

## **Use and Abuse of Female Body in Popular Hindi Films: A Semiotic analysis of Item Songs**

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### **Abstract**

*The item songs have become an important element of Bollywood movies. Women are featured as a commodity, only to satisfy male urge and their bodies are featured in a way as if they are meant for male consumption. In an environment where a plethora of movies are releasing every year, putting a peppy item song in a movie, is a good trick to gain the attention of viewers . Brazen lyrics are used to enhance the popularity of these songs. Many established film makers in the industry are using this trick to gain huge financial returns. They are attracting and engaging audiences by using as well as abusing female body in their films. The paper makes an attempt to analyze the item songs by employing semiotic method to examine the use and abuse of female body in Hindi films.*

**Key Words: Hindi Films, Item Songs, Female Body, Use & Abuse, Portrayal, Commoditization.**

## Introduction

Cinema and dance have had a long history of engagement. Cinema enlisted dance from its very beginnings – the spectacular display of movement. The shared investment in movement ensured a spontaneous intermediality (transgression of boundaries) between early cinema and dance. Songs with dance have always played a crucial role in Hindi movies. The role of song and its demand changed with the entry of ‘item songs’. Barrett Grant (2006) defines an item song as “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”. These songs have little to do with the plot of the movie. The role of the song would be to make the movie popular and attract audience to the movie. In almost all circumstances, the pasteurization would consist of a scantily dressed girl performing a sexually provocative and suggestive dance. The ultimate role of an “item song” is to generate publicity by dragging the attention of the audience.

An item song in its earliest period was not endorsed by leading ladies of the movie. Only vamps or dancers making special appearance graced these tracks. Over the years, item songs have moved beyond the vamps. Today, mainstream actresses dance to numbers that are meant to be crowd pullers. They are now an integral part, every actress whether established or new ones are performing item songs to achieve high points in their career. The first major dancing star was Cuckoo who ruled the cabaret scene in 1940s and 1950s. She was the undisputed queen of item songs at that time. Cuckoo was joined by Helen who went on to become the most successful in the field of cabaret. Her skin tight dresses, dramatic eye makeup, fanciful props escalated the feel of songs. She gave Bollywood a local taste of the songs. By 1980s not only vamps but heroines too started performing on item songs. The trend began with Zeenat Amaan (*Qurbaani*, 1980), Parveen Babi (*Shaan*, 1980; *Namak Halal*, 1982) and Rekha (*Jaanbaaz*, 1986); and was taken forward by Madhuri Dixit (*Khalnayak*, 1993), Raveena Tandon (*Rakshak*, 1996) and Urmila Matondkar (*Chinagate*, 1998).

This phenomena was so dominant that every major and minor actress gracing the silver screen with a special performance. There is a wide difference between songs of then and now. Nowadays despite of peppy music, sizzling dance sequences and fabulous girls to look at these songs have a timely feel. Rarely, we find songs like ‘*Aaj ki raat koi aane ko hai*’ (*Anamika*, 1973) with tales interwoven to it or ‘*Oh haseena zulfon wali*’ (*Teesri Manzil*, 1966). They displayed dance numbers with the most scintillating woman appearing in them – yet with a sense of reason. This has made all the difference between songs of then and now. Songs of today are basically not related to the theme of the movie, the sole aim is to increase

the marketability. The trend of increasing obscenity in Indian cinema is not a new debate. In 1993, 'Choli ke peechhe kya hai' a hit song from the movie 'Khalnayak' starring Madhuri Dixit became the focus of public attention and legal controversy because of the indecent lyrics and vulgar representation of women.

### **Semiotic Analysis: Key Elements**

Semiotics is the method of studying how meaning is created; and analysis of signs, symbols and their signification. It is the helpful in studying the meaning and sign process through communication. A semiotic and psychoanalytical approach to the representation in popular cinema reveals that the image of women is not wholly congruent with the reality. The functional allocation for such a 'sign', as per the view of Roland Barthes is to remain active as the signifier of an ideology which will denude it of all its denotative meaning, in order to invest it with purely connotative dimensions.

**Mise – en – scene:** which means 'putting on stage' is the placing of actors and props on the stage. It is used to describe everything that appears and happens in front of the camera from what we place such as subject matter scenery and lighting to create the shot. There are some elements which act as a unifying bond of representing the song clearly, these elements are Camera, Music, lyrics, location, actors, costumes, props, sound, dance, lighting and semiotics.

