



Vidhyayana - ISSN 2454-8596

An International Multidisciplinary Peer-Reviewed E-Journal

www.vidhyayanaejournal.org

Indexed in: ROAD & Google Scholar

Exploring the Social Effects of Item Songs on Women in Hindi Cinema

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Abstract:

An Item Song is one such song with dance but having no relevance to the main story. In an item song, the ITEM is a gorgeous woman who immediately attracts attention with her shy gazes and her seductive dance moves. This research article addresses item songs and its history. It explores various aspects of it and the social impact on Indian society. An Item Song is made for two purposes: first, to bring material benefits to the producer and the team of the film. Second, to fulfill the desire of the male gaze by bringing in the theatre the object of desire in front of the audience. There are two opinions on it: When in item numbers, slices of the body are focused on, and the angles are only about the swiveling hips and the swinging navel, you make the woman surrender her autonomy to the male gaze. The other view is that I have a good body, why not show it off? Items songs are a challenge to the historical and cultural portrayal of women in stereotypical roles in Indian films. The item song in Indian films has given the liberty to Indian female to come out of the traditional set-up. They can now learn new dances, other than traditional Indian dances, and can have a career in them too.

Keywords: Item song; ITEM; Cinema; Social impact; Male gaze; Body.

The History of Item Songs:

Songs and dances are an essential part of the Indian films. They are used to attract and hold the attention of his audience. All pure forms of Indian classical dance forms like Bharat Natyam, Kathak, Kathakali, Kuchipudi Manipuri, and Odissi are included with sensuality within their compositions and choreography in Indian films. Many films have a story which requires no-song in it but still the songs are added to the film. An Item Song is one such song with dance but having no relevance to the main story.

To quote from The Official Dictionary Of Unofficial English: “An item number is a musical performance that has little to do with the film in which it appears, but is presented to showcase beautiful dancing women, to lend support to the marketability of the film”. (Barrett, 189-190) Wikipedia provides more clarity; “Although, the origin of the term item number is obscure, it is likely that it derives its meaning from objectification of sexually attractive women. This is because item in filmy Mumbai slang is a sexy woman...The item number would feature an "item girl" who appears in the film as a dancer, usually in a bar or nightclub, and is only in the film for the length of that song. ...Today, it is a commonly used term with hardly any negative connotations to it. The term item number has now been relaxed to include almost all



upbeat dance numbers involving either a woman in very revealing clothes, or a cameo from a star who is only in the movie for the length of that song” (“Item number”). Lately we have also seen item numbers with male stars performing. It is common for such item numbers to occur in the opening or closing credits of the films. This research article addresses item songs and its history. It explores various aspects of it and the social impact on Indian society. Hence, in an item song, the ITEM is a gorgeous woman who immediately attracts attention with her shy gazes and her seductive dance moves. Traditionally, these item girls were courtesans dancing for rich clients as part of cabaret shows that had nothing to do with the actual plot of the film.

Instances of Item Songs:

In the Indian films, the vamps were supposed to perform the cabaret dance, Helene being most popular among them. Helene left her fans breathless with item songs like Mungda, Piya tu, Mehbooba and so on. Helen’s famous number mungda performed in a nine-yard Maharashtrian sari wrapped tightly around her shapely body and folded between the legs with ethnic jewellery to match. The dance was a bigger hit than the film, a thriller, Raj Sippy’s Inkaar. The same rule applies to Aruna Irani’s item song dilburdilbur in Naseer Hussain’s Caravan. Naseer Hussain in his box office hit Caravan, featured Helen in a single dance with the now-famous song number Monica, Oh My Darling. It was used as a refrain by music director R.D. Burman in the main song duniyamein logon ko sung by Asha Bhonsale. Burman made corporeal use of the sound of heavy breathing as the beat for the song after each line. It gave the song a sense of sensuousness and Helen did the rest. It remains one of the most unforgettable cabaret numbers in the history of Indian mainstream cinema. It was this reputation of Helene that attracted a number of heroines too to perform similar dances. Padma Khanna, Bindu and Madhumati followed in her and obtained great success. They used to expose their body and making dance in a form so as to attract the male lovers. The heroine of the film generally avoided such dances though few of them like Parveen Babi and Zeenat Aman did exposed their bodies. Zeenat Aman performed the dance in the movie Qurbani in the song Laila O Laila. But the task of dancing to such tunes belongs initially to the vamps. This could be the early starting of the item songs. Later, many female heroines started to dance in club scenes as it was required from the director and the audience. The dances of Rekha in Jaanbaaz in the song Pyar Do Pyar Lo is nothing but an item song.



