

Bollywood's 'Badnaam Begums': Representation of Women in 'Item Numbers'

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Abstract:

The word 'item', in common parlance, has multifarious connotations which it has acquired over time. It is often used as a derogatory term to objectify a person, usually a woman. The mushrooming of 'item songs' in Bollywood movies from the 1990s onwards is only an indication that it is a popular phenomenon, which has continued the legacy of 'song and dance' as was evinced from the very onset. The purposes of introducing an item song in a commercial movie are manifold – they serve as a source of entertainment for the masses; they help in promotional activities; they add to the glamour quotient: they also provide a respite from the continuous action of the movie, and act as a suitable break; but, most importantly, they add to the overall visual pleasure and enrich the experience of the audience. In Bollywood movies, an 'item song' traditionally centres around a female protagonist whose identity has been unidirectionally channelized towards the role of a temptress who can arouse a sense of eroticism among the audience. This paper intends to highlight upon the portrayal of women in these 'item songs' and how they have been commodified by the masses.

Keywords: *Bollywood, 'item songs', entertainment, commodification, seduction*

With the turn of the millennium, there came about a radical transformation in the socio-economic milieu of the Indian society. The effects of the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s were slowly setting in and this had its impact on the entertainment industry as well. Middle-class households were getting hooked to the cable connection, and private channels started to enter the fray, competing with the state owned Doordarshan. The Bollywood industry too underwent a paradigmatic shift. The VFX and other editing techniques progressed by leaps and bounds. All this, coupled with the advent of widespread Internet which aided in publicity and promotional activities resulted in the fact that, for the first time, movie collections were grossing more than 100-crore rupees.

With the inflow of Foreign Direct Investments (FDI's), decrepit and dilapidated single-screen cinema halls were gradually being replaced by posh multiplexes. There also came about a shift in the audience coming in to these newly constructed theatres, which catered more to the crowd belonging in the age group between 20 to 40. As a consequence, the concept of going for movies with all the members of the family, young and old, began to change. This had an impact upon the content being showcased in the movies of the 21st century. Therefore, directors and producers were now more willing to overtly showcase more mature content in their films, in order to cater to the taste of their target audience.

One of the major means of luring this young audience turned out to be the rampant use of 'item numbers' in Bollywood. The primary purpose of an item number is to provide entertainment to the audience and to assist the marketability of a movie by featuring in trailers. Rini Bhattacharya Mehta opines that - "An item number is a dance sequence of raunchy movements and risqué lyrics with little relation to the plot line, which aspiring starlets use to debut in Bollywood. In keeping with Bollywood's libidinous drive, an item number is normally added on to generate

publicity, to guarantee the film's box office success and ensure repeated viewings." (Bhattacharya Mehta 42) 'Item numbers' supplement the glamour quotient without affecting the overall continuity of the movie's plot. They are, therefore, part of the hype and propaganda created around a movie. According to Shirin Zubair:

The item songs are a marketing gimmick both for the leading female actors as well as for the film makers. From the filmmakers' point of view, these are primarily included for the commercial success of the film, targeted at common male consumers in cities and small towns with single screens ... From the point of view of the leading female actors (known as A-list actors) – who do the item numbers, since such songs are usually catchy, and major hits on the charts, played in discos, bars and weddings – they agree to do these numbers for various reasons. Among those reasons, are one, they are the quick work of a few days or a week for hefty payment; two, once the item song is on the music charts, the actor gets invited to perform (on payment) at weddings, award functions and shows, thus making a lot of quick money; and three, usually an item-song girl outshines the female lead in the movie by just doing these numbers. Producers and filmmakers sometimes tend to add these numbers even though they are not part of the original script, but are inserted after the film is completed to grab the attention of the masses and to attract them to the theatres.

(Zubair 4)

The concept of the 'item number', however, is not a millennial phenomenon. The earliest instances in Bollywood can be traced back all the way to pre-Independent India, when the likes of Anna Marie Gueizelor (popularly known as 'Azoorie') and Cuckoo Moray were the chief exponents of the genre in the 1930s and 40s. The following two decades were largely the monopoly of Helen Ann Richardson (monony-

mously known as 'Helen'), who earned stardom for her sexually explicit performances. Peter Morey comments that up to "the 1970s, Bollywood often relied on the figure of a vamp – a cabaret dancer, a tawaif (prostitute), a gangster's moll – to provide entertainment of a more sexually explicit nature. The heroine might sing and dance, but the vamp wore more revealing clothes, smoked, drank, and sang in bolder terms of sexual desire." (Morey 221)