**Camera:** Camera has the potential to function in many different ways such as to direct space, provide information and to create expressive effects. It plays an important role in the presentation of a song in an effective manner. In case of an item song, camera is one of the essential elements that enhance the appeal of a character / dancer. It helps in focusing the situation properly and conveys meaning in a defined manner. It also helps to emphasize a particular aspect of the song to draw the attention of the audience.

**Music:** Music is considered as a soul of the song, it is a deciding factor for the success of any movie. Good music is a basic requirement to make the film commercially successful.

**Lyrics:** Lyrics is the composition of words that make up a song, usually consist of verses and choruses. The proper assembling of words can turn the song towards the popularity of the movie. It is an important part that heightens the appeal of the song. It intensifies the experience and sentiments accordingly.

**Location:** It refers to the place where the shooting takes place. The correct decision of the place provides the availability of a successful venture.

**Actors:** Actors play a crucial role in the success of any movie. The non – availability of actors can lead to a complete failure of the movie. They are the driving forces who make it possible to present situation as required.

**Costumes:** Costumes are important to the representation of whole situation, dramatize the situation effectively with the lyrics, actors, camera, location and music.

**Properties (Props):** Prop are the properties or things used during the performance, they can be actual things being told in the story or can be symbols used to indicate something. It serves the purpose of helping to dress a set to create the world of story in a proper manner. Beyond helping to sketch and realize the characters, props can be useful in narration.

**Sound:** The availability of appropriate sound is a pre requisite to create rhythm and enhance the mood of the song. It provides desirable meaning to the song; it is an important element that needs to be controlled during production and post production. It is a tool that makes the communication effective.

**Lighting:** Lighting is important for the successful presentation of a scene or an item song. It contributes to the presentation of performance efficiently. It enhances the picture clarity and makes the subject look appealing (in an item song the proper lighting help in focusing the dance movements and facial expressions of an item girl). Lighting serves both purposes - artistic and mechanical to amplify the clarity of the scene.

### **Analysis of Popular Item Songs**

An item song in Bollywood is a dance sequence featuring a female actor who is basically not related to the plot of the movie. It does not contain any information related to the content of the movie. It is a primary source for the generation of publicity and generally regarded as a marketing tool. It involves the use of woman in revealing clothes, loud music and obscene dance movements that sexually objectify female body so as to attract male audiences. In almost all situations, the picturisation consists of scantily dressed girl performing a provocative dance. It has become a vital element for the commercial success of a movie. These songs are aimed at attracting the audiences towards the film. Here the film maker tries to use and abuse female body to the optimum level. In these songs attractive female characters are employed to perform a captivating dance number. The Indian movie industry is known for their songs. From ‘*choli ke peeche kya hai*’ to latest ‘*Chipka le saiyyan Fevicol se*’, lyrics, these item numbers represent women as objects. Surely this is an example of creativity, but a song and dance sequence showing a woman being haunted and wooed by a group of men is ironical.

### ***Munni Badnaam Hui***

*Munni Badnaam Hui* is an item song from the movie – *Dabangg*, featuring Malaika Arora Khan, Salman Khan and Sonu Sood. The lyric of the song is penned by Lalit Pandit. The song depicts the lifestyle of rural people. In India the term ‘Munni’ is used for a young girl who is adorable to all. The song starts with a line ‘*Munni Badnaam hui, darling tere liye*’. In the song, a village girl (Munni) blames her male counterparts for her defamation in a very peculiar way by addressing them as darling. This line clearly reveals the position of women in our paternalistic society. On the one hand a girl is getting defamed for the sake of male desire and on the other hand she is accepting this humiliation with honor by addressing the perpetrators of the crime as darling. In the beginning the song picturises the female protagonist (Munni) by showing her back; dancing and moving waist to attract male audiences towards her body and after few seconds she turns her face towards camera. The scene portrays a ‘liquor shop’, where men are sitting unenthusiastically and in a sad mood. But the unexpected entry of Munni changed everything. They become over-enthusiastic and crazy at the sight of Munni. Their sadness vanished and they started dancing enthusiastically to the tune.

In the second line ‘*Munni ke gaal gulaabi , nain sharaabi , chaal nawabi , main jhandu baam hui darling tereliye*’, the dancing girl describes her body parts and attitude by saying that ‘I have rosy cheeks , beautiful eyes, and royal walk; with all of these qualities I became a *Jhandu Balm* for your sake. She is elucidating important parts of her body to catch the eyeballs of men. The other dancers are also enjoying the company of Munni, watching her body as if she is their prey. ‘*Shilpa sa figure ,Bebo si ada, hai mere jhatke pe lakhon fida*’ further describes the obsession of Munni with her body and the way she is imitating with film actresses as she treats herself as an actress who possess body like Shilpa Shetty and attitude like Kareena Kapoor.

