (76). And James Stone compares India to a gendered utopia seen from an Orientalist lens owing to the multiple references to this country in the play: a pregnant Indian woman and her son who finds himself in Titania's care after his mother's death; the "spiced Indian air at night" (2:1:126) referring to marketplaces full of fragrant spices that had attracted merchants from several parts of Europe to various former colonies; the comparison between big pregnant bellies and ships loaded with merchandise that make us think of "traders on the flood" (2:1:129) and their acts of (forceful) impregnation of local women as part of the colonial ventures that the mercantilists would soon embark upon.<sup>1</sup> Stone suggests, "*A Midsummer Night's Dream* bodies forth two distinct sexual spaces, alternative and antithetical to each other: a world of fantasmatic male sexual abandon (Theseus and the male lovers, human and fairy), and a female utopia like India [...]" (107).

Stone's take is particularly relevant in the case of *10ml Love*, a 2012 Indian film adaptation of the *Dream* that was directed by the independent filmmaker Sharat Katariya. With respect to the Orientalist tropes in this film adaptation (or the lack thereof), Varsha Panjwani has noted in *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations*: "[...] the play is indigenised but not orientalised so that India is not viewed as 'something strange, something other;' rather Shakespeare is viewed through an urban Indian gaze" (Panjwani 187). This urban gaze is emphasised by the genre of the film, its setting and the choice of language(s). Trivedi and Chakravarti, the editors of *Shakespeare and Indian Cinemas: Local Habitations* note in the introduction that a film like *10ml Love*, set in the cosmopolitan city of Mumbai, "represent[s] a new genre of independent (indie) non-Bollywood and non-parallel/-art, low-budget films made in 'Hinglish,' a combination of Hindi and English which is spoken by a large section of educated, urban Indian youth." (14) However, I argue that this very urban Indian gaze of a Hinglish indie like *10ml Love* ends up creating a dichotomy not between the West and an Orientalised India as its Other, but between elite Indians in dominant positions and several indigenous Indian Others owing to their religious, linguistic, gender, caste, and class identities.

Jonathan Gil Harris highlights the presence of "polyglot linguistic markers" (60) in *10ml Love*—apart from Hindi and English, some characters speak a smattering of Punjabi or Urdu. These languages co-exist naturally in the film because its characters come from different linguistic communities, from

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<sup>1</sup> All citations from the play have been taken from Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen's *William Shakespeare: Complete Works*.

various parts of India, live in diverse neighbourhoods of Mumbai, and are affiliated with multiple religious groups. For example, Hindi and Hinglish films tend to stereotype people from Christian communities as largely English-speaking; those born into the Muslim faith as likely to be proficient in Urdu, while Punjabi speakers typically belong to the dominant Khatri caste. People from Hindu families usually speak English (a sign of postcolonial privilege) or Hinglish if they are from an affluent background, and Hindi or any other regional Indian language if they are not from a well-to-do family or a less “posh” geographical region; and those proficient in English tend to communicate in a regional language with those “lower” than them in the social hierarchy.

As for *10ml Love*, this film portrays a romantic relationship between Shweta/Hermia who is from a prosperous family and Peter/Lysander who comes from a modest background. Shweta and Peter were born into the Hindu and Christian faiths respectively, as indicated by their names. Shweta’s father/Egeus insists on arranging her marriage to a fellow well-to-do Hindu (and in all likelihood, a fellow Khatri) called Neel/Demetrius, with whom Shweta’s childhood friend Minnie/Helena (presumably Christian, as suggested by her name) is madly in love. Shweta and Neel agree to the match, and their wedding serves as the inciting incident for the entry into the green world—whether one reads it as *utopos* or “airy nothing,” or as a dystopia or “a jungle of dangerous sexual desire,” “a world of fantasmatic male sexual abandon.” It is a love potion called *Josh-e-jawaani* (literally, enthusiasm of youth) used by a Muslim apothecary named Ghalib/Oberon from a working-class background that leads to the many accidents and misunderstandings that the play is associated with—including a dalliance between Roshni/Titania (religion not explicitly mentioned but likely to be a Hindu woman) and Chand/Bottom (a Hindu man). The religious, caste and class identities of these characters are the key to understanding the film because it is just before Shweta and Neel’s wedding ceremony that Shweta elopes with Peter, subverting a marriage arranged by her father and choosing a man from a different faith and financial class. The inciting incident ends up uniting Minnie and Neel, while Ghalib and Peter also strike up a friendship. In other words, these situations lead to what I will term a left-wing secular utopia that celebrates love and friendship between the film’s characters who are associated with the major religions in India—Hinduism (almost 80 per cent of the population), Islam (a little over 14 per cent) and Christianity (just over 2 per cent).

On the other hand, a right-wing utopia is presented by a play-within-the-film sequence, on the lines of *Pyramus and Thisbe*, the play-within-the-play in the *Dream*. *10ml Love* has some of its characters rehearse for a staging of the *Ramlila*, a folk drama that celebrates the life of Rama—the eponymous Hindu character of the ancient Indian epic *Ramayana*—as a parallel track. For our analysis, it is vital to note that Ram Rajya (the rule of Ram, also spelt as Rama)

is often glorified as the ultimate goal of the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP, India's currently-ruling Hindu nationalist right-wing political party. Considering that *10ml Love* was released in 2012—two years before the BJP came into power at the centre and in various states—the film can be read as foreshadowing the rise of right-wing politics in India that is hinged on promoting Hindutva, or the essence of “Hinduness.” By staunchly opposing inter-faith marriages and reiterating its belief in the patriarchal order and hierarchies of caste (or *varna*, as the social stratification was known in pre-colonial times), the *Ramlila* track is the epitome of a right-wing utopian situation. In other words, it symbolises the return to India's pre-colonial as well the pre-Islamic “golden past” that eulogises Rama as a *maryada purushottam* or ideal man. This status is conferred upon Rama because he is said to have fulfilled his patriarchal duty as a king by suspecting his wife Sita of infidelity after she was kidnapped (she later walked through fire to prove her “purity”) as well as his caste duty by killing a “low” caste man called Shambuka because the latter had dared to transgress the caste hierarchy.

It would thus not be far-fetched to state that this analysis of the play-within-the-film which glorifies caste supremacy could be compared to the recent trend of exploring race as we know it today in early modern literature, in opposition to the oft-made claim in the past that associating race and racism with early modern texts would be anachronistic. For example, in *The Cambridge Companion to Race and Shakespeare*, Ayanna Thompson discusses the construction of whiteness and Englishness in Shakespeare's works as “race-making and racecraft in the service of racism, whose aim is to create justifiable systemic, structural, and material inequalities” (31):

If you ask today in the 2020s if the concept of race existed for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, the answer is an emphatic yes. Yes, the concept of race existed. Yes, racialized epistemologies existed and were employed and deployed. And, yes, Shakespeare himself engages in both the symbolic and materialistic elements that comprise race-making. Yes, Shakespeare and race are coeval; they grew up as contemporaries. (Thompson 21)

Similarly, in a 2021 online lecture entitled “Shakespeare, Race and Performance,” Farah Karim-Cooper shares an anecdote related to the terms “Ethiope” and “tawny Tartar” used by Lysander to reject Hermia in the *Dream*: “Away, you Ethiope, out tawny Tartar... This language makes me think of when I was told [...] by a passer-by outside Waterloo station not too long ago, ‘Go home, Paki.’ He might as well have said to me, ‘Out, tawny Tartar’” (online). In keeping with the above manner of interpretation, we can state that the following lines from the *Dream* could also have racial implications: “Call you me fair? That fair again unsay, Demetrius loves your fair: O happy fair!” (1:1:184-185); “Who will not change a raven for a dove?” (2:2:114); “This princess of pure white, this seal of

bliss” (3:2:144); “That pure congealed white; high Taurus snow, fanned with the eastern wind turns into a crow” (3:2:141-142); “The lover all as frantic sees Helen’s beauty in a brow of Egypt” (5:1:10-11).

### **Right-Wing Utopia or Ram Rajya: Hindu Nationalism, Caste Supremacy and Male Privilege**

Caste supremacy is signalled at the very beginning of the film via the establishing shot. We see a medium close-up of a man gently blowing on an oil lamp to keep the flame burning in the darkness. What is clearly visible is his *janeu* or “holy” thread that is typically worn across the left shoulder by Indian men belonging to the “top” three categories of the Hindu caste hierarchy. In the establishing shot, it is first wrapped behind his right ear as is the custom while performing tasks that could endanger its “purity” (lighting the lamp in this case), and just after that, the man frees the *janeu* from behind his ear and tucks it back into his *kurta*, a knee-length traditional Indian outfit that is usually worn over *pyjamas* or loose pants. The slight low angle adopted by the camera as he walks down the stairs emphasises his superiority in his entourage. Through the scenes that follow—within the first two minutes of the film—we are made to understand that the man in question is called Ganshubhai; he is not only the head cook hired to prepare food for a wedding but is also in charge of an amateur drama group.



Figure 1: The head cook/theatre director Ganshubhai is shown adjusting his *janeu* or white “holy” thread that is a symbol of caste supremacy (0:46').<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> All images from the film have been taken from [https://youtu.be/kdXgxi5\\_RwQ](https://youtu.be/kdXgxi5_RwQ)

Although Ganshubhai visibly belongs to a lower financial class than the families of the bride and the groom, his *janeu* as well as the fact that he has been hired as a cook for a wedding hint at the possibility of him being a Brahmin. The food cooked by Brahmins is still generally seen as the epitome of “purity”—the “higher” the caste of the person, the higher up they are on the scale of purity/pollution. According to this scale, the Brahmins (priests) are the “purest,” followed by the Kshatriyas (nobles and warriors), the Vaishyas (merchants) and the Shudras (peasants and manual workers). Those considered too “low” to belong to the *varna* system (the former untouchables, some of whom have adopted the political identity of Dalit, literally meaning “broken”) are seen as the most “polluted” and “polluting.” There is, therefore, to this day a demand for cooks from the Brahmin caste in India as well as in the Indian diaspora abroad. *10ml Love*’s establishing shot with only Ganshubhai could thus be read as a representation of the lasting “superiority” of Brahmins in Indian society and their “pure” status that makes them apt to be hired as cooks for auspicious occasions like weddings. Nonetheless, the *Ramlila* track in the film that features the cooks as theatre actors cannot be categorically declared to endorse caste supremacy. It could also be considered a critique of the caste hierarchy owing to the depiction of Ganshubhai as petty and unreasonable instead of epitomising the wisdom and maturity that is conventionally associated with Brahmins.

In spite of Chand—apparently one of the best actors in the drama group—proving himself apt to play the roles of Rama (the hero) and even Ravana (the villain), Ganshubhai relegates him to the non-speaking role of Hanuman (a celibate monkey). All of Chand’s “auditions” are ridiculed by Ganshubhai, leading the rest of the group to join in the mockery. Chand’s first “audition” is for the role of Ravana; as he stands up to separate himself from the rest of the group, the camera pans left to show him in the middle of the frame, a medium shot taken from a low angle emphasising his dominance as he recites his lines. However, although Chand is in the foreground, it is one of the characters in shallow focus in the background who is ultimately chosen to play Ravana. The latter happens to be hard of hearing—a detail that is repeatedly used for comic relief in the film—and Chand jokingly refers to his hearing aid as his *janeu*, indicating the latter’s possible “high” caste status as well. Chand’s “audition” for Rama is sneered at in a similar fashion although Chand folds his hands and falls at the director’s feet to request him for the role, a slight high angle shot framing Chand in a vulnerable position. Ganshubhai ultimately picks a character with a pronounced stutter to play the part of Rama, again seemingly for comical effect. We later learn that the pettiness stemmed from the fact that Chand’s late father (the former head of the *Ramlila*) had allowed Ganshubhai to play only minor roles throughout his career.

