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‘Constructed’ Female Identities: A Study of Popular Bollywood Film Songs

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Abstract:

The identity of a land rests on its culture. Culture is a dynamic and evolves over centuries. Culture plays a key role in determining a person’s identity. Cultural symbols propagate through mainstream media such as films, television shows and the print media, reiterating their ideologies.

The representations of sexuality in Indian media have often been criticized as being highly gendered. Mainstream media often features the gender types as polarized and antithetical to each other. Popular notions of sexuality and mainstream media seems to have evolved in tandem. This is especially visible in popular movies, songs and soap operas. Together it affects how we perceive sexuality and form sexual identities. This paper aims to examine the representations of sexuality and gender in Bollywood film songs. It aims at analyzing the songs to understand the gendered aspect of it’s narrative. The focus is to understand how women are cast into stereotyped images in popular media and how patriarchal ideology informs cultural identities. The paper also aims to trace the history of Bollywood cinema in order to understand the formation of cultural stereotypes.

Keywords: Bollywood movies, culture, gender stereotypes, sexuality, item songs, patriarchy.

Introduction:

Films are archives that document the history of a nation. It also maps the political and geographical terrain of an era. It is the recorded history of life as lived in an age. Films and other forms of entertainment are an important part of culture. Culture plays a key role in determining an individual’s identity. Every culture has icons which function as markers of identity. These cultural patterns propagate through mainstream media such as films, popular television shows and the print media, reiterating their ideologies. Movies are intended for mass cultural consumption. Therefore,

it has an important role in propagating cultural identity. Films, at the same time, reflects the ideas and ideologies prevalent in a particular society.

In the course of years films have evidently moved away from the ‘grand narratives’ of histories of nation and war, to personal /realistic narratives which record the lives of the common man. The history of Indian films is as vast and diverse as the cultural milieu of the India peninsula. Indian films have, over the decades, mirrored the sentiments of the society and voiced the thoughts of a generation. Cinema has evolved into a powerful medium of communication and entertainment. Commercial films production has now become a lucrative trade involving huge production budgets, popular actors, song and dance sequences intended for mass consumption and box office turnouts.

The Indian concept of sexuality is highly gendered in its approach. Popular notions of sexuality and mainstream media seems to have evolved in tandem. This is especially visible in popular movies, songs and soap operas. Together it affects how an individual perceives sexuality and constructs gender identities. Mainstream media often features the gender types as polarized and antithetical to each other. Stereotyped images of men and women in films affects the cultural identity of individuals.

Bollywood movies, in recent years have started to emphasize on the ‘sex appeal’ and ‘glamour quotient’ of the actors in an attempt to accelerate box office turnouts. ‘Item numbers’ have now become an inevitable part of mainstream movies. Objectifying the female body and ‘morselling’ it for the consumption of a male -centered audience reiterates the retrograde chauvinistic attitudes. The songs also reflect hidden patriarchal attitudes of male domination and the subjugation of the female. Films have a lasting impact on the audience. Lop-sided representations of gender norms and sexuality impales identity formation and disables sexual identity. Moreover, it can become a contributory cause for rampant sexism and rape culture.

Research Methodology:

This research paper is based on an analytical approach.

Objective of the study:

1. The paper aims to delineate the history of Indian films in order to trace the changing scenario in Indian cinema.
2. This article is also an attempt to understand the patriarchal codes embedded in Bollywood film songs. It proposes to do so by analyzing the lyrics and visualization of the songs.
3. It also proposes to critically analyze the relationship between culture and media and how they influence each other.

Review of Literature:

1. Mulvey, Laura. (1999). "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.*" *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen. New York: OUP.

Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema is an essay by Lara Mulvey published in the year 1975. The essay is centered on the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan. Mulvey argues that representations in a film is mediated by a masculine look/gaze which has voyeuristic overtones. The spectator identifies himself with the male protagonist who occupies the central position as the 'maker of meaning'. The female protagonist is made to exist in relation to the hero and her body is coded for strong erotic impact. Mulvey argues against the dichotomy and polarization of the idea of the active /male and passive /female represented in a film. The essay is a powerful critique on the lop -sided gender representation, masculinized viewership and power politics of Hollywood movies.