The song is composed in a very peppy style; music is loud to draw the attention of audience and to present an established sequence of village. The next scene showcases Munni performing dancing steps pointing her body parts, basically inviting male gaze. She is enjoying the attention and says ‘*Item ye aam hui, darling tere liye*’. This line intensifies the craze of Munni among every man that she is very popular. The performance is given in a short blouse and tight skinned green colored skirt.

In the meantime, there arrives a rowdy policeman, Chulbul Pandey (character played by Salman Khan). In India ‘Chulbul’ is a term used for a naughty boy. He arrives with a liquor bottle in his hand pointing Munni and saying ‘*hai tujh main poori bottle ka mazaa, bottle ka*

*mazaa, karde budhape ko pal main jawaan*'. Here, Chulbul Pandey (policeman) is describing the beauty of an item girl by saying you have the potential to make everyone crazy just like a bottle of liquor. He says your beauty has mesmerized us and it can heighten anybody's youth. This line is completely symbolizing woman as an intoxicating commodity (item) as he is comparing her to a liquor bottle and describing she is only here to please men and to fulfill their desires.

In the next scene Munni is seen in a short blouse (Orange and green) and orange skirt with golden base. The rowdy policeman is so involved in her performance that he starts dancing with her crazily. Another line is '*amiya se aam hui darling tereliye, main jhandu baam hui darling tere liye*' clearly signifies that the item girl is so curious to announce that she is no more a little girl and she is now grown up and her body is ready to be eaten like a ripe mango. In this way she is engaging the attention of men and inviting their gaze at her body. In the next line the policeman says '*tu item bomb hui darling mere liye*'. The scene depicts a situation where the character Munni is dancing even more provocatively to satiate the sexual drive of the male characters surrounding her. The word 'item bomb' is used for a girl who is beautiful in looks and has a charming body. The song also uses the word '*Jhandu Balm*' many times. 'Zandu Balm' is a pain reliever balm of Emami Company. Here, Munni is saying that 'I have become a balm for you to relieve your pains. With all these provocative body display and lyrics in this item number, Dabangg broke several records. The song '*Munni Badnaam hui*' is considered as the main crowd puller for the movie. Malaika Arora Khan is considered to be the prime reason for the success of song, her provocative dance movements made the audience crazy.

### ***Sheila ki Jawaani***

The movie 'Tees Maar Khan' is directed by Farah Khan in 2010, featuring Akshay Kumar and Katrina Kaif in lead roles. The lyric of the song is penned by Anvita Dutt Guptan. The song is showcasing the shooting of a movie and presentation of an item song on screen. The whole arrangement of a set is picturised in presentation of the song, for e.g. Item girl, supporting dancers, lighting arrangements, cranes, etc. The film was not a big hit as expected but despite negative comments, the film commercially did well, the sole credit for commercial success was given to the item song '*Sheila ki Jawaani*' .

The moment music of the song starts, viewers have established an unconscious identification of the ego with the object on screen. Except that recognition is not with the self and in fact it is not at all dependent on seeing rather it depends on the level of identification with the music and lyrics of the song. It triggers a pre-identification subconscious scopophilia (an

expression of sexuality, it refers to sexual pleasure derived from looking at erotic objects: equivalent to the pre arousal stage where the mind readies itself for arousal). For understanding this identification it is enough to note that song '*Sheila Ki Jawaani*' was very popular before the release of the movie.

The song starts with a line ' I know you want it but you never going to get it, *'tere haath kabhi na aani*' describe the self-obsession of item girl who says I Know I am much in demand, all of you like me but you can't get hold of me. Here, by this line a strong drive of pre –scopophilia is created and triggers challenge in the mind of viewers to get hold on Sheila. When this situation is established with music, the viewers are given a glimpse of a notice board which says 'Blue Film present Sheila Ki Jawaani'. In India blue film is a term used for pornographic films. This further creates scopophilia. After this scene the panning of camera is used to portray a complete scene of on screen studio, here shooting equipments like cranes, lights are shown. Another line '*Ab dil karta hai haule haule se main to khudko gale lagaun, kisi aur ki mujhko zarurat kya main to khudko gale lagaun*' describes Sheila's obsession with her own body as she says 'I feel from my heart that I shall myself embrace my own body and I need not require anyone for this purpose'. Though Shakespeare said what is in a name but in this song the name speaks a lot about the item girl. As the lyricist insists the name of the character in the song '*what's what's my name, what's my name? My name is Sheila, Sheila ki jawaani, I am too sexy for you, main tere haath na aani*'. The character with pride says that her name is '*Sheila*'. In India, '*Sheela*' is a feminine (or Girl's) name, generally means Cool or Good Character or One with good morals. It is of Sanskrit origin. In the song her name is Sheela, she is youthful, she is too sexy and nobody can hold her. Sheila appears in golden colored belly dancing outfit and pyrotechnics is used to enhance the character's appeal. Here the availability of fire increases the appearance of golden curtains and candles.

