

# Are they just movies? – Explicating Gender Politics and Sexual Objectification in Bollywood’s Item Songs

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## *Abstract*

Women’s bodies have been used and abused in Hindi silver screen for ages. However, through the lens of Bollywood’s item numbers, the politics of male gaze and eroticism are brought forth all the more prominently. Question remains, are these item songs only a representational import of male ascendancy being an imperative factor for big-budget cinema? Or is it the eroticism of the dancer that makes it ever so problematic? Within the rubric of this larger argument, this paper studies how female bodies in Bollywood’s item numbers are glamorized and sexualized leading to an ever-increasing objectification of women. This study has attempted to focus on body politics through male gaze, literary analysis of lyrics, visual advent of dancers, uncouth dance movements, and bodily appearances. It has also been examined in this paper, whether item songs can be considered as weapons of reclaiming liberation or whether they can be construed as toxic male ascendancy, in its entirety. The analysis in this paper is qualitative in nature.

**Keywords:** *Gender, item songs, sexual objectification, Bollywood, gaze*

- “.... The cinematic elements of lighting and shot taking, i.e. the way the body is arranged with respect to the camera and hence the eye of the audience, the movements of the body, all add up in turning the woman into a spectacle. The gaze is invited to certain parts of the body selectively considered sexual”.

(Bindu Nair, 2002)

**B**ollywood is no more a mere film industry. It can be widely considered as one of the important socializing agents in today’s society. Question remains, does these item numbers plugged in the nooks and corners of big-budget movies readily accept sexual objectification as a form of mass observational entertainment? Do these directors go by the assumption that the more skin

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they would be able to show, the more box office collection they would be able to gain? Doesn't this objectification of labeling women as 'item girls' eventually lead to the reception of sexual violence?

As we proceed towards the centennial of Indian Cinema, the responsibility thrusts upon us to examine the role of item songs – songs which despite being largely irrelevant are incorporated in big-budget Bollywood movies, to clasp more and more attention. Item numbers are undoubtedly, arresting examples of how bodies are gendered, objectified, gazed upon, ridiculed and looked at. Moreover, this 'to-be-looked-at-ness' (Mulvey, 1975) poses nothing but enraged sexual desire, through and through.

However, there lies a juxtaposition between those who feel item numbers to be redeeming women's autonomy and those who feel these songs to be vulgar and toxic. Hence, my study examines whether these songs are sincerely obnoxious or if they have become a potent target for condemnation. In this pursuit, this paper studies how women are reduced to mere objects for monetary gains in terms of bodily movements, visual pleasure, camera angles, and lyrical pleasure of texts in an androcentric industry. My research examines more than a few famous item numbers of Bollywood through feminist juncture, that promotes sexual aggression as a desirable unique value proposition of these movies.

### **Bodies under Gaze**

- "There is no need for arms, physical violence, material constraints. Just a gaze. An inspecting gaze, a gaze that each individual under its weight will end by [internalizing] to the point that they are their own overseer, each individual thus exercising surveillance over, and against themselves".

(Foucault, 1980)

Women characters in Bollywood movies, devoid of any individual existence, are seen to exist in relation to their male counterparts. In most of the item numbers, we see bodies of women dancing with the sole objective of seducing male actor(s). Also, male audience who consumes these item numbers from the other end of the screen participates in this mockery. It is at this juncture where, the bodily objectification stands two-fold, firstly in front of male actors on stage and secondly, in front of male audience off stage. This is where, item numbers blur out the thin line entirely, between reel and real.

In case of renowned item numbers like 'Munni Badnaam Hui' (Dabangg, 2010) or 'Zara Zara Touch Me' (Race, 2008), we see female bodies grooving sexually in accordance to the beats and rhythms of the songs. This, very wrongfully, presumes the idea that women bodies are nothing but uncontrollable bodies, being dominated by the males. Also, many a time, we see men, twisting the hands and wrists of these dancers, which normalizes eve teasing and brings forth an authoritative narrative. Also, item girls, as mere puppets, are found to be readily enjoying these kinds of dominations, on screen.

As posed forward by Bindu Nair (2002) earlier, in these item dance sequences, we see

certain parts of the body emphasized very often - including eyes, lips, torso, waist, hips, and breasts among others. Alluring costumes are worn which are revealing and brightly decorated. Highly suggestive makeup is incorporated such as brightly colored lips; light to mere transparent dresses are used, and co-dancers dancing with colorful props are prevalent. In this pursuit, if we remember Dworkin's renowned theoretical argument, she writes – "in our culture not one part of a women's body is left untouched, unaltered.... From head to toe, every feature of a woman's face, every section of her body, is subject to modification. (1974: 113–114).

