



The body as a text: Analyzing the “item” songs in Chennai Express and Dabbang 2 movies.

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Abstract:

The roles that the body performs are constructive and effective in the modeling of popular culture. The bodies of women, especially are the crucial contributors to this aspect. The constant display of the female body creates a visual manifestation of an “ideal” woman. Thus, rendering gender stereotypes.

The depiction of females in movies is subject to this notion of stereotyping gender. The portrayal of the “item” girl and the female “character” in South Asian movies itself is a testimony to cinematic stereotypes of gender. The impact this creates in the viewer's minds and the cult it encompasses is reflected in society.

The study focuses on the types of bodies of women represented in South Asian movies. The research aims to study the position of power held by these bodies, their identities, their location in patriarchal norms, and their influence on popular culture.

Keywords: Sex, gender, culture, “item” dance, “heroine”, cinematic position, power, Madonna whore complex.

Introduction

The body is a space to express one's identity. When a female exercises her identity through her body, it is gendered based on her sex by cultural and political appropriation. Then the space of a "woman" becomes easily commodified.

"On the one hand, representation serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women." (Butler, 40) The political position of spaces/bodies thus restricts the expression of identity or its interpretation.

The representation of women in South Asian movies is the stereotype of female identities. Being part of a larger political propaganda, the misrepresentation of women in popular media toys with a woman's space in the real world. The body here is dissected and terrorized by the critics, the public, and the media. Media then plays a double role. Because of the media, "item" dances exist and are promoted. The role the media plays in its promotion of popular culture is appalling.

The "item" dance in South Asian movies, the song-dance sequence performed by women is criticized for its "lewd" performance and appeal towards the "male gaze." Expressing a desire for sex is part of these actions performed by the bodies that are subject to scrutiny. Such bodies are deemed deviant and those dance-song sequences promote unwanted consequences in society.

Studies have been taken considering this dance number and have proved to be a toxic influence on the cultural milieu. (Dr. Sharma et al.3856). These songs are catalysts to criminal activities, especially rapes, alcoholism, and encouraging gangster culture. (Jain et al).

The negative influence upon society was largely dealt with while other studies focussed on the dance sequence itself. The origin of the item dance itself can be connected to the "hijra" dance tradition. (Chatterjee). Its globalization and glocalization forces are analyzed and the established individual style in the Bollywood industry by its unique dance sequence tracing similarity to traditional Indian dance forms to complicated Western dance sequences. (Bhattacharya).

The space utilized by these women is to explicate. The men surrounding these women are to be studied. While the spotlight fell on the vulgarity of the female body, little or no studies have explored the man's space.

The “item” songs can also be studied as a carnivalesque to the ordinary songs of movies. Celebrating sex and inviting a man sensuously falls out of the category of ordinary songs which often do not contain “vulgarization” of the female body and a group of men enticed by that body.

Judith Butler in “Gender Trouble” uses Levi Strauss’s theory of the “raw” and the “cooked” to explain sex and gender. “That “sex” is to nature or “the raw” as gender is to culture or “the cooked.” (Butler, 47). The women in movies are subject to a cultural identification explicating their role and relationship only in regards to a man. Without the male phallus, the female is insignificant. Her only task becomes supporting the man or not existing. Here, man becomes the culture.

The body engendered by sex, in cinema, determines its bodily function. The female body moves around in the limited cinematic space surrounding the “false universal of man” (Butler). Interestingly such a phenomenon is only possible within a cinematic space. For cinema is fantasy, by creating a passive “heroine” and the playful “item” the dichotomy of female roles is redefined by South Asian movies.

“Power is the ability of one entity to influence the action of another entity.” (The Foucauldian Concept of Power, 11). The position of the “item” girls has remained controversial for a long time. Looking at their position from a Foucauldian point of view a momentary shift of power can be observed. The “item” song that plays for a few minutes portrays a woman dancing, singing, and moving sensuously attracting the men. The men are enticed by her. The sexual aggressiveness of women is foregrounded hence. Inviting the man for sex the woman is placed on a higher pedestal and position of power.

