

The Objectification of Women in Bollywood Item Songs: A Semiotic Study

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Abstract: The majority of Bollywood movies include songs that are categorized as “item songs”. These songs have women as central figures around whom the songs are choreographed. While these songs have nothing to do with the plot they are mass entertainers. These women are shown wearing skimpy clothes with camera angles focusing on specific body parts, thus objectifying them. But it only the pictographic representation that is objectifying women or lyrics does play an important role in this objectification too? And if the lyrics do support such objectification then how are they objectifying women with words? The research paper attempts to study how women are continuously being objectified in Bollywood item songs down the ages with the help of lyrics. The primary texts for the analysis are Bollywood item songs. And the researcher has done a semiotic content analysis of the lyrics studying the various metaphors and symbols used in such songs to show how various metaphors are used to objectify women reducing them to mere flirts or seductresses.

Keywords: Bollywood, Item songs, objectification, analysis, semiotics.

More often than not when we watch a Bollywood movie, we come across dance numbers that are now named “item songs”. An item song, in Bollywood or the Indian Film Industry, is a slang which refers to a song performed by a sexy, sizzling lady, with a catchy tune and hook phrases. This lady will be dressed in bare minimum with a bunch of men lusting after her, while she will be portrayed enjoying their attention and provoking them with her often suggestive dance moves. These songs mostly have nothing to do with the plot development but will be simply added to bring audiences to the theatres. Then why is it that they are gradually becoming so popular and are being included in the majority of Bollywood movies. While the word “item” means an object or inventory, in Bollywood, these item songs often compare the girl to various objects addressing her as “patakha”, “phuljhari”, “chamiya”, “tandoori murgi” and whatnot. Then is it only the pictographic representation that is objectifying women or lyrics do play an important role too? And if the lyrics do support such objectification then how are they objectifying women with words?

The research paper attempts to study how women are continuously being objectified in Bollywood item songs down the ages with the help of lyrics. The paper is divided into the historical background of how songs entered Bollywood, how are the songs objectifying women by analyzing the lyrics of such song and studying the recent researches conducted in this area and contradictory viewpoints put forward. It is said that Bollywood has a major role to play in shaping the mindset of the people of the country, so what exactly is Bollywood propagating through these is questionable. But Bollywood item songs through the use of metaphors that are profanely materialistic objectify women, reducing them to a stature of mere seductresses.

The Indian film industry is a thriving industry that expands every day. It traces its origin to the establishment of motion pictures with the release of the movie “*Raja Harishchandra*” back in 1913. Since then the industry has never looked back. The industry suffered a standstill during the wars but it recovered quickly, emerging more powerful than ever with Hindi as the national film language and the inauguration of the National film council and the Censor Board.

Arguing that the objectification is not sudden but a gradual process, from utopian socialism, Bollywood movies developed gradually handling the political pressure during the partition and emergency (Chatterjee 53). Butalia in her article, “Women in Indian Cinema” (110) had the same notions as she argues that not only male directors objectify women but also women directors appear to go with the trend and create stereotypical female characters. Her article dealt with the position of women in Bollywood and aims to reveal the hypocrisy of the directors. She argues that under the curtains of songs and dances, romance and colours, escapism, melodrama and romance, Bollywood

has projected these stereotypes that go very deep. Women are either projected to be good or bad, either they are dotting daughters, caring mothers or sisters, loving wives, and love interests or they are vamps with heavy makeup and revealing dresses supporting the villains of the movies. There is no grey in this picture. This cine-sexuality is normed by social life and in turn casts upon the social life, its own changing images. (Brara 100) Often item songs use the female body to bring in audiences in the theatres making money merely by selling the female body.

The trend of the item songs is not new, we have actresses like Helen, Aruna Irani, Nadira and Padma who started this trend, with songs like "*Piya tu ab to aa jaa*", "*yeh mera dil pyaar ka deewana*", but unlike recent times, earlier it was only the vamps who agreed on dancing on these item songs. With songs like "*jumma chumma*" we saw even the lead actors enjoying the beats. The trend gradually changed from when Madhuri Dixit performed on songs like "*choli ke peeche kya hai*" and "*ek do teen*" to the present when we have lead actresses like Kareena Kapoor Khan, Katrina Kaif, Priyanka Chopra shaking their legs on item songs. Today they have become an inherent part of Indian cinema, they have become a promotional necessity. It is due to less or no objections raised by people that the songs now use such derogatory lyrics. Earlier what used to be just double meaning lyrics are now replaced by the use of various metaphors that are materialistic to compare a woman and her body with different things.