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Madhuri Dixit turned such numbers into a fine art form with her ek do teen in Tezaab followed by the extremely popular dhak dhakkarnelagaa in Beta and then the choli kepechheykyahai in Khalnayak. Urmila Matondkar is another excellent dancer who has now shifted to diverse roles. Raveena Tandon performed an item number in songs like sheher ki ladki and ore ore. Sushmita Sen with her sizzling mehboob mere number in Fiza finally caught the attention of filmmakers. Shilpa Shetty has also done quite a few item numbers in her career. One of the most popular ones is Main Aayi Hoon U.P. Bihar Lootne in Shool directed by E. Niwas. Malaika Arora's chhaiyanchhaiyan number shot on top of a moving train and choreographed beautifully by Farah Khan for Ram Gopal Varm's Dil Se with foot-tapping music by A.R. Rahman to some of the loveliest lyrics ever, composed by Gulzar.

The demand picked up in the Indian films in the recent time with the success of items songs like Munni Badnam Hui, Kajra re, Sheila ki Jawani, Jailebibai, Mahiya Mahiya, etc. It made huge earnings for the movie and gave the heroines a market value. For instance, Mallika Arora is today well-known as an item girl rather than a heroine.

The song, "Jumma Chumma De De" (Hum, 1991), which means "Give us a kiss" is sung by a group of men, including the hero of the movie, to an 'item girl', who is just dancing in this song, situated in a bar. Two other songs, "ChammakChallo" (Ra.One, 2011) and "Chikni Chameli" (Agnepath, 2012) are euphemistic slang for prostitutes, especially ones who dance, and from the countryside. The words refer to the color of their skin as well as their jewelry and ornaments, not to the woman herself. This insults not only the entire female fraternity but also the Indian culture, which respected females as goddesses.

Veteran directors, such as Ramesh Sippy, have said that item songs "instantly attract attention, musically as well as visually... this increases the recall value of the film and also helps push the music sales" (Thahir, Sreen). These often boost the careers of the actresses who continue to star in these numbers, earning them the title of 'item girls'. The terminology itself degrades these women below human beings to inanimate objects who are simply there for the pleasure of the viewer, presumably male.

The lyrics also have a sense of commercialization beyond attracting viewers to films. Songs such as "Munni Badnaam Hui" (Dabangg, 2010) and "Fevicol Se" (Dabangg 2, 2012) have references to actual commercial products within them, a pain reliever and Fevicol glue, while another song was popularly used in chips commercials for quite a while. This shows that the item in these 'item songs' refers not just to the woman, but often the product she is trying to promote within the song. This parallel that the song draws between the



woman and the product is striking, using one to sell the other.

The Social Impact on Indian Society:

The words of Shabana Azmi, an actress and an advocate for female rights, are very apt: The sexuality of the heroine is being celebrated now. However, there is a difference between that and the commodification of women. When in item numbers, slices of the body are focused on, and the angles are only about the swiveling hips and the swinging navel, you make the woman surrender her autonomy to the male gaze. I ask heroines to make an informed choice. They say, "I have a good body, why not show it off?" But just because Salman Khan takes off his shirt in every film to show his six-pack abs, they can't do the same! It's not kosher for a woman to be commodified just because a man is too!... Instead of mindlessly dancing to the item numbers, listen to the words, focus on your collaboration in that process..." (Arora, Chandana).

Sharmila Tagore, an actress, had some different views from Shabana Azmi. Things have changed, why shouldn't cinema? Perceptions have changed, costumes have changed. But decisions are still being made very stereotypically - a woman's passport to life is still marriage. An item song is put into the film for entertainment; it has nothing to do with the film. Earlier, the vamp did the (sexy) song, but then came Choli Ke Peeche and the line collapsed, heroines started doing that. The song had innuendo and naughtiness, which is also traditionally present in Indian tradition. But later in the film, when Madhuri is kidnapped, the villains are humming it to her, and one of them also says cheer kerakhdoonga. That's even more sexist than the song. Why did no one say anything about that when Madhuri had to go to court?