Helen was followed in her footsteps by Vijayalakshmi (known by her stage name 'Silk Smitha') in the 1980s. Towards the end of the decade and the early 1990s, however, the roles of the 'item girl' and the female protagonist amalgamated into one, and mainstream heroines started appearing in comparatively bold avatars, pioneered by Madhuri Dixit. In this regard, Tejaswini Ganti elucidates – "One of the keys to Dixit's initial success was her combination of middle-class, girl-next-door persona and a sensuality, expressed through her dances, which in the past had been relegated to the vamp in Hindi cinema." (Ganti 134) Since the year 2000, most leading actresses in Bollywood have featured in 'item songs'. This is testimony to the commercial viability and the demand of the genre. However, to buckle the trend, the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) had issued a diktat in 2013, certifying 'item numbers' with an 'adult' (A) rating, and therefore, barring their telecast on TV channels. In an interview with *The Indian Express*, Pankaja Thakur, the then CEO of CBFC had stated:

These songs, thus, would not be allowed to be telecast on television as only (a maximum of) 'UA' rated content is allowed on television ... Item songs are essentially adult content. We ourselves do not define what an item song is, but what we mean is that all those songs which are meant for adult consumption, either because of their lyrics or because of visuals, should be given adult certification.

(Thakur)

The purpose of appending these 'item songs' in movies is, therefore, to gratify the 'male gaze'. The concept was first propounded by Jean-Paul Sartre in his work *Being and Nothingness* (1943), wherein he described the act of 'gazing' as a means of objectifying the 'gazed' by the 'gazer'. Art critic John Berger used the concept of the 'gaze' in the *Ways of Seeing* (1972) to depict how "continuities between post-Renaissance European paintings of women and imagery from latter-day posters and girly magazines, by juxtaposing the different images and showing how they similarly rendered women as objects. Berger argued that this continuity constrained how certain forms of femininity are understood, and therefore the terms on which women are able to live their lives." (Bell) Laura Mulvey in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) further defined the concept by introducing the notion of the 'male gaze', which intends to achieve pleasure by viewing the female body. L. Paul Weeks opines:

Mulvey ... contends that the male unconscious seeks two forms of scopophilia (visual pleasure). Voyeurism, the first of these, seeks to exercise power over its object by marking her as the bearer of guilt. Fetishism, the second form of visual pleasure, marks the female as object of desire at the level of spectacle. A masculine subject emerges through a narcissistic identification with the male characters and an objectification of female characters. Thus, woman as passive spectacle and object and man as active voyeur and subject together constitute a proprietary male gaze.

(Weeks 467)

In accordance with Mulvey's theory, women in 'item numbers' are depicted as commodities for the 'male gaze'. They are visualized in such a manner which would arouse libidinal passions in heterosexual male audience. The lyrics often include raunchy phrases such as 'chikni' (flawless beauty), 'gaal gulabi' (rosy cheeks), 'kamseen kamariya' (slender waist), 'nain sharaabi' (alcoholic eyes) and so on, which focus

singularly on the female body, thereby further embodying it as an object of pleasure. According to Neena Pandey, “the choreography of the steps and actions is catchy. Certain aspects of the body are highlighted more with the swings of the woman’s body, her expression of the eyes and face, and the jerks of her waist, breast and back are very prominent in all the item songs.” (Pandey 107-108)

As a consequence, the ‘item girls’ are stereotypically identified in accordance with their on-screen presence as vamps or sirens, resulting in a relegation of their social position. While they are the object of desire for a certain section of the society, on the other hand, they are also subjected to criticism and backlash by the conservative sections of society who consider them responsible for denigrating the moral fabric. In this regard, the Parliament of India passed a resolution in 2005 to close down all dance bars in the state of Maharashtra. While this was met with state-wide protests by the members of the affected community, women’s rights activists also criticized the decision. Flavia Agnes states:

If an ‘item number’ of a Hindi film can be screened in public theatres, then an imitation of the same cannot be termed as ‘vulgar’. The bar dancers imitate what they see in Indian films, television serials, fashion shows and advertisements. All these industries have used women’s bodies for commercial gain. There is sexual exploitation of women in these and many other industries. But no one has ever suggested that you close down these industries because there is sexual exploitation of women.

(Agnes)

‘Item numbers’ thus typify women as objects of lust. They are orchestrated to provide momentary sexual gratification to the male audience, and to ensure maximum viewership. To conclude in the words of Shabani Azmi:

I have strong views on item numbers because they are not part of the narrative and they’ve been put in a film for

the only purpose of titillation and nothing else. When a girl or a leading lady says 'it's alright, I want to celebrate my sensuality' I have no problem with that. I think that's wonderful. But under the pretence of 'celebrating your sensuality' what you are actually doing is surrendering to the male gaze and objectifying yourselves because the business of cinema is of images.

(Azmi)

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