A result of this is that women body is nothing more than an object in these songs where comparisons are made of a woman to "zandu balm", her cheeks are pink, her eyes are intoxicating like alcohol; she is a lady easily available to everyone; she is like a piece of chicken which can be best served with alcohol, her smile is like milk cream, style mesmerizing, eyes are sour like salt, lips are sweet like milk pudding. The sad part behind these songs is that these are written to be sung by women, filmed where the item girl is singing and instigating the males around her, performed by lead actresses who have nothing to say against them. The cinematography is so much so that the female gives away to three gazes, one of the male counterpart in the video itself, second is that of the camera, and the third of the audience.

The fact that springs out here is that the majority of the item songs are from flop movies, devoid of proper plot or storyline, yet all the item songs are hits. This further supports the argument that the item songs are only added to bring audiences to the theatres and nothing else.

Bollywood is essentially a male-dominated industry where often females are not given major roles and no matter how beautifully the lead actresses act, they fail to leave an impact on the audiences. Often their scenes are cut when the film extends its time limit. Bollywood movies comprise generally of a plot often centring the actor, dialogues, costumes, exotic locations, songs choreographed in these exotic locations and when there is nothing else to add, the directors end up adding item numbers. Even the lead actresses are fixed in stereotypical roles, we either have the "abla naari" who is a sorrowful, melodramatic character often bearing all the ill-treatment she gets from other characters, then we have a character that conforms to all the norms of the society, i.e, the "Sanskari ladki" as she might be termed, though well educated this character would have only one motto in life, that is, to look after her husband and family, then we have the character of the mother who is willing to sacrifice herself for the sake of her children, next comes the bad girl who is often the one who does not conform to the societal norms, this character would never get to pair up with the hero and if she does then she has to go through a transformation whereby she becomes the "sanskari ladki". And then comes the vamps or item girls, though the item songs were first performed by the vamps it's now that everybody is ready to sign up for it. Thus it is seen that its either good or bad that these characters are divided into and nothing in between.

The darker side of the sparkling bright world of Bollywood is that often boys and girls from lower and middle-class backgrounds come to Mumbai in order to try their luck as actors. These aspiring actors land up struggling for many years in the industry, for them it becomes easy to dance on these songs as background dancers than to dance in bars or local shows. These item songs are reproduced in the dance bars, in turn, seeping into the society. Even the mainstream actresses who dance on these songs do not see the layers of objectification. In an interview, Sushmita Sen is found saying "if you have a body, you should show it" when asked about her views on the skimpy dresses girls wear in an item song which portrays that not only in men but the stereotypes are also engraved in women psyche.

The primary texts for the analysis are Bollywood item songs. The lyrics are taken verbatim, and the translation is done by the researcher who has the basic proficiency in Hindi also referring to Google translations for some words. The researcher has done a semiotic content analysis of the lyrics studying the various metaphors and symbols used in such songs.

The song from the movie “*Tevar*”(2015) titled “*Madamiyan*” featuring Arjun Kapoor and Shruti Hassan uses lyrics such as

*“smile malai hai teri, style hai gajak,
Narmi bhi, garmi bhi, tu badi gazab”*

The lyrics translate to,

“Your smile is smooth like milk cream, style remarkable,
Soft as well as Hot, you are awesome”

On analysing the lyrics we can see that they are complimenting a woman with words like remarkable and awesome but at the same time with the help of metaphors, her features are compared to milk cream, eyes with a salty dish while lips with sweets(kalakand). Through language her beauty is reduced to fragments, she is not described as a whole but by especially focusing on certain features the effectiveness of her beauty is being reduced. The lyricist has somewhat rendered the woman invisible as a person, her only function is to seduce the male-counterpart. As described by Ahmad and Wahab(2016) by using such lyrics, for the lyricist a woman is not taken for her scholarly achievements but the achievement she gets through the pleasure that her body gives to the male gaze of the lyricist.

The next song taken for the analysis is from the movie “*The dirty picture*”(2011) titled “*Ooh La La*” featuring Vidya Balan, Emraan Hashmi, Tusshar Kapoor and Naseeruddin Shah composed by Vishal-Shekhar. The song uses lyrics such as

“chedenge hum tumko, ladki tu hai badi bumbard.....(music)”

“Tu hai meri fantasy”

“yauwan tera sawan bhara,

Bheeng gaya dil yeh mera”

The translation of this is

“I will continue teasing you, as you are a bombshell(music)”

You are my fantasy”

“Your puberty is raining as if its monsoon,

My heart is drenched in it.”