The next scene shows Sheila was surrounded by men, it signifies arousal of sexual drive of men as they gazed Sheila's sensuous body parts as she wore revealing clothes and dancing very provocatively. Meanwhile, the hero of the film (Akshay Kumar) arrives, he kicks on the backside of a male character; thus not only causing confusion but creating disconnect and anxiety in the mind of viewers that the scopophilic diegesis may end very soon. The next scene show Katrina with her back wearing Michael Jackson outfit and suddenly shifts into another scene where she appears in a sensual small blouse with a knot and a black short dhoti; literal play of mirrors is applied. The last lines of the song '*ain't nobody got body like Sheila*', suggest the worth of a woman lies in her body. The woman herself is objectifying her

body. The whole song invites the gaze of male audiences by provocative dance movements; it represents Sheila performing vulgar dance steps by revealing her body parts.

### ***Chikni Chameli***

This song is from the movie '*Agneepath*' which was released in 2012; it was counted as one of the most popular song of that year. The lyric of the song is penned by Amitabh Bhattacharya. The song starts by showing a red sheet covering the face of an item girl which is slightly put off by her. The dacoits in bulk are shown enjoying the sensual dance of a woman. The song is presented in Mumbai dialect. The first line of the song is '*Bichhu mere naina, badi zehereeli aankh maare Kamsin kamariya saali ik thumke se lakh mare*'. The item girl is saying that her scorpions like eyes are winking very poisonously and a jerk in her hip can kill thousands. The next line is '*chikni chameli chhup ke akeli pawwa chadha ke aayi*'. The item girl calls herself '*Chikni Chameli*', a term used to signify a soft skinned, fair gorgeous girl like a jasmine flower and says that she came alone after taking a quarter (alcohol). The song depicts a fair skinned girl performing in a pink and orange dress with bunch of young bamboo stick holding dacoits. The line '*husn ki teeli se beedi chillam jalaane aayi*' define the beauty and charm of item girl who says I have ignited the passion with my beauty. The evening ambience and glow from lanterns is describing the crazy obscene performance explicitly. In another scene the item girl is inviting the male gaze towards her body by moving a matchstick across her arm to light a dacoit's cigarette. Further, by holding liquor bottles in each of her hands the girl shakes her ample bosom to titillate male drive. The choreographer employed the most vulgar movements of the girl's body parts just to attract the attention of the male audiences. The lighting arrangements further played their role in illuminating the body parts of the item girl.

The line '*Jangal main aaj mangal karungi, bhookesheron se khelungi main*' presents the situation of a item girl who is saying I have potential to fulfill the desires of men, whom she is referring to hungry tigers. It means she is lust for men and she knows how to attract them. The arrival of Chameli has lightened the whole community of dacoits with joy and cheer. The song is a pathetic commoditization of a woman who is portrayed not less than a commodity to satisfy men, accomplishing their desires and make them happy. The music of the song is raunchy and loud, it goes well with the lyrics. Costumes are effective in creating mood for the song, the presence of Chikni Chameli in Maharastian outfit increase enthusiasm in audience and dacoits in white clothes add meaning to the situation. In another line, the item girl calling her youth brazen, the line is awful as a woman representing herself as a commodity and inviting a male gaze. She wants to remove her loneliness by sharing it with men; it portrays

women as an object of desire as she is only used to satisfy men by fulfilling their desires. This song was basically used as a medium to titillate interest of the audience to the film and the song effectively helped in the commercial success of the movie. The lyric: *'Haaye! baaton mein ishaara hai, Jisme khel saara hai, Tod ke tijoriyon ko loot le zara'* completely presents a pathetic situation for woman where she is inviting men and objectifying herself. She is directly calling men and saying body is only a means of pleasing men and satisfying their desires who see women like a commodity. She is saying that her charming body can fulfill their hunger; this line is a pristine contradiction to Indian values. Here a woman is revealing her body and in addition to provocation she is directly inviting him and saying body is merely a commodity to satisfy the urge of men. Indecent words are used in the song which has portrayed women negatively. The lyrics of the song included words which are against the cultural ethos and leave a wrong impression on society, especially on young boys.