Ganshubhai is therefore unlike Quince in the *Dream*’s play-within-the-play sequence, who assigns the lead role of Pyramus to the character of Bottom

who accepts it without any hesitation. Chand is also unlike Bottom when it comes to playing the male protagonist's female love interest in the *Ramlila*. Whereas Bottom offers to play the role of Thisbe too (a role that Flute balks at playing, even with a mask and a high-pitched voice: "Nay, faith, let not me play a woman. I have a beard coming." (1:2:36)), the question of Chand proposing to act as Sita does not even arise. He is too stereotypically "masculine"—tall, muscular, with a deep voice. Instead, Ganshubhai offers the role of Sita to a younger and slimmer man, whose immediate reaction is to refuse playing a woman. The pretext for this rejection is presented through a pun; the character says that people would call him "good" if he played a woman, the word "good" in Hindi being slang for a homosexual man. Chand gives Ganshubhai a demonstration of the meaning of "good" in Hindi by pinching the latter's *derrière*, which further angers him. The camera remains static during this scene, allowing the viewers to focus on the reactions and movements of the characters.

In terms of parallels between the plots of Shakespeare's play and Katariya's film, Pyramus is "a lover, that kills himself most gallant for love" (1:2:20) in *Pyramus and Thisbe*, while it is Sita who is willing to risk death not to prove her love but her "purity" in the *Ramlila*. Another difference between *Pyramus and Thisbe* and the *Ramlila* is that there is no final show of the *Ramlila* in the film unlike *Pyramus and Thisbe* that is performed at the end of the source play. However, the few instances when the cooks/dramatists are shown on screen after a rehearsal or even during a regular conversation, they chant proclamations to repeatedly hail Rama in unison: *Siyapati Ramchandra ki jai*, with added non-diegetic background music emphasising their fervour. These chants are also characteristic of a right-wing utopia although the absence of a full-fledged *Ramlila* performance could signal the dominance of a left-wing perspective.

### **Left-Wing Utopia: Attempts to Transcend Barriers of Religion, Language, Caste and Class**

Despite the marriage arranged for Shweta and Neel by their parents, it is inter-faith love that triumphs at the end. The presence of two Hindu-Christian couples—Shweta and Peter, as well as Neel and Minnie—is a sign of open-mindedness that veers away from the conservativeness of the parallel track of the *Ramlila* featuring the cooks/dramatists. We also learn that Roshni and Ghalib had a "love marriage" as opposed to a conventional arranged marriage usually fixed by the parents and extended family of the bride and groom; it is highly likely that Roshni was born into a Hindu family although her name is also found among members of the Muslim faith. These three relationships can be seen as part of a left-wing secular utopia that encourages love and friendship between

the film's characters who are associated with the three major religions in India—Hinduism, Islam and Christianity.

Three distinct political factions have been associated with the left in India's political history: (i) the Indian National Congress, simply known as the Congress in popular parlance, which is India's "grand old party" with a centre/centre-left leaning that was established in the year 1885 and was instrumental in the freedom struggle from the British; (ii) the Communist Party of India that was founded four decades after the establishment of the Congress with the aim to bring about equality among people from various economic strata of society; (iii) the Depressed Classes Foundation and the Independent Labour Party that were created in 1930 and 1936 respectively in order to agitate for the rights of people belonging to marginalised caste backgrounds.