In these item numbers, even certain bodily portions are found to be distorted, following a low- level camera angle which makes it even more unfitting. Henceforth, item numbers can be concluded as nothing but songs that normalize revealing bodies, vulgar and loud lyrics, distorted camera angles, suggestive grooving, and bodily movements which indicates sexual aggression.

For instance, in the renowned movie, 'Coolie No. 1' (1995), we see Govinda dancing to '*main to ladki ghuma raha tha*', as sung by Kumar Shanu. Question remains, are women then mere objects that needs to be exhibited? The song says so. This argument will be even more substantiated if I quote Rituporno Chatterjee here, according to whom "the etymology is perhaps unclear but no other word commodifies women like the word 'item' does" (Chatterjee, 2012).

Within the rubric of this argument, Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty's statement stands apposite, where she says, "if one thinks of the body as such, there is no possible outline of the body as such. There are thinkings of the systematicity of the body, there are value codings of the body. The body, as such, cannot be thought, and I certainly cannot approach it" (Spivak, 1989).

Item numbers have achieved pivotal focus in Bollywood ever since decades. Songs like "Mehbooba Mehbooba" (Sholay, 1975), "Piya Tu Ab To Aaja" (Caravan, 1971), "Yeh Mera Dil" (Don, 1978), "Aa Jaane Jaan" (Inteqam, 1969), "Jawani Jan-E-Man" (Namak Halaal, 1982), "Laila Main Laila" (Qurbani, 1980) are to name a few. Pattanaik in '*The Goddess in India*' (2000), talks about nymphs. And while doing so, he calls dancing women of Indian mythology as '*slippery damsels*' as if women dance with the sole objective of seducing men. We observe a similar ongoing narrative in Bollywood's item numbers. Hence, item songs, whether observed in recent Bollywood movies or older ones - display female sexuality as a readily available packaged service, with the sole objective of being consumed by the male gaze.

An interview with Ken Ghosh (Indian film director and producer) on 17 July 2005 would perhaps solidify the argument even more, where he says that 'skin videos' are much renowned among directors. He asserts that, "skin show and five babes (girls) in the rain, seems to work. More than audio CDs, music companies sell VCDs because I think we have a big market. A lot of men are willing to buy VCDs, so that they can watch in the privacy of their own homes - women cavorting in the rain, so that helps sales a lot. [And] it's cheaper to shoot a skin video than it is to shoot a made in India type video" (cited in Kishore, V., Sarwal, A., & Patra, P., 2016, *Salaam*

*Bollywood: Representations and Interpretations*).

While in the movie *Dabaang* (2010), we see Malaika Arora dancing as an item girl to the song 'Munni Badnam Hui', we see Sonakshi Sinha playing the character of Rajjo on the other hand, who is submissive, obedient and docile to say the least. There we achieve, a strict boundary of gender politics and morality being maintained, between good girls and bad girls – girls who dance on stage seducing men, versus girls who are homemakers and well-disciplined. One who is powerful and one who is powerless. Feminist representations on silver screens and item numbers can also be deduced from power relations following Foucault (1980), Bartky (1990) and Bordo (1993). Ranging from songs like "Tip Tip Barsa Paani" (1994) and "Main Aayi Hoon U.P. Bihar Lootne" (1999) of '90s to more recent "Sheila Ki Jawani" (2010), "Baby Doll" (2014) and "Kamariya" (2018), Bollywood produces and reproduces female objectification, in more ways than one.

What remains even more pertinent in today's Bollywood's narrative is the theoretical stance posed forward by Laura Mulvey. In accordance to the idea of 'to-be-looked-at-ness', Mulvey (1975) draws upon the concept of scopophilia, introduced by Freud in his *Theory of Sexuality* (1905). If we break down the terminology, Scopophilia refers to the pleasure grown from being gazed upon. However, Mulvey explores the idea of Scopophilia in terms of two different perspectives – majorly one of activity and the other of passivity. In 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' Mulvey asserts male characters and audience to be active whereas female characters to be passive and docile.

Question remains can Bollywood be considered as a medium of transformation then? A medium that converts female sexuality into nothing but a commodity and sells it off to the male centric audience? In this pursuit, I argue item numbers to be a form of gendered labour, whereby women work and dance only for the pleasure of men, be it actors or audience. They are demoralized all the more in the economy of sex, and forcefully made to bear the brunt of this demoralization themselves. Hence, it's nothing but a vicious cycle of use and abuse of both female bodies and female sexuality.