“The aim of this technology of power is not mere control, which is achievable through imposition or restrictions and prohibitions, but pervasive management. What is new in Foucault's consideration of pervasive management is a description of how it is achieved not just through restrictions, but through enabling conceptions, definitions, and descriptions that generate and support behavior governing norms.” (The Foucauldian Concept of Power, 11).

The man is in momentary control of the woman he is attracted to in “item” songs. The female body exerts power over the man her position enabled her to. Under the pretext of succumbing to male desires, the woman has the man completely wrapped around her fingertips.

“Where such men love, they have no desire, and where they desire, they cannot love.” (Brownlee). Freud puts forward the theory of the “Madonna whore complex.” The Madonna is the pure woman, in this case, the chaste “heroine” and the “whore” is the “item” dancer. This complex of the man leads him to behave in contradicting

ways toward women. In the cinematic space, this dichotomy of the male hero is aptly portrayed. The phallogocentric male does not sexually desire the chaste “heroine” but he “loves” her. The “item” girl is not chaste and is fit to his profile of a sexually desirable body.

The two movies under analysis are, “Dabbaang 2” and “Chennai Express” two prominent Bollywood movies directed by Arbaaz Khan and Rohit Shetty. The songs in each movie taken for analysis are “fevicol se” from, “Dabbaang 2” and “One, two, three, four” from “Chennai Express”.

“Fevicol se” from “Dabbaang 2” is an item song starring Kareena Kapoor and Salman Khan. This song has received heavy criticism for its degradation of the female body and its vulgar lyrics.

The song is shot in a Red Street area of Mumbai. Assumably the dancers too must be prostitutes. Surrounded by masses of men the women dance sensually arousing them. The men respond to their movements likewise enticed.

The way the lead dancer moves around the mass of men is incomparable to everyday scenarios as no woman would boldly move about. An inherent fear of an attack always would lie in the back of her mind. Also, it is important to note how the men act around her. As she indicates sex, they revere her out of fear. No one touches her without her consent and they fall drastically to the ground as she playfully pushes them away.

The hero Chulbul Pandey (Salman Khan) is passive in this song-dance sequence. He agrees with the dancer and not vice versa. This gives the audience a feeling that she dances for herself and likewise playful is her character. Her playful and naughty teasing checks the control she has over the other men and Chulbul Pandey.

The “heroine” Rajjo Pandey (Sonakshi Sinha) the “hero’s “wife is the sex engendered around Chulbul Pandey. Without him, the body has no existence. Her life surrounds the “false universal” of her husband. She is portrayed as passive and sheds tears for her husband, thus making her the perfect Madonna.

Living with the perfect Madonna, Chulbul Pandey is not able to desire her sexually, so he turns to brothels and girls who dances enticingly thus profiling them as unchaste and as “whore”. He believes she can satisfy him sexually.

“Chennai Express” directed by Rohit Shetty has the song “One, two, three, four” starring Shahrukh Khan, Priyamani, and Deepika Padukone.

the song-dance sequence is different from the one discussed above as the “item” dancer is pacifying Rahul (Shahrukh Khan) because of his dangerous situation. She offers sex as a solace and later Rahul can be seen enjoying her playful teases.

Here, Rahul is torn between his current task (eloping with the “heroine”) and enjoying the “item” dance. But he chooses the dancer anyway as it is more fun. Through his slackening and immersing himself in the dance, he puts himself in a dangerous situation.

The dancer is surrounded by a mass of men and she dances gracefully around them entertaining each one. Not one man is bored or dissatisfied. Her end of teasing the men in a visually cramped space is successful. Again, this is a position that is only possible within a cinematic space.

The “heroine,” Meenamma (Deepika Padukone) is seen witnessing the dance. While she cannot be compared to the perfect Madonna, her life does center around him. She takes it upon herself to save the man from himself and rescue him from the toxic society.

To conclude the study, there are two types of female bodies within a cinematic space. One is the entertainer who holds firm control over the phallus and the other is controlled by the phallus. The positions they are put in are contradicting. Just like how K R Meera says in “The Hangwoman,” the man fears a woman who invites him openly for sex.

“I am two women: one wants to have all the joy, passion, and adventure that life can give me. The other wants to be a slave to routine, family life, and things that can be planned and achieved. I'm a housewife and a prostitute, both of us living in the same body and doing battle with each other.” (Paulo Coelho, 96).

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