Although the Congress constitutes the official opposition to the BJP, it would be inaccurate to state that the former party is communist or anti-caste. It is definitely more inclusive of people from various religious, caste and class backgrounds than the BJP but the dominating elements have been Hindu men from privileged caste and class locations for the most part. *10ml Love* was released when the Congress government was still in power at the centre and in various states, and this film appears to echo the ideology of this political party because of the prominence it initially gives to the Hindu Punjabi Khatri men who decide on a caste-endogamous marriage to retain caste and class status in society, in keeping with laws that date back to the ancient period in the Indian subcontinent. Thus, just as an ancient Athenian law that makes Egeus proclaim in the source play: "And she is mine, and all my right to her, I do estate unto Demetrius" (1:1:100), ancient laws in the Indian subcontinent detailed in a text called the *Manusmriti* ordained fathers to choose suitable grooms for their daughters, in other words, grooms from the same religious, linguistic and caste community as their own. An excerpt from the *Manusmriti* translated by George Buhler (3) reads: "The gift of a daughter, after decking her (with costly garments) and honouring (her by presents of jewels), to a man learned in the Veda and of good conduct, whom (the father) himself invites, is called the Brahma rite. III: 27" (online). Caste-endogamous marriages remain the norm in twenty-first century India, and, therefore, it is not particularly surprising that in *10ml Love* both Shweta's and Neel's parents convince their children to have an arranged marriage with each other because they both have the same religious, linguistic and caste backgrounds—Hindu, Punjabi and (most probably) Khatri. Contrary to Hermia who rejects Demetrius in the source play, Shweta agrees to the match with Neel and their marriage is accordingly fixed within a month of the "arrangement"—a sure sign of the social conditioning that Indians go through ever since childhood.

Also, and perhaps more importantly for our demonstration of the film's ostensible endorsement of the Congress party's ideology, Shweta's father is far from calling for a Hindutva-inspired honour killing, unlike Egeus who called for



Lysander's death when the latter eloped with his daughter: "I beg the law, the law, upon his head (4:1:148)." The Congress party has been often accused of appeasing religious minorities, and the fact that no opposition to inter-faith romance is expressed in the film's denouement can be taken for acceptance of the same—albeit grudgingly. And indeed, in the last ten minutes of the film, after the effects of the love potion have worn off, the two Hindu-Christian couples (Shweta and Peter, and Minnie and Neel) are no longer in the "blue world" of forbidden love and lust with the screen bathed in a deep electric blue—the equivalent of the source play's "green world"—yet no forces from the "real" world of the film's diegesis intervene to separate them. The transition from fantasy to reality is depicted through shots of Shweta and Peter in the woods. We hear soothing non-diegetic music as the camera tilts down to show us leafy trees and the couple asleep/unconscious in the foliage. The background sound stops abruptly and is replaced by diegetic sounds of birds chirping and humming, which signals the couple's exit from the "blue world" as they regain consciousness.

Shweta's definitive split from Neel is emphasised via a visual separation of the couples. While Shweta and Peter awaken in the woods, Neel and Minnie are pictured by the mountains after they leave the "blue world." Shots of a disappointed Minnie, telling Neel that he does not love her anymore as they are no longer under the influence of the love potion, are interspersed with reverse shots of Neel realising that he actually loves only Minnie, and are soon replaced by two-shots of the embracing couple. Although it is not shown in the film, we can presume that both the couples will go on to have "love" marriages. As for Ghalib and Roshni, they had a love marriage (most probably a Hindu-Muslim inter-faith one), which can be read as an attempt to dissent against the right-wing's Hindutva utopia. At one point, Ghalib's mother taunts her son for being hen-pecked and unable to subjugate his wife Roshni. She puts it down to his "progressiveness" for having indulged in a love marriage as opposed to a traditional arranged marriage. This scene depicts Ghalib's mother from a low angle that emphasises her dominance over her son and her power in the relationship dynamics. However, the viewers of the film know that despite Ghalib's insecurity and jealousy, and his mother's misogynistic bickering, they are meant to side with Ghalib and Roshni because their love marriage stands for a breaking away from the conservative right-wing's utopia that especially tends to target Muslims.