2. Storey, J. (1993). *An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Popular Culture*. Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

The book delineates and details the relationship between cultural theory and popular culture. Cutting across theories like Culturalism, Structuralism, Postmodernism, Marxism and Feminism, the author assesses each approach and its relation to popular culture through various examples of popular texts, narratives and everyday usages. The book also offers a platform for discussing the latest debates and relevant recent developments related to culture studies.

3. Jain, J., & Rai, S. (2002). *Films and feminism: Essays in Indian cinema*. New Delhi: Rawat Publication.

This book offers a study of both mainstream and parallel cinema. The major focus is on Hindi cinema. It analyses the idea of the 'woman' presented on the screen. It explores ideas of romance, the patriarchal order and how women define themselves as an individual. The book also discusses the different aspects related to film production. The book also voices feminist concerns and offers a significant contribution to film and gender studies.

The history of Indian films evidently starts with Lumier Brother's Cinematograph, which presented six short films in Bombay on July 7, 1896 to a British audience. In 1897, H. S. Bhatavdekar made two short films. Dada Saheb Phalke produced the first feature length silent film, *Raja Harishchandra*, in 1913. It was the first film to be shot by an Indian and he is considered as a pioneer of the Indian film industry. Ardeshir Irani's first sound film *Alam Ara*, released in 1931, marked the beginning of a new era in Indian cinema. *Alam Ara* also set the stage for the song-and-dance template which has become an imperative part of the later movie sequences. Moreover, the opening of the talkies marked a stage where movies began to be made for the masses.

Films steadily gained popularity in India and were popular with the masses. Regional cinemas thrived in the 1930s and 1940s. Most of the movies dealt with religious subjects. The partition of India remained the subject of major movies in the 1950's. The birth of realism in Indian cinema is exemplified by movies like *Dharti Ke Lal* in 1946. The Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) was formed in the 1940s. It continued to emphasize realism and went on to produce movies like *Mother India* and *Pyaasa* which are among India's most recognizable cinematic production. Movies like *Awaara* and *Pyaasa* are centered around the cityscapes and work on the idea of the 'unreal' urban space. The 1950's and 1960's is considered the Golden age of Indian cinema. These years saw the emergence of the Parallel Cinema Movement led by Bengalis. Eminent film makers like Satyajit Roy and Subrata Mitra made pioneering changes in the production of films. Hindi commercial cinema emerged in the 1970's with film such as *Aradhana* (1969) *Anand* (1971) *Amar Prem* (1972) *Dushman* (1972) and *Daag* (1973).

The arrival of the screenwriter duo Salim-Javed (Salim Khan and Javed Akhtar) revitalized the industry and established the genre of violent Bombay underworld crime films. Films such as *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Deewar* (1975) depicted the growing discontent and disillusionment among the masses – the unprecedented growth of slums, urban poverty, corruption and crime. The creation of the image of the 'Angry Young Man' personified by Amitabh Bachchan is the hallmark of the

movies of the genre. The film *Sholay* released on August 15, 1975 has been hailed as a cultural marker and a milestone in the history of Indian film industry. The movie was a trend setter and it also introduced innovative ways of cinematography. The term Bollywood was coined in the 1970's when the conventions of commercial Bollywood films were established. The creation of the 'Masala film' genre was key to this development. The movie *Yaadon Ki Baaraat* (1973) was the first movie dubbed as being quintessentially Bollywood. Landmark movies like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) by Manmohan Desai further expanded the genre in the 1970's and 80's.

The stagnation that Hindi cinema experienced in the 1980's was broken by *Qayamat Se Qayamat Tak* (1988) directed by Mansoor Khan with its blend of youthfulness, wholesome entertainment, emotional quotients and strong melodies. Setting the template for Bollywood 'Musical Romance' films, it greatly aided the growth of the industry with movies such as *Chandni* (1989), *Saajan* (1991), *Khalnayak* (1993), *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (1997) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998).

