



Singing The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Look at Bhojpuri Music

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Abstract:

Bhojpuri music is often dismissed as vulgar, low or sensational, existing discussions have rarely examined how various figures and images function to express, displace and sublimate psycho-sexual desires. For instance in many songs, the image of “Bhauji” is presented not merely as a family member but as an object of teasing, fantasy, and attraction, occupying a position between familiarity and prohibition. The paper addresses this gap by analysing how such figures allow socially restricted desires to find displaced expression.

Drawing on Freudian psychoanalysis, the study treats the lyrics of Bhojpuri songs as cultural texts through which unconscious and repressed desires are articulated. The analysis focuses on two interrelated dimensions. First, it examines the image of “Bhauji” as a sublimated sexual object whose liminal position within the familial structures enables the displacement of Oedipal desire. Second, it explores the repeated use of mouth-related imagery, such as kissing, tasting, and consumption, which Freud described as the oral stage of psychosexual development. These motifs are read as symbolic forms through which desire persists without direct genital union.

Methodologically, the paper undertakes a close textual analysis of selected lyrics of Bhojpuri songs, chosen for their recurrent use of kinship-based erotic figures and oral imagery. The paper argues that Bhojpuri songs function not simply as reflections of social relations but as sites where repression, displacement, and sublimation give form to unconscious fantasy within popular culture.

Keywords: Bhojpuri music, Psychoanalysis, Desire, Unconscious, Popular Culture.

Introduction

Bhojpuri popular music is often dismissed within dominant cultural discourse as vulgar or merely sensational. Various judgments tend to rely on moral reaction rather than critical engagement, overlooking the complex social and psychic forces that shape these cultural expressions. Such analysis of Bhojpuri songs ignores their role as cultural spaces where desire, repression, and fantasy are expressed and reproduced.

The paper approaches Bhojpuri songs as a cultural text whose analysis beyond the surface meaning can lead to understanding Bhojpuri music as sites where socially restricted desires find displaced and culturally permissible expression. What appears excessive or vulgar often reveals an underlying logic through which desire adapts to social constraint. One of the key forces operating beneath this surface is psychosexual, shaping both the figures and imagery that recur within Bhojpuri popular music.

The paper consists of a relevant review of existing literature, a precise identification of the research gap, and an outline of the theoretical framework utilised; it is primarily structured around two main analytical sections. The first section discusses the image of “Bhauji” and its significance within familial and social structures, as both desired and prohibited, occupying a liminal space that enables the displacement of forbidden desire. The second section focuses on oral imagery to examine how desires related to the oral stage of sexuality find expression in such songs. Motifs such as kissing, tasting, sweetness, and consumption function as a medium through which the sexual impulse finds gratification in culturally permissible forms.

The paper seeks to move beyond reductive notions of vulgarity and instead highlight the deeper forces that structure Bhojpuri popular music by viewing these songs as sites where various psycho-sexual processes intersect with popular culture.

Note: All translations of the transliterated Bhojpuri and Hindi lyrics mentioned in this paper are the author’s own.

Review of literature

Academic engagement with Bhojpuri popular music and cinema has largely emerged from sociological, cultural, and moral frameworks rather than sustained psychoanalytic inquiry. A significant strand of scholarship examines Bhojpuri songs in relation to vulgarity, patriarchy, and social decline, offering important insights into gender politics and cultural anxiety. However, such approaches rarely engage with the psychosexual processes through which desire is structured and displaced within these cultural forms.

Richa Singh's analysis of Bhojpuri item songs foregrounds the language of vulgarity and the representation of women in popular lyrics. Situating these songs within a framework of gender politics, Singh argues that sexually suggestive expressions normalise misogyny and reinforce patriarchal power structures. While this work is significant in highlighting phallogentric patterns in the language and expression of such songs, its emphasis remains on representation and gender critique rather than on unconscious desire or psychic investment.

A broader cultural mapping of Bhojpuri media is offered by Ratnakar Tripathy, whose work situates Bhojpuri cinema within contexts of migration, caste mobility, and vernacular cultural assertion. Tripathy's analysis is crucial for understanding the historical and material conditions shaping Bhojpuri cultural production, yet it does not directly address questions of fantasy, repression, or displacement operating at the level of the unconscious.

In contrast, psychoanalytic criticism has long treated cultural texts as sites where repression, sublimation, and symbolic desire find expression. Freud's text *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* conceptualizes sexuality as polymorphous and organized around shifting sexual objects and aims rather than genital union alone. Despite the extensive application of Freudian psychoanalysis in cultural studies, such an approach has rarely been applied to Bhojpuri popular music or its recurring figures and motifs.