Along with Scopophilia, Mulvey draws upon the Freudian idea of phallocentrism (1905) as well, noting that images, characters, plot sequences and storylines are all formed on the patriarchal narratives and sexual frameworks. Furthermore, she draws from Jacques Lacan to focus more on the male gaze of the-then Hollywood movies. What remains even more prominent in Bollywood item numbers are the three different types of spectatorships as posed forward by Mulvey. These include the look of the camera which records the scene, the look of the audience off stage, and the look of the characters on stage – all three of them engrossed on women's bodies.

Hence, Bollywood can be defined as what Gayle Rubin articulates, a "sex/gender system...[or] set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (Rubin, 1990). While big-

budget movies incorporate these item numbers for production house profits, there remains several other latent repercussions Bollywood consciously gives rise to.

### **Lyrical Pleasure of Item Songs and Gendered Bigotries of Texts**

- “But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.”

George Orwell, 1984

It is language, through which meanings gain their forms and figures. Hence, in the case of item numbers, it is language that should be strictly disparaged under the school of feminist criticism. The lyrics of these item songs pose forward a substandard connotation of women in society. What disturbs us even more is the kind of ease and fun, these songs are heard among parties and crowds, children and adults, irrespective of gender, caste, class, or creed. But unfortunately, this ease, despite being detrimental is normalized to a mass extent.

While, Bollywood’s item songs are comparing women to liquor, cars, money, material wealth, and bombs, celebrities participating in these dance sequels are leading to self-objectification on one hand, and glorifying pro-rape attitude on the other. Similarly, in songs like *Sheila ki Jawani* (Tees Mar Khan, 2010), *Dilbar* (Satyameva Jayate, 2018), or *‘Chikni Chameli’* (Agneepath, 2011), we see the chief dancer dancing on the stage - groped, stared and crowded by men all around. If we consider songs like *‘Fevicol Se’* (Dabang 2, 2012) or *‘Munni Badnam Hui’* (Dabang, 2010), we come across lyrics like *“Main Zandu Baam Hui, Darling Tere Liye”* (translated into: I have turned into a painkiller, just for you”) or *“Main toh tandoori Moorgi hoon yaar, Gatka le mujhe alcohol se”* (translated into: I am like a chicken, ...consume me with alcohol). These lyrics remain extremely disgraceful and exasperating, to say the least.

Another exemplary instance of lyrical pleasure and gendered chauvinisms would be a song like *‘Pinky hai Paisewallon ki’* (Zanjeer, 2013) that prominently and publicly proclaims women to be gold diggers and materialistic. While these big-budget movies try to portray femininity in a distorted manner, the language and lyrics of these songs are eventually helping them to project a picture of distorted femininity, successfully.

It is at this juncture we return to Mulvey again, who asserts how ‘to-be-looked-at-ness’ results in nothing but a heightened erotic energy. It is at this juncture; we realize that these item numbers are glorifying nothing but toxic hegemonic masculinity on and off screen.

Hence, every time a film incorporates an item number, the responsibility is thrust upon us to remember and realize that women’s bodies are getting reduced to mere liquor bottles and *‘tandoori chicken’*. Every time, an item number gains popularity on social media, it is our responsibility to realize that we’ve failed. Every time, the movie directors decide to portray a female celebrity of Bollywood in semi-nude attire to dance suggestively on stage, we should realize that women’s bodies are being merely used in the name of arousing and igniting the male audience.

### **Reception and Perception of Androcentric Item Numbers**

However, we need to comprehend, that gendered bigotries of item numbers are not only limited to textual pleasure, but also visual construction. For instance, apart from camera angles, at the commencement of any item number we usually observe female dancers entirely crowded by male characters. Also, in certain cases, we see dramatic turnarounds of 'item girls' dancing on stage to which male characters start to whistle or throw liquor right away. There are instances, where women are found to enjoy the touch of males on their bodies whereas men are found to be rightfully enabled to female love and women. So, what gets projected is a distorted picture of femininity . whereby both the counterparts are found to be enjoying each other's company, supporting the romanticization of using and abusing female bodies. This in turn, teaches us that sexual aggression is pardonable, amusing and extremely regular.