Indian film industry is synonymous with Bollywood. Mollywood, Kollywood and Tollywood industry has also started experimenting with an array of styles and themes and has successfully created some of the best movies. But Bollywood movies still leads the industry in relation to movie production. Bollywood movies, after the turn of the century, though continuing with the musical romance trends, genuinely explore a diverse array of challenging themes. Some movies have made serious attempts to move away from the formula for blockbusters by incorporating strong characters and a less predictable storyline. They try to incorporate the major socio-political and cultural issues and the challenges to the present democratic setup.

Cultural stereotypes: Gender norms and Indian cinema

The term culture is etymologically related to the Latin word 'cultura' which is related to the root word 'colere' which means to cultivate, nurture and to tend to the earth. In later years the term the definitions extended to a figurative use to denote the nurturing and refinement of the mind through education. Human identity is deeply influenced by the culture of the age. Culture encompasses the customs, traditions, religion, cuisine, language, lifestyle and belief systems of a particular society. Culture creates repositories of shared patterns of behaviour and living. These

result in collaborative social and cultural norms delineating expected patterns of conduct and behaviour. These societal norms dictate lifestyles and encourages standardized gender roles.

According to Raymond Williams the term culture can be understood in different ways. He suggests three broad definitions. It could mean “a general process of intellectual, spiritual and aesthetic development”. It can also be used to define “a particular way of life, whether of people, a period or a group.” It can also denote “the works and practices of intellectual and especially artistic activity” (Storey,2). Dance, drama, films, fine arts and poetry thus become an inevitable part of culture and the signifiers of meaning in a cultural setup. Films, soap operas and music often amplify the cultural codes embedded in a social structure. Through the repeated depiction of certain gender specific behaviour being rewarded, media provide lessons in gender-role conformity.

Gender roles are standardized patterns of behaviour and characteristics expected of individuals based on their biological sex. Gender role conformity is the social process of adhering to normative gender roles. Gender roles or stereotypes can be dichotomized as descriptive or prescriptive. Descriptive gender roles details how a person of a particular gender behave in a particular situation. Prescriptive gender roles are often culturally coded and indicate how a specific gender should behave. Often women who violate the prescriptive gender roles have to face social ostracization, discrimination and harassment. Prescriptive gender roles are an intrinsic part of the Indian cultural norms. Deeply ingrained into the social fabric, gender norms for women include gullibility, sensitivity to others needs and eagerness to soothe others feelings. Patriarchy reinforces these gender norms. Indian women are also expected to be submissive, docile, generous, innocent, polite and family oriented. Often women’s conformity to cultural archetypes of perfection are epitomized in religion and they determine their status of respectability.

In his study of women's popular culture in 19th century Bengal, Sumanta Banerjee makes a distinction between two classes of women who occupied different spaces of the city according to the class position. The middle-class women stayed indoors and preferred a private space. But the majority of the working women occupied the city spaces and was ‘exposed’ to the outer world. This inside - outside dichotomy has been coded and consolidated as a moral discourse. During the years of the freedom struggle, issues related to gender were highly contested and debated over. Ideas related to female sexuality and gender evolved out of this dialogue between nationalism and

colonialism. The repressive Victorian ideologies related to gender roles was impressed upon the Indian society. Transmitted to the audience via Indian myths and patriarchally coded texts like Manusmriti, it celebrated and delineated the virtues desired of an Indian woman. The colonial encounter thus provides the cultural terrain for the formulation of a powerful discourse around women.

This dichotomy was widely prevalent in movies before and after independence. This polarity was personified in the roles of the innocent/ docile heroine and the unrestrained sexuality of the vamp and is evident in films like *Caravan* (1971), *Mere Jeevan Saathi* (1972), *Sachchaa Jhutha* (1970), *Do Raaste* (1969), *Anamika* (1973), *Zanjeer* (1973) and *Sholay* (1975). The Vamp was a visible intrusion of the West into the cinematic space of the Indian films, signifying unrestrained sexuality and license, given to vices 'unknown' to Indian women. The vamp was an outsider, distinct from the iconic women of the nation. Helen, an Indian actress born to Burmese and English parents was used extensively to depict the vamp. Helen's blond hair and blue eyes heightened and highlighted the idea of the vamp as an outsider. The woman's body thus becomes the site of conflicting value systems.