Given the limited availability of sustained academic work on Bhojpuri popular music, this review focuses on representative sociocultural studies alongside foundational psychoanalytic theory in order to situate the present analysis within existing scholarly conversations.

Research Gap & Rationale

Despite the growing visibility of Bhojpuri popular music in public discourse, there remains a notable absence of sustained academic engagement with its psychic and symbolic dimensions. Existing studies have largely approached Bhojpuri songs through sociological, moral, or ideological frameworks, focusing on vulgarity, gender representation, or cultural decline. While these approaches offer valuable insights, they do not adequately address how desire itself is structured, displaced, and expressed within these cultural texts.

This paper identifies a research gap in the lack of psychoanalytic readings of Bhojpuri song lyrics, particularly those that attend to familial-based erotic figures and oral imagery. Although psychoanalysis has been widely applied to literature, cinema, and popular culture, its application to regional Indian popular music remains limited. As a result, recurring figures such as the “Bhauji” and persistent bodily motifs have rarely been examined as psychosexual formations shaped by repression and sublimation.

The decision to employ Freudian psychoanalysis is a methodological choice, for Freud’s formulations of sexuality provide a conceptual vocabulary for understanding desire as polymorphous, displaced, and having various sexual objects and sexual aims. Freudian understanding of infantile sexuality consisting of various stages of psychosexual development is central to interpret dominant psychosexual tendencies within Bhojpuri popular music.

The selection of songs, “Bhaiya Ke Saali Ghare Aaiel”, “Bhauji”, and “Chadhal Jawani Rasgulla”, is guided by their representative use of kinship-based erotic figures and oral

imagery. Focusing on a limited corpus allows analytical depth while illustrating broader patterns that recur across Bhojpuri popular music.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in Freudian psychoanalysis to examine Bhojpuri popular song lyrics as cultural texts through the technique of close reading. The study treats these songs as symbolic formations through which desire, repression, and fantasy are articulated. The primary concern is the psychic logic through which desire finds expression within culturally permissible forms rather than the actual sexual acts that occur beyond the text, though they are equally important.

The theoretical framework is drawn from Sigmund Freud's early writings on sexuality, particularly *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex* (authorised English translation by A. A. Brill). Freud's formulation of sexuality as polymorphous, fragmented, and revolving around shifting sexual objects and sexual aims provides a conceptual vocabulary for analysing repression, displacement, sublimation, and fixation within cultural texts. Concepts such as sexual object, sexual aim, infantile sexuality, oral fixation, and sexual overestimation are employed here as analytical tools.

Freud's work, however, emerges from a Western intellectual context and carries well-recognised limitations, particularly in its treatment of female desire and its reliance on historically situated assumptions. Acknowledging these constraints, the present study employs Freudian concepts critically, as analytical tools that can unearth psychosexual tendencies rather than giving an exhaustive explanation of cultural subjectivity. Alternative approaches, such as feminist psychoanalysis, Lacanian theory, or postcolonial criticism, offer valuable insights but are not adopted here in order to maintain conceptual coherence.

Methodologically, the paper relies exclusively on Freudian psychoanalysis to sustain analytical focus on psychosexual displacement. Other critical approaches to Bhojpuri music, including sociological and cultural studies perspectives, remain important but fall outside the deliberately limited scope of the present inquiry. The study undertakes a close textual analysis of Bhojpuri song lyrics, focusing on language, metaphor, and recurring imagery rather than performance, choreography, or audience reception. The analysis is therefore textual rather than performative or comparative.

The songs selected for analysis, “Bhaiya Ke Saali Ghare Aaiel”, “Chadhal Jawani Rasgulla”, and the track “Bhauji” from the Hindi film *Roohi* (2021), were chosen for their articulation of Oedipal erotic figures and oral imagery. The selected corpus includes two regional tracks and one mainstream Bollywood song, which mirrors the sexual imagery and sublimated desires found in the regional Bhojpuri variants. These songs provide an ideal lens for examining how desire is displaced through familial relations and bodily symbolism, thereby indicating broader patterns of transformation of the sexual impulse that recur across both Bhojpuri popular music and its mainstream cinematic appropriations.

Bhauji and the Sublimation of Oedipal Desire

The image of “Bhauji” is particularly significant in the sublimation of Oedipal desires. Unlike the mother, she is not related by blood, yet she remains within the familial structure. As the brother’s wife, she occupies a prohibited position, rendering her a forbidden sexual object; however, she continues to exist as the Other within the family. As a woman entering a patriarchal system from another lineage, she does not carry the same absolute incest prohibition as the maternal figure. This liminal position allows the sexual aim to find a displaced or substitute form of gratification.