What is also part of the film's left-wing utopia is female characters asserting themselves in the face of the patriarchy. There is a reversal of gender roles when Roshni follows Chand under the effect of the love potion *Josh-e-jawaani*, an act that also appears to comment on her jealous husband's tendency to follow her around driven by suspicions of her supposed infidelity. While Titania puts her feelings into words to express her affection towards Bottom in Shakespeare's play: "I pray thee, gentle mortal, sing again. Mine ear is much

enamoured of thy note. So is mine eye enthralled to thy shape. And thy fair virtue's force perforce doth move me On the first view to say, to swear, I love thee" (3:1:99-103), Roshni lets simple gestures do the talking in *10ml Love*. A pleasantly surprised Chand who plays the character of the celibate monkey called Hanuman in the *Ramlila* track admits to her that it is the first time that a woman has ever pursued him. They are shown frolicking by a stream and in a field and even getting physically intimate in the "blue world." The dreamy background music accompanies Roshni's lilting laughter and transports the spectators into an other-worldly setting that entices and intrigues us because it is rife with the sentiment of the impossible on several levels. Close-ups of Roshni's face that express romantic feelings and sexual desire along with her agency to be "on top" and caress a blindfolded Chand with a feather as he lies on his back accentuate the challenging of gender norms. The reversal of stereotypical gender roles continues until the end of the sequence when the effect of the potion disappears along with the electric blue, and the camera slowly pans to portray a bemused Roshni collecting her clothes and walking away—while a bare-chested Chand wakes up alone and remains confused after her departure.



Figure 2: Roshni is shown in a dominant position with respect to Chand in the dark "blue world" of the dream sequence (1:14:25')

### **Realities of Otherness: The Prevailing of Stereotypes**

Having explored allusions to the right-wing utopia that teeter on the verge of parody in the *Ramlila* track (with a stuttering Rama, a hearing-impaired Ravana and a celibate Hanuman who gets physically intimate with a married woman under the influence of the love potion) and the presence of inter-faith couples

as well as attempts to dissent against stereotypical gender roles in the left-wing utopia, we can state that the reality of the film lies somewhere between the two utopias. What tends to eventually prevail is various Othering clichés associated with religion, gender, sexuality, caste and class. Let us study how these stereotypes are portrayed.

*10ml Love* belongs to the rare category of films that brings together Hindu, Muslim and Christian characters in the tradition of the 1977 Hindi-language blockbuster *Amar Akbar Anthony*, directed by Manmohan Desai. The latter film features triplets separated at birth (somewhat akin to *A Comedy of Errors*) and raised by families professing the three different faiths in question, thereby giving us the Hindu Amar Khanna, the Muslim Akbar Allahabadi and the Christian Anthony Gonsalves. In *10ml Love*, the three characters from these three faiths—namely Neel, Ghalib and Peter—cross paths at a much later stage in their lives and at a much later stage in the diegesis of the film, but we come across quite a few stereotypes related to their religious identities. Since Neel belongs to the dominant faith in India, his Hindu identity is the norm rather than an exception. On the contrary, Ghalib's "Muslimness" is accentuated by the henna he uses to dye his beard (a practice that is not conventionally associated with other faiths) and the language he uses (Urdu expressions such as *Khuda haafiz* as a greeting, and *Inshaallah* to signal hope).

He is often framed in profile close-up shots and low-angle shots that emphasise his henna-dyed beard; he is also portrayed in front of minarets and mosques lit in green, and the symbolism of the colour green associated with the Islamic faith does not go unnoticed. Moreover, the scene that introduces Ghalib as a roadside apothecary features a signboard that reads *Habib Meat Shop* in English and Urdu in the background as well as a reverse shot of an animal carcass, in accordance with the myth of the meat-eating, and therefore, "violent" Indian Muslim, unlike the peace-loving vegetarian Hindu majority (again, a misconception; it is only certain "high" castes that are forbidden from eating meat). In a similar vein, Peter is made to utter lines such as "God bless you" and "God will punish you." The reference to the divine force in the English language as opposed to Hindi (associated with Hindus) or Urdu (associated with Muslims) is a signaller of his "Christianness," along with sequences that show him in a church or mention that he has gone to church. However, not once does Neel visit a temple or utter expressions that invoke Hindu deities, signalling that his religious affiliation is the "normal" one and does not have to be explicitly mentioned—thereby shrinking the gap between the right-wing's Hindu nation utopia and the left-wing's Hindu-dominant reality.