In the song, the lyricist Vishal-Shekhar are justifying the male gaze as well as the harassments caused by a male and they are putting the blame on the female as if she is to seduce the man and provoked him into teasing her. The language is used as a tool to show women their “place in the society” as well as celebrate stalking, harassment, and molestation. We see a subject-object binary being established where the male being the subject is putting forward his point of view and justifies his right to tease because she is hot like a bombshell. The female here as portrayed by is a sex object, a mere temptress who gratifies the sexual needs of the man.

Another song whose lyrics justify the male gaze and molestation is the song from the movie “*Phata poster nikla Hero*”(2013) titled “*Agal Bagal hai*” featuring Shahid Kapoor and Ileana D’Cruz. The lyrics are as follows

“Khali pili khali pili rokne ka nai,

Tera peecha jo karu tokne ka nai”

“Hai tujhpe right mera’

Tu hai delight mera,

Tera rasta jo roku chaukne ka nai”

The lyrics translate to,

“Don’t ever try to stop me unnecessarily,

If I stalk you on the roads don’t complain”

“I have a right on you,

As you are my delight,

If I stop you on the road don’t get scared.”

Thus in this song as well we can see the subject-object binary established by the lyricist for whom if a male stalks his crush on the roads, it is absolutely okay for both of them. She should always be passive about it. She should not stop her “lover” in such cases. What is astounding to see is the line “I have a right on you” which promotes the idea that no matter what designation a man has, even a mere stalker has the right over the female, with or without her consent. The opinion of female voice is not at all given any kind of importance, which points to the patriarchal notion that a woman is a man’s possession; she is always the “other” whose ideal role should be passive and submissive.

The next song taken for analysis is titled “*Fevicol se*” from the movie “*Dabangg 2*”(2012) featuring Kareena Kapoor, Salman Khan and Arbaaz Khan written by Wajid Ali. The lyrics of the song go as follows

“mai toh kabse hoon ready taiyaar,

Patale saiyan missed call se”

“mai toh tandoori murgi hoon yaar,

Gatkale saiyaan alcohol se”

“log kehte hai mujhe mai toh hoon namkeen butter”,

These lines translate to

“I am ready since so long,

You can have me with a missed call.”

“I am a barbecued chicken,

You can swallow me with alcohol”

“People say that I am salted butter,

The lyrics have profoundly materialistic metaphors used to compare a woman to a barbecued chicken better enjoyed with alcohol. She is so easy to impress that she will be yours in no time. She is salty like butter. What is to be observed here is that through the lyrics it is a female who is making her own comparisons. In the last few songs, it was the male singing the lyrics but here it is the female who submits to the role of a seductress luring the man to go after her. She is “asking for it”. This hints to the fact as observed by Dwivedi(2017) the objectification is well internalized in the society. While analysing lyrics of these songs what is to be taken into account is the composer of such lyrics as language varies according to the user. The composer always becomes the self while the object becomes the “other” but here the “other” is submitting to the desires of the self.

As observed by Carver(2003), in the patriarchal society, there are certain behavioural attributes being assigned where the women’s attributes are physical weakness, dependency, emotional excess as well as co-operative social strategies, along with sexual constancy and security consciousness. And this can be realised with such songs where women is shown to be dependent on the male. Other such song that exhibits self-

objectification and dependency is titled “*Aa ante amlapuram*” from the movie “*Maximum*” featuring Hazel. The lyrics are

“meena hai naam maihoon atom bomb,(music)

“tu chalaye mai chalungi,

Bin tere na hilungi,

Tere haathon me meri steering”

“mai patakha, mai dhamaka,”

The lyrics translate to

“My name is meena, I am an atom bomb,(music)

“You will operate me, I will abide by,

Without you I won't even take a single step”

“I am a firecracker, I am an explosion,”

The self-objectification is quite explicit here where the lyrics hint that a girl named Meena is singing this song who says that she is an atom bomb, a firecracker. She willingly accepts her role as a seductress. The dependency exhibited here is quite shocking as she says she won't even take a single step without the man and that he has full control over her. She willingly suspends her individuality, opinions and voice just to be with her male counterpart. Thus it is the woman herself who is placing her as an object, her male counterpart being the subject.