A solution comes from another actress of Hindi cinema. Actress-filmmaker Soni Razdan feels our films definitely play a part in the commodification of women in our society. "Women as objects of desire have been around for decades from Marlene Dietrich to Marilyn Monroe to Meena Kumari to Rekha. The celebration of sexuality is a natural impulse. To ban or suppress it would have even more damaging consequences. What is required is a more liberal attitude, better sex education, and less secrecy around the topic of sex. Sex is an essential part of life. The less hypocrisy surrounding this the more open and mature our society will eventually become." (Jha, Subhash).

In South Indian film, there was a scene of a very exposing and explicitly sexual song was screened. Half of the girls left the room till the song was completed while the remaining avoided it and redirected their gaze from the screen. The female spectators fear that they will be watched by someone watching such explicitly



sexual item songs. Hence, they avoid it. When alone, they do watch it.

An Item Song is made for two purposes: first, to bring material benefits to the producer and the team of the film. Second, to fulfill the desire of the male gaze by bringing in the theatre the object of desire in front of the audience. An Item Song is made by males to satisfy the male audience more. Items songs are a challenge to the historical and cultural portrayal of women in stereotypical roles in Indian films.

Hema Malini, a famous actress and an expert classical dancer, said that dance is a puja. To save our culture we need to return to classical dance forms and music. Item numbers will neither save India nor our culture. In Bollywood, nobody these days asks new actors whether they know or understand the nuances of classical music.

One ad, published in February, addressed the nature of Bollywood 'item songs' by transcribing the chorus line of several popular, mainstream Hindi songs from the last 25 years. The ad ended with the line "They have not been put on this planet for your supreme entertainment or pleasure. A woman is not an adjective. If you cannot respect a woman, you are nothing." This was in response to the gang rape of a girl in New Delhi in December, 2012. Indirectly, it even held the Item Number Songs responsible for the new form of assault against the females.

The all-male movies like Chinagate have no chance of putting a song having heroine in it. In such cases an item song like Chamma Chamma does the trick. It not only gets the song in the movie but attracts a lot of audience due to the song only.

In an article written by Mandy Van Deven, founder of the Feminist Review blog, states, "Lessons for striptease, burlesque, lap dancing, and pole dancing are the newest class offerings at local fitness centers and dance studios in cities such as Mumbai, Delhi, and Bangalore," she says. (Deven, Mandy) She asks Sneha Krishnan, editor and co-founder of the feminist webzine Sa, about the erotic dance moves too. "I think one big reason is Bollywood. Sexy dances have become, increasingly, the symbols of liberation in Bollywood cinema, and as always, Indian women are following" (Deven, Mandy). Thus, we can say that the item song in Indian films has given the liberty to Indian female to come out of the traditional set-up. They can now learn new dances, other than traditional Indian dances, and can have a career in them too.



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An item song is seen as a promotional stunt for the film. It attracts the viewers and keeps the movie in media limelight and public discussions. Thus in a sense, the item songs constitute a film in advance. The necessary features of the item number as listed by Sreya Basu (2011), in the editorial of Glamsham is worthy of note: “the item number should have the capacity to make people jump off their seats at theatres, blow whistles and do all sorts of mad things, the wordings have to be suggestive; subtly cheap as opposed to outright cheap and the choreography should have the ‘jhatkas’ and ‘matkas’, pelvic thrusts and seducing looks , with a sexy and sensuous costume and the perfect backdrop of unruly men. This is what an item song should be able to do when screened in the public” (Basu, Shreya).

Concluding Remarks:

Film stars are in the business of physical beauty and entertainment. We showcase it. We don't sell it. If a working woman wears makeup to office it doesn't mean she is commodifying herself for the men at her workplace. The same goes for actresses. They have to look good. Whether an actor or an actress, it is the era of commodification, if that's what you want to call it. Tamil actress Khushboo who has been in the eye of moralistic storms several times says cinema shouldn't be blamed for the objectification of women. Cinema is a medium of entertainment. Though smoking causes cancer, still people continue to smoke. Similarly, to blame cinema for all the wrongs is also not apt. Thus, Chiknichameli, Sheila ki jawani and Ooh la la are aimed at providing cheap thrills, as the days when heroines were described as chauthvi ka chand are gone. They call themselves tandoori chicken, fish fry and other edibles, so why should men respect them? With their raunchy pelvic thrusts, item songs definitely commodify women. Women's sex appeal has always been a staple diet for films, fashion, television and advertising. Hence, it should come with a tag: Everything You See Is Entertainment. Do Not Imitate In Real Life.



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