Such essentialism aside, myths and misconceptions related to religion and gender are enmeshed in the case of Shweta (a Hindu woman) and Minnie (a Christian woman). While Shweta is modestly dressed for the most part, Minnie wears much more revealing clothes and sports short hair—signs of being



Figures 3 and 4: Ghalib is framed in front of a mosque that is lit in green, a colour associated with the Islamic faith (1:15:05'); Peter (seen here with Minnie) is shown in a church (39:03')

“modern,” “Westernised,” “un-Indian” or someone with loose morals, in other words. In fact, she is the only character who talks openly about having had a sexual relationship; in the sequence that introduces the characters of Neel and Minnie less than ten minutes into the film, Minnie reminds him of all the nights they spent together, including the night before this particular conversation which was apparently his last night of “bachelorhood” with her. They are filmed on a boat while returning to the Gateway of India from their getaway in the beach town of Alibag, the framing of the two-shot first emphasising their closeness by showing them side by side, and later stressing their impending separation by placing Minnie on the extreme right and Neel on the extreme left side of the

screen. We are privy to her initiating the act with Neel—a series of over-the-shoulder shots depict Minnie wearing a low-cut blouse, helping Neel pick a perfume to wear for his “arranged” date with Shweta, Minnie running her fingers through his hair and trying to kiss him before she is ultimately rejected by Neel in a two-shot that has Neel push her away.

Moreover, Minnie is the only female character who kisses a man on the lips in the film. When she and Shweta apply face masks as a skincare treatment and Neel walks into the room and has an intimate chat with Minnie thinking that she is Shweta, Minnie takes advantage of the case of mistaken identity and kisses him. The display of affection could account for the fact that Neel’s intentions were to reveal his former relationship with Minnie to Shweta; we hear soft non-diegetic music and the camera progressively zooms in from a medium shot to a close-up of Neel and Minnie to get us to focus on their facial expressions. In sharp contrast, let alone indulge in a physical relationship of any kind, Shweta (a “good” Hindu girl) does not even allude to any kind of premarital intimacy with Peter. The naming of the characters thus continues as per the conventions of Hindi cinema that tends to portray female Christian and Anglo-Indian actors and characters as “fallen” and “easy”—via acts such as smoking, drinking, wearing tight and revealing “Western” clothes as opposed to traditional Indian clothing, indulging in premarital sex and often getting pregnant out of wedlock. It comes as no surprise, then, to see Minnie wear a strapless blouse along with a *sari* at Shweta and Neel’s wedding—an outfit that falls into the hybrid category of Indo-Western clothing. Furthermore, the camera work accentuates her bare shoulders and back, which in turn emphasises her “modernness” and, therefore, her Otherness with respect to “modest” Hindu women.

Finally, stereotypes related to economic class are also represented in the film. Firstly, class privilege or the lack of it is linked to the success of romantic relationships and marriageability. When Peter confides in a friend that Shweta and Neel are to get married to each other, Peter’s friend rationalises that dreams of love and marriage are not for “small people” like them; they both are “only” mechanics while Shweta and Neel come from wealthy families. Considering that this scene takes place during the first five minutes of the film, is shot at a Christian wedding, and has Peter and his friend speak in an accent typical to Indian Christians from Goa, it serves the purpose of establishing Peter’s Otherness on account of his religion and financial class.