The next song taken for analysis is “*Sheila ki jawaani*” featuring Katrina Kaif from the movie “*Tees Maar Khan*”(2010). The lyrics are

“I know you want it but you're never gonna get it,

Tere haath kabhi na aani”

I am too sexy for you, tere haath kabhi na aani”

“paisagaadi mehenga ghar, i need a man who can give me all that”

“jeben khali fattichar, no no i don't love him like that”

The lyrics translate to

“i know you want it but you're never gonna get it,

It's out of your reach”

“I am too sexy for you, I am out of your reach”

“Money, car, expensive house, I need a man who can give me all that”

“Empty pockets, a miser, no no I don't love him like that”

The lyrics again suggest that it is sung by a woman who is provoking a man saying that she is out of his league. Language and the ways in which people use it has a profound influence on how one sees the world. As the patriarchal society considers man as the norm and woman as the “other” she is always defined from a male's perspective. Though women want to break stereotypes, they themselves have submitted to them. As here as well, we see the girl accepting her identity as being a temptress. She is seen provoking the male by saying that she is out of his reach, but if he wants to have her he ought to be rich. Here though the song is supposed to be portraying a woman's viewpoint it is showing her in a bad light, she is a vamp, the only way to get her is giving her materialistic

things. She will only go to a rich man, somewhere we can see the economic dependency of the women which again is a patriarchal notion in which no matter what role the woman has in the society, she will always depend on a man for everything. By saying that she needs a rich man with expensive house and cars, the male's perspective of a woman being materialistic and gold-digger is portrayed.

These notions are challenged by many saying that with changing times we do have item songs performed by males and when an item song is written for a man and performed by one, no one has any objections to that. But what is to be seen is that in item songs written for males to perform on, there is no such objectification made. Two such item songs to be analysed that are written for males and performed by them are "Subah Hone na de" from the movie "Desi boyz"(2011) featuring John Abraham and "Tattad Tattad" from the movie "Ram-Leela"(2013) featuring Ranveer Singh.

The lyrics of the song "Subah hone na de" are as follows

"humko kehde superman, on karlo handycam,

Bahoon me aa soniye, bus aaj raat k lie"

"subah hone na de saath khone na de,

Ek dusre ko hum sone na de,

Mai tera hero.. haan hero.. haan hero"

The lyrics translate to

"People call us Superman, switch on your handycam

Come closer darling, just for tonight"

"Let there not be morning, Let's not leave each other,

Let's not allow each other to sleep,

I am your hero, your hero, your hero."

Here we can clearly see that the male is being favoured in the song, unlike the above mentioned songs where a woman is seen comparing herself to atom bomb and firecrackers, we see the man comparing himself with Superman. He says that he will satisfy his female counterpart's needs because he is her hero. The fact that he wants the female to depend on him as he is her "superman" to give her the pleasure she wants somewhere again puts man as self and the woman as the "other"

The lyrics of the song "tattad tattad" go like

"ramji ki chaal dekho,

Aankhon ki majaan dekho,

Karein yeh dhamaal dekho,

Are dil ko tum sambhaal dekho"

Ragon me ubaal dekho"(music)

The lyrics translate to

"Notice lord ram's walk,

Notice the confidence in his eyes,

He spreads joy everywhere,

Control your heart when you see him"

“see his walk, see his style,

See the power in his blood,

What is again to be observed here that the lyrics compare the male who is singing it to lord ram and praises him for all his actions. The lyrics portray that for the one singing it he is nothing less than god, thus he is the overarching self who is reaffirming his agency unlike the songs written supposedly by female perspective in which the composer being males shows that the lady is willingly giving up her agency and asking the male counterpart to take control.

Often the forms of behaviour assigned to males are physical and intellectual aggression, unemotional individualism, competitive achievement as well as sexual promiscuity and risk-taking and somewhere these songs cater to these notions portraying male as the subject or self. We can clearly see that both in songs written by the male perspective as well as female perspective it is the man who is the centre of everything. A female is just a seductress or a vamp whose main role is to submit to the man's desire, completely give herself up and give pleasure to the male as it is the only thing a woman can do. Thus though people argue that it is not only for females that these item songs are written, one cannot ignore the fact that for the songs written for males, there is no objectification whatsoever. Also 90% of these item songs are written for the females to perform on and as these songs are majorly written by the male composers we see them stereotyping the females and reducing them to the stature of mere seductresses.

Another argument made against the objectification is that though Bollywood item songs objectify women but there are other songs as well written by famous lyricist which praise women without portraying them in a negative light. Analysing such songs is for future study.

But in the case of Bollywood Item songs, one can say that the majority of them have sexual connotations which knowingly or unknowingly objectify women with the profane use of metaphors that are materialistic and in turn reflect women's inferiority often naturalising the abuse. Thus, through the analysis of selected item songs, one can clearly see that there is a profound use of metaphors that are materialistic to objectify women, reducing their stature to being mere seductresses or flirts.

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