The image of the chaste woman and the nightclub continued inform Indian cinema right up to the early 1980s. The films in the late 1960s and 1970s often had a mandatory cabaret song sequence. The sexuality of the heroine and the vamp undergoes a scopophilic objectification in the closed ambience of the theatre. Scopophilia "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight" (Mulvey,61). The vamp's sexuality is to be understood at two levels-she functioned "as an erotic object for the characters within the story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (Ibid,62). The cabaret song sequences are converging points where cinematic voyeurism is created by the dancer's direct look into the camera- "... the device of the show girl allows the two looks to be unified technically without any apparent break in the diegesis... the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude." (Ibid).

Sexuality and eroticism, though a part of Indian films, have been dealt with grace by filmmakers like Kidhar Sharma, Mehboob Khan, Guru Dutt and Vijay Anand. With the production of films involving the vamp, Hindi films entered a new arena of voyeurism, fetishness and 'morselling' of the body. In the late 1970's there is a definite shift of perception with the emergence

of the idea of a modern and liberated female figure. By the 1990's the earlier binary oppositions which had been so dear to the nationalistic image had ceased to hold. The heroine now occupied the space of the Vamp, through a process marked by a public display of desire and an entirely new discourse on sexuality that threatened the old boundaries as in *Tezaab* (1989), and *Khalnayak* (1993).

With the turn of the century dance sequences took a definitive turn from the morally coded space of the night clubs and vamps and moved to multiple locations. This relocation is embedded in a novel experience generated by the new visual cultures of globalization. The changed dialectic between women's sexuality and spectatorship created new horizons of consumption and film songs evolved to accommodate the change. Globalization also opened up the Indian market to western attire, which is reflected in the dresses Bollywood heroines wear. Songs now offered a 'Window Shopping' experience, where song and dance sequences began to be shot in outdoor and exclusive locations. Fleeting, erotic and utopian, this experience allows the spectator the possibility of experiencing the global world in an Indian setting.

Earlier classic movies celebrate femininity without offending, stereotyping or belittling. Beautiful examples can be seen in songs like 'Chaudhavi Ka Chand Ho' (*Chaudhavi Ka Chand*, 1960) and 'Maine puchha Chand Se' (*Abdullah*, 1980). In the songs that evolved later, one finds the lack of this sensitivity and a clear demarcation of the 'superior gender'. Songs like 'Ye kahan aa gaye hum', 'Kabhi kabhi mere dil mein', and 'Milo na tum to hum ghabrayen' incorporate female subjugation and prescriptive ideas related to Indian women in its lyrics. The songs of the 1990's often play around explicit sexuality and objectification of the female body, often promoting the idea of the dominant male who predates and pesters the heroine.

Mainstream Indian cinema has restricted itself to define sketches of women who are dominated and defined by patriarchy. In Indian cinema women have often been relegated to the passive position as an onlooker, as a "bearer, not the maker of meaning" (Mulvey,58). The stories played out on the screen often revolve around the life of the hero and women exist only in relation to men. "As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist, he projects his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence." (ibid,63). He thus emerges as the "representative of power" (ibid).

The trend of pursuing the female and subjugating or ‘owning’ her is a trend that continues to be used in Bollywood songs. The lyrics and visual content of songs like ‘Mat maari’ (R. Rajkumar), ‘Badri ki dulhaniya’ (*Badrinath ki Dulhaniya*), ‘Hans mat pagli’ (*Toilet- Ek Prem Katha*), ‘Tu mere agal bagal hai’ (*Phata Poster Nikla Hero*) and ‘Ding dong’ (*Munna Michael*) seems to be episodes of a criminal narrative where the self-proclaimed lover predaes and stalks the female, forcing her to submit to his harassing love antics. These songs present a glamorization of sexual violence. The songs of the 1990’s, like ‘Jumma chumma de de’ (*Hum*) ‘Jaadu teri nazar’ (*Darr*) ‘Apun bola’ (*Josh.*), ‘Premi ashiq awara’ (*Phool aur Kante*) ‘Kya ada kya jalwa’ (*Shastra*) ‘Khambe jaisi khadi he’ (*Dil*), Akeli na bazar jaya karo (*Major Saab*) and ‘Khud ko kya samjhti he’ (*Khiladi*) had pursued a similar trend. These songs reflect the patriarchal ideology embedded in Indian culture. These retrograde male attitudes featured in the film, foster chauvinistic ideas and attitudes that is visible in the sordid crimes perpetrated on women.