Apart from this scene, class difference is depicted via two clear instances where wealthy people haggle with those from lesser-privileged financial backgrounds. Firstly, as per the tradition where Neel is meant to buy a *sari* for his bride-to-be for the wedding ceremony, he relentlessly bargains with the shopkeeper in order to save a few thousand rupees. On account of both the camera work and the target audience—owing to the film’s choice of language

(Hinglish) and themes (inter-faith relationships, premarital sex)—the viewers of the film who probably belong to privileged sections of Indian society are likely to end up adopting Neel’s point of view in the bargaining sequence. The camera is strategically placed just behind Neel during most of the sequence, putting the viewer quite literally in Neel’s place. When the shopkeeper refuses to give in at first, Neel walks away and comes back only when the former relents. The fact that Neel stands next to Minnie and in front of the shopkeeper at the end of the sequence helps us see Neel’s knowing smirks mocking the shopkeeper that are quite obviously directed at Minnie, and at the film’s viewers—smirks that the shopkeeper is not meant to see.

Similarly, Shweta’s father also decides to pay Roshni—who is from a lower economic class and has been hired to apply henna on the hands of the bride and other women attending the wedding—three thousand rupees instead of the five thousand that she had originally asked for. This information is revealed in front of one of his NRI or Non-Resident Indian relatives (who asks what it would cost in Canadian dollars) as well as the financially modest cooks/dramatists who are trying to eavesdrop on the conversation (they seem to be impressed by the amount that will be paid to Roshni, indicating that they are perhaps underpaid too). This is because Indians from elite backgrounds and even upper middle-class families are socialised into being perpetually suspicious of “those people” who typically come from a lesser-privileged financial background and who often have no choice but to perform blue collar jobs or to be a part of the informal labour industry. Not only are the privileged sections of society conditioned to believe that “those people” are lazy, inefficient and shirk work at every possible occasion, they are also seen as experts at trickery. Moreover, Neel speaks rudely to the labourers hired to work at the wedding because as per the common belief, that is the only way to get the job done—and the camera follows suit, relegating the workers to the background, and focusing on Neel in the foreground, thereby accentuating the dominance of the Hindu man without overstating his “Hinduness.”

## Conclusion

In conclusion, one can state that although the film seems to present both a right-wing utopia and a left-wing utopia, it does not wholly represent or endorse either of them. This is because the parodic elements of the former situation—two characters with physical disabilities and one celibate character indulging in sexual intimacy with a married woman—ultimately overpower the religious and political aspects of the *Ramlila*. *10ml Love* does give the impression of erring on the side of the left-wing utopia by depicting romantic relationships between men and women from different faiths and different financial class backgrounds (by

uniting Peter and Shweta, and Minnie and Neel at the end of the film), but the film does not reveal if their families will ultimately accept their choices. In addition, it propagates stereotypes associated with homosexuality by mocking one of the cooks/dramatists and forcing him to play the part of a woman. Thus, the reality of the film appears to be rooted in stereotypes of Otherness linked to religion (Muslim characters associated with henna, meat, mosques and the colour green; Christians with a stereotypical accent and sexual promiscuity), gender (women seen as the property of their fathers; a misogynistic mother-in-law berates her son for not controlling his wife), sexuality (men who are not the epitome of masculinity as it is conventionally accepted socially must be gay), caste (only “high” caste people are pure enough to cook food for auspicious occasions like wedding ceremonies) and class (working-class people are suspected of taking advantage of the elite, and have also apparently internalised their supposed inferiority).

One cannot help but wonder if the team behind *10ml Love* would have stuck to the same ideological viewpoints had they made the film a few years later. Would the content of the film have been influenced by the right-wing Hindutva project of the BJP that has been India’s ruling political party since 2014? Or, were the film to be released as a more mainstream production in Hindi instead of an indie in Hinglish, would the filmmaking team have made more conventional choices with respect to same-caste and same-faith marriages as well as premarital and extramarital sexual relationships? Whatever the case, it does appear as though direct or indirect signs of indigenous Otherness would have invariably found their way into the film; irrespective of the impact of left-wing or right-wing political leanings, tropes of alterity linked to linguistic background, religion, caste and class seem inevitable in a hugely-populated and socio-culturally diverse country like India.

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