The “Bhauji” is sexually overestimated, which enables the libido to bypass socially constituted psychic restrictions such as shame, loathing, and fear (Freud 26). Freud explains that sexual overestimation extends beyond the body and spreads into the psychic sphere, manifesting as what he terms “logical blinding”, a diminished judgment in the face of the perceived psychic attainments and perfections of the sexual object. The sexual impulse thus acquires an authoritative position, demanding obedience and suspending critical judgment. In such cases, the very act of transgressing psychic barriers may itself become a significant source of pleasure rather than the image alone. It is therefore not surprising that Freud called “love”, the source of primordial authority.

This dynamic is evident in the opening line of the song “Bhaiya Ke Saali Ghare Aaiel,” which celebrates the arrival of the sensual figure, “Bhaiya ke saali ghare aiel badi” (“Brother’s sister-in-law has come to the house”). The emphasis on arrival may be associated with the excitation of the libido. The overestimation of the Bhauji (or the closely related figure of the Saali) produces a state of logical blinding, articulated in the line “Manwa nahi bas mein rahela” (“The mind/heart remains no longer in [my] control”), which signals a loss of judgment and control. The following line, “Love ke badhal bemari” (“The sickness of love has intensified”), presents desire as a form of hysteria or illness, reinforcing Freud’s observation that the repression or expression of sexual impulse can affect the physiological functioning of the body. Desire appears morbid here when viewed through conventional notions of sexuality; however, Freud argues that perversion becomes pathological only when marked by exclusiveness and fixation (Freud 35). In this case, although the sexual aim is displaced, often operating through fantasy or partial acts, it nonetheless achieves a form of satisfaction without anatomical transgression. This gratification of the sexual impulse is infantile in nature, where the sexual tension is released without genital union. The image thus primarily produces fore pleasure while the fantasy and other subsequent actions primarily produce end pleasure. However, the

image and the fantasy of that image are closely associated and their roles may be substituted. Similar to infantile sexuality, the sexual impulse reaches satisfaction primarily through fantasy, the physical presence of the sexual object or the genital union which Freud believed to be the marker of adult sexuality is not needed. Therefore, such image and their impact heavily depends on the Oedipal desires that emerged during infancy, if the psychosexual growth was normal and the Oedipal desire eventually transformed into the adult desire through revolting against the parental authority (Freud 104), the effectiveness of the image would be reduced, while if ,as an infant, there was a lack of care given by maternal figures ,the image's effectiveness would be increased.

The song “Bhauji” from the mainstream Hindi film *Roohi* (2021), acquires a unique place in this study, for it is not a traditional regional Bhojpuri track, but the representation, appropriation and commercialization of those recurring regional images for a mainstream audience. In the song movement of the sexual object is described as a form of struggle: “Chhattisgarh ka Naxali thumka” (“a Naxalite hip-sway from Chhattisgarh”). Much like the Naxalite movement in the political sphere, the image of “Bhauji” enables the libido to challenge and transgress the authority of restrictive psychic forces through sexual overestimation. Oedipal desires that would ordinarily remain repressed thus find expression through this imagery. The song further warns a soldier who is about to enter marriage: “Shaadi karne tu toh chala tha, taan ke seena fauji... jaan tohri le le legi hamri bhauji” (“You were going to get married with your chest puffed out like a soldier... our sister-in-law will take your life”). Marriage here represents a normative route of the sexual impulse, structured and regulated by social authority, symbolised by the figure of the soldier. The emergence of “Bhauji” as a new sexual object empowers the sexual impulse to bypass these repressive forces, metaphorically “killing” the *fauji* (soldier). The narrator’s stammering repetition of the word

“Bhauji” conveys not only the overwhelming and destabilising potential of the image but also its psychic excess and pervasiveness.

Taken together, these representations reveal the image of the “Bhauji” as a culturally permissible figure through which forbidden desire may be displaced and negotiated. Positioned between familial relations and prohibition, she allows Oedipal impulses to circulate in sublimated form, enabling the sexual aim to attain substitute satisfaction without violating the incest taboo. The figure of the “Bhauji” thus functions not merely as an erotic image but as a psychic solution to the constraints imposed by familial and social authority.

Oral Imagery and the Displacement of Sexual Aim

Why is a kiss often regarded as platonic, whereas an act such as spanking is condemned as perverse? A kiss rarely provokes loathing, while a spank does, despite the fact that the former involves bodily fluids and the latter largely involves touch. Even within conventional frameworks where the sexual aim is assumed to be genital union, kissing is normalised whereas spanking is treated as sinful. Fascination with the mammary glands among Homo sapiens raises similar questions: a part of the body not directly linked to procreation often stimulates desire more intensely than the genitals themselves. The answer to such contradictions lies in Sigmund Freud’s theory of infantile psychosexual development, particularly the oral stage. However, social conditioning and patriarchal economy also contribute to the normalisation of these attitudes.

