



Bollywood and Gender: Male Gaze in Popular Culture

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Raymond Williams defines culture as the cumulative deposit of knowledge, values, beliefs, notion of time, religion, attitudes, hierarchies, roles and other possessions of a particular community acquired by generations after generations through individual or group striving. Culture is thus the sum total of learned behavior. It is further divided into High culture and Low culture. The high culture is often referred to as the culture of the intellectual elite. It is highly acclaimed for its lasting artistic and intellectual effect. Whereas the low culture which is often tagged as the mass culture or popular culture is a binary opposite of the high culture. It has a little or no artistic value. It is often considered to be undemanding, easy to understand entertainment product.

India, the subcontinent popular for its cultural diversity, in almost every single sphere of its existence. Ranging from the apparent diversities in clothing and food habits, to the subtle diversity working underneath guiding ideologies of the society, diversity drapes itself all around the Indian consciousness. But there are certain uniting factors that bind the country together forming unique characteristic of 'unity in diversity'. Amidst other binding factors, the entertainment served by the silver screen is one of its kind, it has the power to unify 'almost' the whole of India under its spell. The Hindi film industry or the Bollywood runs like a river across the country connecting people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari. It is liked by the majority and is produced for the sole purpose of entertainment of the mass, thus making it a major face of contemporary Indian popular culture. Indian cities offer a major cornucopia of images related to Bollywood: ranging from huge colorful billboards to roadside posters to public transport having film posters on them. Bollywood is a far complex matter and it has greater social impact than it being credit to. By the mentioning of Bollywood what comes up to our mind is music and dance. The most inevitable part of Bollywood are songs and dance

sequences Each film is like a music album consisting of atleast 8-10 songs suitable for various moods; from party songs to sad songs to love songs, suitable to various moods.

Bollywood songs often being generalized as Hindi songs are an inevitable part of any public function all across India. The recent trend in the Bollywood is the introduction of the "item songs" or the "item numbers". The item songs are wholly dedicated to satisfy the male gaze in the audience and which the paper tries to explore.

Laura Mulvey's popular essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" coined the term "Male Gaze" which soon went on to become a very well known and discussed theory. According to her in the film, the male gaze occurs when the audience is put into the perspective of a heterosexual man. A scene may focus on the curves of a woman's body, putting you the viewer in the eyes of a male. However it is only the Male Gaze theory if these curves are highlighted with specific conventions such as slow motion, deliberate camera movements and cut aways. The theory suggests that the male gaze denies women human identity, relegating them to the status of objects to be admired for physical appearance. The theory suggest woman can more often than not only watch a film from a secondary perspective and only view themselves from male's perspective. However the presence of woman in the mainstream film texts is something that is vital. Often a female character has no real importance herself, it is how she makes the male feel or act that is the importance. The female exists only in relation to the male. Mulvey argues, for women the result of media being presented from the perspective of men and through the male gaze, women find themselves, at times taking of the male gaze. Women then gaze at each other in the same way as men would, and thus end up objectifying other women.

The word item refers to an object or thing, but in the Indian film context it often refers to some



good looking girl and so the item songs need no more definitions. Tracing the history of item songs from the early days of Hindi films till date item songs have secured their very own place their role have changed and evolved but they never fell out of favor. These songs are mainly portrayed on a female lead dancer, often scantily dressed, moving her hips suggestively in a catchy tune and is often surrounded by a crowd of men (often drunk) lusty over her. The item songs have changed their looks and music and dancers but the basics remain unchanged so does its role. The item songs are usually a big hit, the scantily clad heroine or lead female dancer is pretty herself, a pretty crowd puller thus selling off the ticket.

Bollywood realized from the beginning that sex sells, thus presenting eroticism on screen became one of the aims of the Bollywood movies. Time changes and so does the nature of the item songs. Previously the heroes were shown going to mehefils, where the tawaifs did the kathak to entertain the hero. With the turn of the era, mehefils change to cabarets and from then to the present day where the item songs can be placed anywhere from the top of a moving train (chaiyachaiya from dil se) to the police station (dabang) to a film shoot. But the basics remained the same. "The woman remains the dancing lead with some times other male or female co-dancers". She is still being crowded by drunk or lustful men and their remains one main male character to whom she dedicated her performance and it does not count anymore if the male protagonist is already married or engaged in the film, he can easily flirt with the 'item' girl. The costume remained traditionally scanty, showing ample cleavage and slender waists and the thumkas maintained the tradition-the camera keeping true to its duty of representing the eye of the society glides over the curves of the dancer's body. In every item song, the lyrics became more interesting and powerful. The subtle eroticism of the 60's were gone, now the Munni wants to get badnam eagerly for her lover. Munni dances off as she sings and dances surrounded by many drunk men of different age groups. After Munni comes Shila to rock the floor and to ignite the fire in the hearts of Indian men. She was not dancing in the country liquor theque- she was a bit sophisticated in her appearances. But she went a step ahead further where munni was ready for her darling to win her over, shila claimed that she was not just anybody's cup of tea she does not need a man she herself is capable enough to give herself a hug and if she wishes she will choose a man grading him on her own scale. She again and again objectifies herself

maybe with gold rather than with alcohol, or worst with tandoori chicken which needs to be devoured. The objectification of the female body carries on. Bollywood goes next step and introduces strip dancing in the mainstream movie. We have hardly any clue what strip teasing has to do with gymnastics that is actually required in the audition of circus, but it was shown having nothing to do with the development of the story interestingly, in the poster of the film, the male characters are there in their full show of vigour and masculinity whereas the woman is there in the poster as usual half clad putting on a seducing look.

Item songs are a major product of Bollywood, which itself is the product of the culture industry. The item songs have nothing to do with the progress of the movie but they are the selling point of a movie. Item songs are immensely popular because of the reason that they portray the women's body keeping in mind the male audience in mind. The lyrics, the dance, the crowd, the groping, the stalking and the camera all together recreates the world of male sexual fantasy where woman is stripped down of all her individuality and has turned into a sex object. The success of the movies depends on these item songs which use vulgar language and seductive steps. The item songs try to promote many wrong ideas about women and worst among them is that a woman despite of her own will can be forced, she can be stalked and can be inappropriately touched and somehow at the end, she will fall prey and will dance sensuously thus reciprocating the advances made by men. Item songs have reduced women to mere sex objects who can be moulded and directed the way the man wants her to be. The camera always represents the male gaze of the patriarchal society thus settling its gaze on the curves. The gaze outside the silver screen precisely want to ogle those very parts of the female body, so often in item songs, the face is given the least importance. The male gaze on the dancing bodies is purely sexual neither is it respectful nor is it in the appreciation of the art of dancing, its pure lust and Bollywood catches that essence and presents the female body in such a complete package, namely the item numbers. As a cultural practices of India provides us with two kinds of women, the virgin and the vamp, so does Bollywood. Vamps are inviting but they are prohibited as virgins are needed to restore the traditional values, so that's what is prohibited becomes more interesting. Thus vamps become the woman whose body Indian men could easily ogle yet they do not disturb the social balance, they go back home to the ideal bharatiyanari.



Thus somehow the item numbers in Bollywood symbolize women are nothing more than sex objects, who all are created just to gratify sexual pleasure to men, is reaching out to all and this somehow fuels the violence against women. Somehow the gender role in popular culture has gone to point of extreme opposites giving rise to immense hostility. As a result violence against women, sexual crimes, discrimination on the basis of gender are slowly becoming contemporary popular cultures, and that indeed is a grim situation as that is a crime against humanity.

Bibliography:

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- [2]. Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema".