

Thoughts on (selected) Bollywood Geet

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Abstract

In the current debates on literary criticism, and its intersection with cultural theory and criticism, a hybrid oeuvre of 'contrapuntal reading' has emerged that adopts a confrontational attitude to canon, and by extension erodes the distinctions between conventional and accepted subjects of critical inquiry, and non-conventional or taboo subjects. The Bollywood musical is one such domain that has traditionally not found favour with literary inquiry. The advent of Film studies, of course, has gone a long way in establishing the 'legitimacy' of this tilt. This expansion in critical gaze, however, has not reaped rich rewards for Bollywood which is still considered a pariah especially in college and university curriculum as it is deemed to be a 'corrupting influence' despite its ubiquity. This paper sets out to examine one aspect of the

typical Bollywood musical – the romantic *geet* and buddy songs, and examine whether it can be understood as a repository of ideological traces, whether any meaningful connections between text and world can be traced. The analysis can by no means be considered exhaustive, and neither does the paper intend to draw metanarratives from an inventory of songs. Rather the paper only offers a symptomatic framework, at best, of hetero-patriarchal codes that determine our society. The selection of songs is purely arbitrary, and are at best metaphoric representations of their class and era. However, the songs were consciously picked from different time periods to observe whether any continuity or shared linkages could be traced, so as to offer some comment on the perpetuation of hetero-patriarchal structures and spatial configurations they articulated. The arbitrariness calls into question the process of selection that necessarily entails omissions. No matter how carefully, objectively or exhaustive these processes are, there always remains an unresolved residue. These processes call into question the question of canon making – the privileging of certain objects and making some opaque. This is a fundamental issue that confronts any analysis since it must necessarily privilege in order to arrive at some definitive comparison. Therefore, the paper refrains from considering the paper as imposing or tracing a hegemonic opinion or pattern that will directly fit the category of songs and resolve all contradictions. The very nature of dialectical inquiry checks this totalitarian assertion. So, this paper proceeds with the assumption that the reader will view it as one

among many perspectives through which the songs can be observed.

Keywords: literary criticism, film studies, film literature, Bollywood films

Introduction

It would not be out of place here to observe the origin and evolution of the genre with respect to Indian cinema or more specifically Bollywood. I am careful here to distinguish between Indian cinema and Bollywood, even as the multiplex evolution has made these terms almost synonymous with each other, it is and wasn't always so. Bollywood in its strictest sense refers to a particular class of cinema that is populist in nature. Its semiotics can easily be identified and classified into predictable patterns, what later on came to be called the formula film. In this sense the experimental movies that we have grown used to like *Gangs of Wasseypur*, *Paan Singh Tomar*, *Lunchbox* or the earlier *Salaam Bombay* must be excluded from Bollywood and referred to as Indian cinema. Besides one important distinction is that Indian cinema is inherently pluralistic owing to the vast cultural diversity of the country. Thus you get a Bengali cinema rooted in an experimental aesthetic and a Southern cinema that is unabashedly androcentric. Bollywood – a derivative from Hollywood,

specifically refers to popular cinema produced in Hindi and subscribed to largely by north India.

We'd do well here to root this specificity in terms of the historical origins of the Indian National cinema. It began in late 1913's with a silent film called *Harishchandra* by Dadasaheb Phalke, which was a biopic on the legendary ancient king. A few years later came *Alam Ara* - the first talkie i.e. a movie with sound. Indian cinema, however, did not catch the popular imagination up until the advent of independence. This was partly due to the fact that the genre had not yet evolved fully as the shadow of theatre loomed large over the actors and technical considerations meant outdoor shooting was yet not possible. However with the onset of independence Bollywood emerged from the shadows of national cinema, with the construct of star culture.

The star was not multi-dimensional unlike earlier actors who like Kishore and Noor Jehan sung their songs in a few films they acted in. Rather the star was constructed as a larger than life personality and marketed vigorously such that the star became a brand with its own set of brand loyal audiences. This branding and brand loyalty was necessitated by the fact that independence brought in its wake a huge metamorphosis of socio-economic relations and industry in particular required a certain immunity against the flux of economy.

As the economy progressed and faltered in the initial years, the dire need for comic relief and escape arose as the post-independence country began to experience the

pressures of a burgeoning population and unclaimed colonial legacies. Hence came about the class LCD – the lowest common denominator which was tapped very effectively by Bollywood as its primary audience till the onset of liberalization. The LCD was a class of people that came about through the large scale migration from rural areas and across the border that independence brought about. Encouraged by the independence myth and Nehru’s promise of socialized prosperity, the class increasingly became the site of fractured consciousness, manifesting economic and psychological frustrations.

The cinema that actually attempted to realize the psyche of this class, traced a completely different path from Bollywood. This was the parallel movement in Indian cinema known as Art Cinema which started in the 1950’s and included pioneers like Satyajit Ray (*Pathar Pancholi*), Shyam Benegal (*Ankur*) and Bimal Roy (*Do bigha zameen*). This cinema was characterized by its opposition to the glitz and glamour of Bollywood cinema. This division, however is not without its share of opacities either. For one can easily point out that movies like *Naya Daur* starring Dilip Kumar and Vijyanthi Mala – both stars in their own right, delved into the social reality while still maintaining the framework of a Bollywood film. Similar was the case with V Shantaram directed *Do Aankhen Barah Haath*, which is best remembered for the song: *Aye Maalik teray banday hum*. These movies however are exceptions, and a product of the 50’s. With the advent of 60’s the schism developed fully.