The commodification of the female body and its objectification can be found in songs like ‘Tu cheez badi hai mast mast’. The lyrics of both the male and female protagonists often voice only the male desires and concentrates on the male gaze. In the ‘item song’ numbers, which seems to be an extension of the vamp song sequences, women degenerate into items of consumption, like ‘tandoori murgi’ and ‘jhandu balm’ -produced to satisfy the sexual cravings and fantasies of the male gaze. It is interesting to note that this gaze is evident even in movies of the pre -independent times. *The Lor Girl* (1933), co- produced by Abdolhossein Sepanta and Ardeshir Irani is the case in point. The opening scene is of the heroine Golnar dancing for a male audience. The close -up shot of her gyrating hips is accompanied by the sound of musical instruments and the voice of a jeering male crowd. Fast forward to the present time we find a replica of the scene in many of Bollywood’s contemporary songs like ‘Jumme ki rat he’ (*Kick*), ‘Laila main laila’ (*Raees*) ‘Sau tarah ke’ (*Dishoom*), ‘Dilbar’ (*Satyameva Jayate*) ‘Ding dong’ (*Baghi 2*), ‘O saki’ (*Batla House*) and ‘Do you love me’ (*Baghi 3*) and the latest among them from the movie *Pushpa*- ‘Oo bolega ya O oo Bolega Sala’.

While there is a proliferation of songs introducing the main lead hero, in songs like ‘Ala re ala’ from *Simba*, there are rarely any songs that introduces the lead female. Songs on women like ‘Maa’ from *Taare Zameen Par* are often governed by ideas binding the ideals of womanhood. Earlier examples of gender stereotypes of submissive and dedicated wife can be seen in songs like

'Tumhi mere mandir tumhi meri pooja' (*Khandan*, 1965), 'Aaja piya tohe pyar dun' (*Baharon ke Sapne*, 1967) and 'Tere liye palkon ki jhaalar bunu' (*Harjaee*, 1981). Many of the present day popular hit songs are a celebration of male sexuality and its manifestations. Songs like 'Move your lakk baby', 'Lak 28 kudi da', 'Desi boys', 'Chale tu jab matak matak' are repulsively gendered in its treatment of female sexuality. The misogynistic, lewd and sexist rap music of Yo Yo Honey Singh and Badshah are commentaries on the lop-sided gender norms in Indian culture.

Conclusion:

Music is an important cultural component and reflects the society's cultural values. Songs speak a universal language of emotion and is popular across cultures. Songs and music are part of our cultural heritage. Film songs are popular among the masses. Bollywood film songs of the 60s and 70s still have a great fan following. Music has never failed to sway the hearts of the audience. Given the soaring popularity of Bollywood music and its impact on the youth, it is a cause of concern that many of the Bollywood songs encourage ideas of eve-teasing, discrimination, molestation and objectification.

The irrefutable relation between movie and culture follows a complex dynamic. Movies reflect contemporary issues and attitudes of a culture and vice-versa. Cultural codes can be seen embedded in films and other literary and non-literary forms. Films and other popular forms of entertainment are consumed by the masses. This results in the propagation of these ideas in the society. Films at the same time is a mirror held up to the society. It is in turn, a space where the ideas, attitudes, institutions and belief systems of an age is recorded. The explicit portrayal of sexuality in films and media reinforces the pre-existing traditional societal stereotypes. The fetishism and objectification of the female body in the lyrics can promote rape culture and victim blaming. The cultural paradigms portrayed in the movies results in re-inventing the retrograde male chauvinistic attitudes. Stereotyped portrayal of women and sexing her body into fetish images is definitely contributing to rampant sexism in India and is one of the major contributory factors to the exodus of rape and other atrocities being committed on women.

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