Freud argues that experiences of childhood disappear from consciousness in the majority of cases, a process he terms “infantile amnesia” (54). This amnesia does not imply the eradication of early impressions; rather, these impressions are repressed into the unconscious and continue to exert a significant influence on later life. During the oral stage, the child learns to “love other persons who assist it in its helplessness and gratify its wants” (Freud 101). The seemingly

asexual affection expressed through kissing, sucking, and patting becomes the prototype of later sexual aims. While repression prevents the adult subject from directing such desire toward the mother, the Oedipal impulse does not vanish; it is sublimated. Acts involving the mucous membranes of the mouth thus enable a partial return of oral sexuality through other sexual objects, recreating an early experience of nourishment, care, and immediate gratification. It is therefore unsurprising that, within dominant moral frameworks, actions involving the mouth are often not perceived as perverse, as they remain associated with the “pure” love of the mother. Even among kisses, the ‘kiss of the mother’, understood as a brief touch of lips on the various non-genital body parts like the cheeks is considered as the ‘purest kiss’, while a kiss involving the other’s lips for a prolonged period or the genitals is often scorned as ‘impure’.

In the song “Bhaiya Ke Saali Ghare Aaiel,” the sexual aim seeks fulfilment through embracing, “Man kare dehiya me kas lihi unke” (“The heart desires to hold her body tight”), and kissing, “Chum lihi othwa naram” (“To kiss her soft lips”). Both acts belong to the oral stage of psychosexual development, and the narrator appears fixated upon them, as no alternative sexual aim is articulated in the song. The lips function as a substitute erotic zone through which the sexual impulse attains a displaced form of satisfaction, this polymorphism of the libido is the defining feature of infantile sexuality. Unlike other erogenous zones such as the anal or genital regions, the mouth remains socially permissible and thus survives censorship. This relative permissibility helps explain the persistence of oral motifs within mass culture.

A similar mechanism operates in the song “Chadhal Jawani Rasgulla,” where sexual desire is articulated through the image of a dessert. The metaphor is not coincidental: the “rasgulla” evokes sweetness and consumption, linking desire to the oral stage, which Freud characterises as cannibalistic (Freud 74). The narrator’s desire is directed toward consuming the sexual object, describing youth itself as edible. Patriarchal conditioning, social convention, and oral-

stage fixation converge to associate the sexual object with food. The performance of such songs further sublimates the desires of listeners, allowing their sexual aims to achieve temporary and substitute satisfaction through oral imagery rather than genital consummation.

Oral imagery thus operates as a culturally sanctioned mode of displaced satisfaction, enabling libidinal desire to circulate without directly confronting social prohibition. By anchoring pleasure in acts of tasting, kissing, and consumption, such imagery preserves the persistence of seemingly “platonic” desire while maintaining its distance from the genital aim. In this sense, oral motifs function as a psychic compromise, allowing early forms of sexuality to re-emerge in sublimated and socially tolerable forms.

Conclusion

The paper aimed to engage with Bhojpuri popular music beyond reductive notions of vulgarity by examining the psychosexual forces operating beneath its surface. The psychoanalytic reading of the lyrics, it has been argued that recurring figures and images function as displaced sites through which desire negotiates social inhibition. Refusing to treat the sexual images as normative, the analysis understands them as cultural texts shaped by repression, fixation, and sublimation.

The examination of the Bhauji figure demonstrated how familial proximity itself becomes a site of erotic negotiation. Positioned between familiarity and prohibition, the image of Bhauji as a sexual object enables the displacement of Oedipal desire, allowing the sexual aim to achieve alternative gratification without direct transgression. Similarly, the analysis of oral imagery revealed how early modes of pleasure associated with the oral stage persist within the unconscious and find expression through culturally tolerated motifs of kissing, sweetness, and consumption.

This paper aims to open a critical engagement by demonstrating how Freudian psychoanalysis can illuminate the psycho-sexual dimension of these cultural expressions. The scope for further research remains considerable, including psychoanalytic examinations of intoxication, female sexual agency, representations of homosexuality, and fantasies of crime and sexuality in other forms of popular culture.

By positioning Bhojpuri music within a psychoanalytic framework, this study contributes to a broader conversation regarding popular culture, that it acts as a site where desire, conflict, and compromise are continuously negotiated.

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