Reproduction of gender politics on Silver Screens could be considered a direct consequence of socialization at early childhood. For instance, Beauvoir asserts how a girl child is encouraged to treat herself as "a passive object ... an inert given object" (1949 [1982: 306–307]) right from a tender age. "The exuberance of life ... restrained" (1949 [1982: 323]), "lack of physical power" is leading to a "general timidity" (1949 [1982: 355]). The account that Beauvoir is posing forward here is one in which girls undergo something like a training in bodily habits which structure the potentials for interaction with their world. And when these girls are consuming or participating in the gendered bigotries of everyday life, it comes up with a natural ease without any botheration. Because, that's what they have always been trained to do, and that's what turns out to be normalized for them. Hence, they remain silent to all kinds of bodily objectification, gendered commodification, and hegemonic masculinity, be it on reels or in real.

Question remains, what is the role of law then? Why can't lawmakers prevent the distorted portrayal of women bodies and female sexuality on screens till date? The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986 articulates that a derogatory portrayal of female bodies in entirety or any part is probable to impact the public morality; hence, should be strictly prohibited. However, we do not see the enactment of the act till date, be it on reels or in real.

Bettig and Hall (2012) in '*Big media, big money: Cultural texts and political*' asserts that, most often female celebrities are found to be assuring the directors with box office success simply by participating in a dance number through which they can ignite desires among the androcentric audience at large. This remains the only way how they can convert themselves into consumable commodities, buying box office hits in return. Hence, it is evidenced eventually that objectification does not only recur through the eyes of the male audience or male gaze but through self-objectification as well, who considers the ability to sell their bodies as a prowess of nothing but possession.

### **Expressions of Empowerment or Pronouncements of Objectification (?)**

Recently, Javed Akhtar, the celebrated Indian director, took a stance against androcentric

movie portrayals and asserted "I believe it's a testing time for the young filmmakers today as to what kind of characters they want to create that the society will applaud. For instance, if there's a film in which a man asks a woman to lick his shoe or if a man says it's okay to slap a woman, and if the film is a super-duper hit, then that's very dangerous" (The Hindu, 2004).

So, what this research study is trying to attest is that, every time a filmmaker incorporates an item number into the film, it is either because of selling off the movie better or that the movie minus the item number does not have anything to fascinate the audience. This is why when an item number in the middle of the movie is flashed across the screen, we should realize that these are nothing but deceits for gaining more commercial success. After all, the more the bare skin of female bodies is publicized, the more box office revenues would be expanded.

We discussed Mulvey's theoretical stance of male gaze in the prior sections. Her argument stands extremely relevant in terms of female representations amid Bollywood item numbers. Likewise, for Beauvoir, a consequence of a process of internalizing the view of it *under the gaze of others*, is what women are trained to learn from a very tender age. She furthers,

- "Through compliments and admonishments, through images and words, she discovers the meaning of the words pretty and ugly; she soon knows that to be pleased is to be pretty as a picture; she tries to resemble an image, she disguises herself, she looks at herself in the mirror, she compares herself to princesses and fairies from tales"(1949 [2010: 304]).

Hence, here is the beginning of the way in which women learn to live under the gaze of others, learn to consume and participate in commodification as normalized patterns, learn to be treated as objects of other's gaze, something which does not have any biological roots but rooted in one's socialization.

It is at this juncture, that controversies arise whether showing bare bodies and skin in these item numbers should be measured as a liberation of women's autonomy or should we consider it as an objectification of female bodies. Question remains, are the directors not selling item girls in the name of dance sequels to gain commercial success or should these item songs be simply considered as they are in the name of entertainment, irrespective of their loud vulgar lyrics and vexed portrayal?

### **Conclusion**

In essence, Bollywood's item songs convey troubling messages about female consent and glorify male sexual aggression. And, instead of viewing these songs as mere myths or fantasies, audiences use their content to establish norms of sexual behavior, partly due to Bollywood's influence on discussions about sexuality. Cinematic portrayals play a substantial role in constructing our perceptions—be it the romantic notion instilled by background violins or the societal expectations tied to a man conforming to the hero archetype.

Therefore, I consider it crucial to explore this aspect in my research, examining the broader theme of female representation in item numbers. In this pursuit, I have not set a specific time

frame but have established criteria for song selection, opting for a random sampling method. But, for feminism to make strides, it must go beyond written texts or social activism. It is crucial for feminists to engage with all forms of media, given their pervasive presence in our lives today compared to the past. Hence, to effectively combat sexual violence in India, there is a need for increased focus on educating the public to be critical consumers of item songs' – be it explicit or implicit messages about sexuality.

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