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‘Male Gaze’ in Bollywood Item Songs: A Study of Popular Song *Munni Bodnam Hui of Dabang* (2010) Movie

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Abstract:

The importance of item songs along with the excellent story is on the increase in contemporary cinemas, especially in Bollywood cinemas. In these songs, the presence of recent heroines is very much noticeable, and even many cinemas get the promotion centering on the item songs where the erotic demonstration of the female character gets more preference. In these songs, the heroine is nothing but a product to be entertained, and the males are the spectators. According to Laura Mulvey, if a woman is presented in the way ‘the spectators want to look at’ is identical to *the male gaze*. In this article, a famous Bollywood item song has been selected to analyze based on the *Theory of Male Gaze* by Mulvey.

Key words: Laura Mulvey, Item Song, Male Gaze, Erotic Presentation, Voyeurism, Bollywood.

1. Introduction

Songs with dance are one of the most essential parts of Bollywood- the Indian film industry, and lately, item song is a new addition to this. This has got a very little connection or has no connection to the movie's main storyline (Brara, 2010). The erotic representation of the sexuality of women is conspicuous in this type of song. Here erotic indicates a scenic representation that provokes the audience thinks about sexual activities while watching it. According to Posner, "...presentations and representations that are, or at least are taken by some

viewers to be, in some sense 'about' sexual activity." (Posner, 1994, p. 351). But the idea of eroticism may differ based on time and place. In this article, the origin of the erotic representation of women has been investigated- What is the source of erotic representation? Does it (erotic representation) happen because of the male gaze? Or, do the women erotically represent themselves at their intentions? Is there exist any Female Gaze? After the research work, it has been found that this kind of representation of female character takes place because of the male gaze, which is - the way patriarchy wants to see or show- of representing a female character in the patriarchal society. This kind of representation has got its root in the previously dominating patriarchal ideology. Besides, it has also been revealed in this article that how the film society accepts and publicizes the sub-consciousness of patriarchy by illustrating women as passive or lively products and men as active spectators.

This article has been divided into a few parts for a better presentation. At first, the subject matter of the article has been brought up. Secondly, there has been a brief discussion on Laura Mulvey's *Theory of Male Gaze*. The definition, characteristics, and history of the item song are described briefly in the third part. Finally, the erotic representation of female sexuality in one popular item song selected from the item songs of past and present time is analyzed in the light of the *Theory of Male Gaze* by Laura Mulvey.

2. Idealizing the 'Male Gaze' of Laura Mulvey (1975)

The growing trend of exposure of female bodies or the erotic representation of female sexuality in cinemas (Rahman M. A., 2022), more specifically in the item songs in Hindi mainstream cinema, emerges as a result of the male gaze, and it is important to discuss 'male gaze' before explaining how it (erotic representation of female sexuality) takes place.

Laura Mulvey coined the term 'male gaze' in her groundbreaking article, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema (1975)*, where she delineated a thematic trend of Hollywood cinema. She developed the concept of the male gaze has become one of the dominant paradigms in feminist film theory, where she politically applied the Psycho-analysis Theory to trace the root of attraction for films. Mulvey explained that she had used the psychoanalytic theory as "a political weapon, demonstrating how the unconscious of patriarchal society has structured film form" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 6). She propounds that the things we see in the cinemas reflect the socially established ideas where the explanation of gender discrimination is at heart. And the base of this discrimination has its root in Phallocentrism which acts subconsciously in society. She has identified this procedure of ideology as Male Gaze that means it is not likely

the gaze or gaze of a glance or unstable gaze rather, and it is the established patriarchal ideology of the society.

Mulvey (Mulvey, 1975) has explicated this theory through the credence of Scopophilia, Voyeurism, Ego Libido, and Mirror Stage. According to Mulvey, films offer different types of satisfaction, and one of them is Scopophilia, which indicates taking pleasure by watching. There are two aspects- the satisfaction of 'Looking' and 'Looked-at-ness'. But if our eyes are at ease after watching, other sensitive body parts are also satisfied. Mulvey has connected Scopophilia with other people who have been accounted as mere objects by controlling and confining them through curious gaze. Mulvey (1975) analyzed Scopophilia in cinema through sexual difference:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to *the female figure which is styled accordingly*" (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11)

In this case, she brought up the issue of voyeurism in light. Voyeurism is the practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others naked or engaged in sexual activity. According to Mulvey, gazing in films is a primitive desire. An individual who fulfills his or her desire and the Mirror Stage, plays the controlling roles here. This term was first used by Jacques Lacan (Cartwright, 2009). According to him, a child's first watching its face into a mirror contributes a great deal to build up its ego libido, but the mental desire of the baby wishes to surpass its physical ability (Cartwright, 2009). An individual looks for the similarities within himself or herself while watching a film, and he or she wants to surpass himself or herself. This process is called Ego Libido.

Mulvey opines that the females are represented as objects to be 'looked at and the males are represented as 'spectators'. Quoting Boyettishar, Mulvey advocates that the role of females is to entertain the males. The females are represented as an object of 'to be looked at and 'to be shown' which Mulvey wishes to terminate as:

In their traditional exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. The woman displayed as a sexual object is the leitmotif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to, and signifies male desire. (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11)

However, Mulvey believes that this process is a part of the overall patriarchal structure of the cinema, but it can be defied only by breaking down the cinematic codes that create the

illusion of truth and reality to play on the fantasies that are evoked through the gaze. Mulvey (1975) identified there are three levels of cinematic gaze-camera: the look of the camera, character: the look of the characters within the screen diegesis and spectator: the look of the audience) that objectify the female character and make her into a spectacle, It achieves its realistic end by denying the first two and subordinating them to the third. By disrupting the seamlessness of this visual illusion, the 'male gaze' can be subverted.

Women's activist film pundits, along with Johnston (1973), Devereaux (1990), and Smith (1972) repeated Mulvey's (1975) work at the look being manly. Critics, including Rich (1978), Rodowick (1982), Stacey (1987), and Carroll (1990), fundamentally went against the male gaze idea (Sensharma, 2007)

Considering Mulvey's theorization as a framework, this article will be devoted to analyzing a particular aspect of contemporary mainstream Bollywood films, especially the analysis of what is popularly termed the item number.

3. The item songs in Bollywood Cinemas: Its emergence and Present

Songs with dance is a part and parcel of Hindi cinemas since the inception of Bollywood, the Indian film industry, which was initiated by producer and director Dada Saheb Phalke in 1913 (Hutchinson, 2013) (Mazumdar, 2005). Especially, the trend of songs with dance and aesthetic dress launched in the middle of 20th Century- 1960s and 1970s (Kaur, 2011). The role and demand of songs in movies have gradually changed due to the entrance of the item songs which were noticed in the 1950s (Darashiko, 2011), but they were not known as item songs rather known as Cabaret songs or party songs. (Kaur, 2011). Item song is the established form of item number, but the basic and exact credence is item number which is much more associated with actress Shilpa Shetty.

In his research, Majumdar laments the lack of great dance venues, such as the 'Club', about the jobs of Vamp, Helen and Bindu, who gained an attractive status in the context of the extensive 1960s film. She said that,

[T]he prevalence of certain techniques have become important in the 1990s as the heroine began to occupy the space of the vamp ... the space of the nightclub has today lost its iconic status ... the dances were no longer located in a morally coded space, but moved into multiple locations. These fragments negotiate fashion, the female body, dance and music, to present a performance through which a 'spatial relocation of the metropolis occurs'. (Mazumdar, 2005, p. 90)

The word 'item' was first used in the song titled *Mein hun up bihan lootne* of the movie *Shuul*, but in this research article the credence is used as 'item song'. Actually, 'Item song' is a combination of two words 'item' and 'song'. It is not clear why the word 'item' is used here. In Hindi language, 'item' indicates to a 'prostitute' or 'very much sexually attractive girls. This word 'item' can refer to a different meaning like 'intoxicating commodity' because the female characters are shown exotically in this song. Jerry Pinto contrasts between the 'vamp'/'cabaret' and the 'item girl'/'item song':

There has been a tendency to reduce the figure of a bad girl to a caricature...this ignores the moral role the vamp had played in the films in which she appeared. She was not merely about eye candy, which makes the claim that the vamp has returned in the item number sequences that began in the late nineties nonsensical. The item-number girl has no other function than to appease the male desire to be voyeur while a woman dances. (Pinto, 2006, p. 86).

The words 'item girl' is very common in use whereas the use of 'item boy' is very rare. Nonetheless, Shah Rukh Khan was the 'item boy' in *Kaal* or *Om Shanti Om* cinema.

The first thing young lady was a melody artist who got her huge break in 1958, she was given a role as a Chinese lady in the generally indecent sentiment *Howrah Scaffold*. Radiating with orientalist fetishism, her key melody song *Mera Naam Chin Chin Chu* (My Name Is Chin Chin Chu) appears to be agreeable by the present principles, yet it was noteworthy in the straightforwardness of its endeavor to channel a hearty look (Sahim, 2015). The impact was quick – and gigantic. The kickoff that a tune or two from Helen would provide for a's film industry take got unbelievable and made the star's syndication self-sustaining. The most tasteful thing young lady is additionally the saddest. The 1960 chronicled epic *Mughal-e-Azam* (for a very long time, the most elevated earning Bollywood film), tells, to some degree, of a prohibited sentiment between a sovereign and a court artist that the lord – who boycotts the issue – has renamed *Anarkali*.

Grant defines item song as 'a musical representation' (Grant, 2006). It has got a very little connection with the cinema, or it would not be unfair to say that there is no connection at all. In the cinemas, beautiful female dancers wearing a very little amount of cloth are presented as objects. He said "A musical performance that holds little or no relevance at all to the film in which it features. It appears in a film to present beautiful dancing women in revealing and exposing clothes (Grant, 2006, p. 190). From this definition of Grant, some of the characteristics of item songs can be derived. First, this song is not connected with the cinema. Secondly, wearing very little amount of cloth is an essential aspect of this song. Along with it, sensually

excited and attractive lyrics are added to bring a different flavor. Thirdly, the leading characters (hero & heroine) are kept aside, or they are the cast of this song. In the recent times, the top heroines have also appeared in the item songs under the disguise of guest appearance.

The history of item number is not new at all, especially the name of Helen is so much affiliated with item number (Pinto, 2006). The established leading heroines of the 70s of the 20th centuries started taking part in the item number. Zinat Aman, Parveen Bobby and Rekha are the mostly mentioned ones. In the 1980s, the top heroines emerged as the main attraction for item number. The legendary actress, Madhuri Dixit, played a crucial role to take the item songs into a newer dimension. With this, her *contemporary and nearly contemporary* actresses like Urmila Matondakar, Sonali Brendre, Shilpa Shetty, Ravina Tendon even *the recent past and very recent* actresses like Karishma Kapoor, Tabu, Manisha Koirala, Susmita Sen, Oishwariya Roy, Kareena Kapoor, Katrina Kaif and Priyanka Chopra also casted in item songs (Kaur, 2011) (Pinto, 2006) (Mazumdar, 2005). In the recent times, the top heroines have also appeared in the item songs under the disguise of guest appearance.

Though it is not a focusing point of this article, in Bangladesh, a distinct film industry has emerged in the 1950s. Nowadays it also focusing on the items songs for promoting it's cinemas to mass people, who are the important consumer of bollywood's cultures (Islam, 2021) (Rahman H. , 2019) (Muhammad Sajidul Islam, 2021).

4. Item song and male gaze in Bollywood cinemas: The case of *Munni badnam huhi* of the movie *Dabang* (2010)

In this phase of discussion, the process of erotic representation of the heroine of purposively selected item song *Munni badnam huhi* of the movie *Dabang* (2010) has been illustrated. Beside this, an explanation on this opinion has been mounted up connecting it with the *Theory of Male Gaze*. Mulvey's *Male Gaze* is mainly centered on the Hollywood characters where there is a very few songs and dance, but here we placed that in analyzing Bollywoods song.

At the very beginning of the song *Munni badnam hui*, a close up focus of camera on a female still picture is noticed. This picture is set in front of a tavern. With this focus of the camera, an inviting harmonious and deem music of lead guitar creates a mesmerizing scene. This still picture can be called 'placard'. The focus of camera quickly shifts towards the face from the silky fold of waist. The woman is wearing a pinks skirt, and there is a blue jewelry belt tied on her waist; two golden bangles on her hands; two silver colored big ring on her ears; two armlocks on her arms. The upper portion of her body is corseted with golden fringe. The

surroundings of the placard are decorated with red-blue-yellow colored neon lights. Then, the camera focus shifts to another picture like this one.

Very soon, the camera goes on a few men who are ardently waiting for something. Beside this, we see the depressed and unstable face of the main antagonist who is surrounded by his fellow goons. Several men rushed to the tavern with the increase of lead guitar music. Their curious minds wish to see something. Upon seeing the unstable/excited condition of the main antagonist, one of the fellows pushes a glass of sherbet towards him. Taking the glass reluctantly, he eyes on the balcony of the 1st floor. There the door, between two windows flamboyant with colorful neon lights, is open. There the focus of camera is set on the waist of the actress through the eyes of the villain which Mulvey nominates as the 'view of actor'. The actress is wearing a backless dress, and her hands are widened towards both side of the door. The dress code of this actress is same as the placard described earlier. A female body is something sensual-that is what the camera intends to exhibit. The camera mainly focuses on the hip, waist and open back of the actress who suddenly starts singing '*Munni badnam hui darling tere liye* (Munni got defamed for you my darling) with an eye-catching dance (Khemta Nach). That means Munni is defamed because of her lover. In Indian society, 'Muuni' indicates to a girl who has attractive body and beauty (Abbas, 2015). Along with this, the lead guitar and the clapping go rowdy. The dance also goes faster. Now, the focus is on the villain and his goons. In a jiffy, the dismayed face of the villain turns into a jolly one. Returning the sherbet glass, he stares at the actress. The goons are also taking pleasure. Mulvey recognizes this 'pleasure taking by gazing/watching' as 'Scopophilia'.

4.1. Scopophilia

Scopophilia is taking pleasure from watching others. Not only this part but also the whole song is overwhelmed with this. Now, the villain looks at the actress who fastens her waist moving thinking that someone is noticing. The rejoicing in the expression of eye and face is unequivocal in the camera. This is called the *pleasure of showing*. That means there are two things-1. *Pleasure of watching* which indicates to the villain and his fellows' taking pleasure watching the actress, and 2. *Pleasure of showing* which indicates to the showing of the actress. According to Mulvey, this type of watching spreads among other audiences. Thus, once again the camera moves onto the actress while she is dancing, the villain along with his fellows also take pleasure watching the sensual fold of her waist.

4.2. Voyeurism

Voyeurism is a perversion in which a person receives sexual gratification from seeing the genitalia of others or witnessing others' sexual behavior. In this song, the shopkeepers as well as the buyers are *taking pleasure*- from watching the movement of folded waist and the cleavage of the actress-which is identical to voyeurism. Especially, the flashy ambiance differs the shopkeeper from others. As a result, he forgets about the presence of other audience, and he dives into the voyeuristic fantasy to take pleasure.

Once again, the camera focuses on the actress who excites the whole environment by saying that Munni has red chick, perplexing glance, and fascinating gait. She entitles herself as 'Zhandu Balm'. The dancing becomes intense with the increasing of clapping and music. The movements of her hands are alike her language. Here, a fusion of drum, Arabian music, harmonium is noticed in the music. Here the word 'fusion' is used in physics to indicate the process or result of joining two or more things together to form a single entity. Here 'fusion' indicates to the mixture of a few music.

At this stage, the actress rushes to reach the villain comparing her body as Shilpa Shetty and her acting ability as Kareena, both are renowned actress of Bollywood, - this can be called *Tilana*. Now, the camera focuses on the villain who is overwhelmed with joy since the actress touches him. His sexual desire is conspicuous in his facial expression. This is called ego libido.

4.3. Mirror Stage & Ego Libido

The villain was sitting on a couch, and there were three big lap-pillows around him. He wishes to fulfill his repressed desire as the actress touches him. He also wishes to fulfill his ego libido by taking the red pillow in his arms. The same kind of focus camera is now on an old-man who cannot even walk properly but as soon as he eyes on the actress, his ego libido arises, and he goes after the actress who pushes him away rebuking 'old-man who has no money'. That means, once again, she represents herself as a product to be sold.

4.4. Women As Products & Men as Spectators

The actress, once more, mentions herself as 'Zandu Balm', India's No 1 pain relieving balm and this is synonymous for headache, body ache and cold remedy and considered as the best in the category. Besides, she has been embodied as product at some other stages of this song. However, two different scenes are shown at this stage of the song- the dance of the actress with lead guitar and the entrance of the hero riding on a car. This scene distracts the audience in a way. Once again, the actress tries to grab the attention of the male gaze pointing her fingers

towards her hip, waist, and cleavage. The sexual and passionate scene is caught on the camera now. Now, the focus is on the fast walking of the actress along with her mates. At this stage, the *Khemta Nach* on rickshaw is shown again, that indicates that the song is not of the city but of the rural area. And this kind of dress reminds us about the cantatrice dress code. *Khemta Nach* is presented harmoniously. Song is comprised with this dance. Drum, Kasi and Clap are used as the musical instruments. This dance has no specific purpose. It can be arranged in any social and folk program. Once dance was a special attraction on the occasion of marriage. Even it was a part of the Hindu occasions and Puja. Basically, girls are the artists of this dance. The especial traits of this dance are the complex speed of toes and the expression of eyes. This entertaining dance is compared to the rural avatar of the Cantatrice of city life. This type of dance is noticed in Bogra, a middle northern part of Bangladesh (Khanom, 1994). Actress entitles her acting as precious. Now, the camera captures the scene of throwing Rupees, Indian currency by the audiences toward the actress who grabs one note and tips it down between the cleavage inside her blouse. This clears that she can be bought by money, and she is very happy getting the money. At this stage, clapping and drum Tehai is heard. Camera focuses on the 'passionate and satisfied face' of the villain who continues dancing sexually.

Immediately, the camera focuses on the door of Prince Hair Cut Saloon from where the actress is coming out wearing a parrot green skirt and fringe on the upper body. She is taking the downstairs sensually dancing and singing. Straight away, the focus of camera shifts to the actor on the first floor. The actors hold "Moder Bottle" (Cane of Drug) wearing the dress of police, and they have got pistol in their waist. Here, *Moder Bottle* refers to a bottle of wine which is a trop. That means he can do everything including satisfying sexual desire. Now, the actor starts dancing madly by entitling the actress as 'Moder Bottle'. The dancing style of the actor does not match with any dance type that is why 'dancing madly' is used here. Because of entitling her as 'Moder Bottle' the satisfied face of the actress is focused on the camera. Having entitling as 'Moder Bottle', she does not protest instead she accepts satisfactorily. Once again, when the actor entitles her as 'atom bomb', camera focuses on the actress. In response to this, the actress assumes herself as 'ripe mango', The actress wants to tell that she is ready, and the actor can eat her whenever he wishes. That means she is ready to let other to enjoy her body.. Thus, the actress has been identical to an 'active object' in this song. She is the inactive raw material for the proactive men. Here, a woman has been identical as sexual object in two ways- both by the audience who are watching and by the characters who are acting with her. According to Mulvey, the male character does not bear the burden of the 'sexual object' for the social ideology. As an instance, we see that the main actor actively paddles the storyline of the cinema.

He reconciliates the isolation of storyline of *Dabang*-the cinema. For example, at the end of the song, he asks the actress to leave and threatens the villain to be a good man. As a result, the main story line hits once again. Here, three aspects such as, camera technology, rolling the camera and editing the scene have played essential role to reconciliate the story line. Thus, the audiences have gone beyond the boundary of the screen.

5. Conclusion

The paper argued that the varied possibilities of spectacle, specially from Mulvey's *Male Gaze*, is mainly centered here. However, the above discussion has made this theory much clearer and eased to investigate the root of the erotic representation and the language of female characters. Thus, the *patriarchal ideology* comes straight ahead of others in the patriarchal society that constructs everything (Rahman M. A., 2022) (K.C., 2017). Moreover, this is also applicable for the item songs of cinemas. Besides, the capitalist media provokes it.

Consequently, the *patriarchal ideology* accelerates faster. This structure is prevailing in the society containing the *patriarchal ideology*. Hence, it can be inferred that in Bollywood cinemas, the erotic representation of female sexuality in item songs emerges from 'Male Gaze'. The explanation of so-called established gender discrimination in society is reflected here. The women are represented as active objects to be seen and to be shown. The castrated woman entitles herself as 'Zhandu Balm' and 'Ripe Mango' to fulfill the absence of phallus in her body. She even does not care about her respect which is one kind of crystal representation of patriarchal dominance. That means she encompasses the so-called patriarchal subconscious entity.

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