### ***Fevicol se***

It is an item song from the Bollywood movie *Dabang 2* featuring (Salman Khan, Kareena Kapoor and Arbaz Khan). The lyric of the song is written by SajidWajid and Ashraf Ali and music is composed by SajidWajid. The song starts with establishing shot capturing a place or residence area or locality of prostitutes. Immediately camera focuses a board saying 'Open 24 hours' which completely suggest that those girls always available to entertain men. The first line is *'Angdaaiyaan leti hoon main jabb zor-zor se uff! angdaaiyan leti hoon main jab zor-zor se Uhh ahh ki avaaaz hai aati har ore se'*, Kareena is describing her popularity and demand in the area that everyone is cautious about her, everyone is interested in her beautiful face. She appears in small tight black *choli* and knee length skirt (*lungi*) flaunting her curves. She is surrounded by crowd of men who are watching her every activity and dancing her watch her, each man is observing her curves, body movements. The line is *'Main to kab se hoon ready- tayyar, patale saiyyan miscall se'* it is clearly describing that she is irresistible and uncontrollable and can be persuaded by one miscall this line is degrading the standard of women.

The Chulbul Pandey, the rowdy policeman arrives with liquor in his hand (the same entry as in *Dabangg*, 2010, Munni Badnaam) and says *'Pyaar karle tu aaj angoor ki daughter se, Nasehat bhool jayega tu ek quarter se'* he is describing that the beauty of item girl (Kareena) is uncontrollable and mesmerizing, everyman is swayed by her beauty. Her beauty is crazy and can make one forget all the duties. The supporting dancers are appeared in *Kurta* and *Jeans* with different colored mufflers. The female supporting dancers wear embroidered *lehenga – choli*. In the line *'Aaja mere raaja, tujhe jannat dikhaun main, Barfeele paani mein*

*fire lagaun main'* the item girl is trying to arouse her male audiences by describing the capability of her youth in a brazen way. She is presenting herself as an object of desire that can accomplish the lust of men and can ignite fire in ice water. Here she appears in an orange colored outfit (short blouse and tight skirt). Then Chulbul Pandey say '*Saare India ko tune ghulamkiya re*' means everyone admires her beautiful body. She is so popular and demanded by every man. The lyric of the song is men – centric where a woman is ready to call herself a 'Tandoori Murghi' just to get the attention of men. The lyric is completely degrading the status of a woman.

### **Conclusion**

"Men act, women appear. Men look at women; women watch themselves being looked at." This quote suggests very succinctly the position of women in the realm of the 'look', including within the mainstream Indian Cinema. Consider the first part of the statement, "Men act, women appear" in Indian cinema, women have been relegated to the passive position in film after film 'as bearer, not the maker of meaning', merely an appendage to the man, the wielder of power. Women are especially constituting the role of a spectacle as the subject of the look, the male gaze is invited to the female body. Item song generally showcases a girl or dancer performing and predominantly male audience watching. Makeup techniques include brightly colored glossy lips; the costumes are often dazzling with sequins or a metallic finish. These songs are included in the movies merely to generate cash. Even films without strong story line now can succeed because of the involvement of an item song, considered as a crowd puller. Women are representing themselves in a very bold and sensual way and even they are denigrating themselves just to acquire the male gaze. For example in '*fevicol se*' song, the item girl is calling herself '*Tandoori Murghi*'. Further, it seems that the age of innocence in the portrayal of women in Hindi films has phased out. The women are now no longer portrayed as innocent. The craze for item songs has removed the image of innocence by displaying bold, brazen and provocative woman.

The item songs have become an important element of Hindi movies. Women are featured as a commodity, only to satisfy men and they are used to satisfy the desires of men. Brazen lyrics are used to enhance the popularity of the song. In Bollywood, where a plethora of movies are releasing every year, putting a peppy item song in a movie is a good trick to gain the attention of viewers. Many established names in Bollywood are using this trick to earn huge financial returns. And it seems that using the names of some familiar consumer products has become common practice among film lyricists. For instance, the use of words *Zandu Balm* and *Fevicol* in item songs meant to enhance connectivity with audience. Film makers

are employing every trick in using and abusing women and their bodies for artistic and commercial exploitation. Film after film, women are objectified only to satiate male desire and their body parts are on display for male gaze.

**Reference:**

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