Bollywood and Patriarchy

What came to be constructed as Bollywood especially the Bollywood Musical, thus, relied upon a fixed formula: the hero and heroine are engaged in a blossoming romance which attracts the displeasure of the villain in one way or the other, the comedian is fitted somewhere to provide comic relief, and the whole structure is framed within a structure of songs. These songs subsume within themselves an elaborate erotic code where the roles of the participants are codified and delineated firmly, and thus structures the narrative further. The expansion of theory, both film and literary has raised the possibility whether or not there is a deeper meaning that can be read into the highly ritualized forms of these 'digressions'. After all songs can be read like any other narrative though typically they are superimpositions on the main narrative of plot. It is hard to disagree with the word 'digressions' since on first glance the songs seem to be independent structures – completely heterogeneous with the larger narrative. However at the same time it can't be denied that they indicate some progression of the narrative whether it be the first arousal of romantic love or a lament of betrayal (*bewafaai*).

The songs are not limited to these two poles only however and occupy many midway positions like a devotional song, a lullaby or simply a customary act (singing at a *mehendi* ceremony). However in every position the narrative is coded within an elaborate juxtaposition of sound, word and gesture. Thus you had the idiosyncratic Gregory Peck

clone, Dev Anand with his Elvis style lock of hair in earlier movies and a neck handkerchief and baggy clothes in later movies, arm tied, eye blinking dance of Rajesh Khanna in the 1950's and 1960's and simultaneously the uncoordinated psychedelic flailing of limbs by Shami Kapoor "that signalled the change from the deglamourized heroism of Raj Kapoor's indianised Chaplin to the more cosmopolitan, rambunctious personality of the sixties hero) or the strange hip grinding dance of Madhuri in 1990's in her role as the erotic ambassador of the decade or the acrobatic antics of Hrithik Roshan and many others (the North Indian glamourized version of the Michael Jackson clone – Prabudeva) these days.

My intention however is not to provide an inventory of the styles and influences on Bollywood film making, rather it is to analyse these songs as intradiegetic elements. I shall resist viewing them as linear narratives indicative of a particular situation, instead I shall try a) to portray the slippages in the narrative towards an overtly patriarchal attestation of a highly eroticized phallogocentric economy b) to point how the songs involve a queering of desire which is at odds with the conservative taboo generated heteronormative mores of the formula Hindi film c) to point out why the cinema evolves as a transgressive space where a destabilization of external order is enacted owing to the expression of prohibited erotic desire. I view these three aspects as mutually inclusive, and hence point what hybrid subjectivities are articulated.

The Indian-ness of the Indian culture, if such an undiluted nationalist entity can be conjured, relies on an inherently patriarchal outlook. Barring a few exceptions of freedom, the feminine in India has largely been regulated by or fear of male gaze. I speak of India as a monolithic entity for purposes of convenience relying on a presumed homogeneity of civilizational attributes, and not as a historical or factual statement. Tracing its lineage from Manusmriti in Ancient India to Victorian morality in the modern times, patriarchy is firmly entrenched within the nation's psyche. Bollywood too proves no exception to the case as a cursory analysis of selected songs of each decade will show. The selection though arbitrary (from hundreds of songs to choose a song or two as representative is rather impossible) but they may be said to reflect in less or greater degree the prevailing sentiment of the songs of that era.

I will examine the song: *chod do aanchal* (Let go of my stole) from the movie 'Paying Guest' starring Dev Anand and Nautan. The song enacts a repetition of the Garden of Eden motif with a profusion of flowers, blossom, erect trees, and labyrinths formed by hedges. The transaction, therefore, is suggestive of the dramatization of the Eden garden sexual liberation. This reading is reinforced by the implied act of stripping that structures the whole narrative – the stole acting as a vehicle of modesty, and echoing the stripping of Drupadi by the Kurava brothers. The heroine commences the conversation urging the hero to let go of her stole wondering *zamana kya kahega? What will society say (if we were caught)?* The transaction derives its

legitimacy from the social mores of modesty of the Indian woman subject articulated by nationalistic and cultural discourses, especially in immediate post-colonial India fusing socialism with the Gandhian ideal of *Ram Rajya*, and therefore appropriating the woman as the virtuous docile *Sita*. Thus, while the action is started by hero who makes repeated attempts to pull at heroine's stole (in a reworking of the disrobing scene in Mahabharata), the heroine is given the charge of reminding and preserving social standards of decency and chastity. The heroine's concern with modesty and transgression of social convention betrays genuine concern about possible injury to her reputation, as it is under sustained scrutiny of social gaze informed in turn by male gaze.

The examination of sartorial differences makes this point clear: while the heroine is draped in a sari and covers her head with the sari end, the hero is dressed in a western style jacket and trousers. The woman emerges as the carrier of tradition and cultural authenticity deposited in the feminine iconography of national consciousness (*bharat mata*). The implication is that the woman is expected to bear the responsibility for maintaining social and cultural decorum, and preserve the morality of the man, while the male is conveniently excused. This fits neatly into the Eden myth where Eve tempts Adam to take the forbidden apple of knowledge, and thus gets him expelled. Here too, the heroine relaxes her countenance after the initial remark, thus lending her earlier remark an air of coquetry, such that Anand is encouraged to transgress again.

From this view, the heroine- the heroine assumes the agentive position and encourages 'vulnerable male morality' to transgress appropriating all blame on herself. It is no surprise then that the hero professes to be a *deewana*, which indicates hypnotic desire, and supplements his speech by marking out an imaginary circle with his finger near his temple, a cultural symbol of lunacy. The female is envisioned as an agent of social transgression as she is the catalyst for production and reproduction of erotic energies resulting in madness (remember syphilis= immorality= madness). It is crucial to observe that the refrain 'What will the society say?' is used in two different contexts by the two characters. While the heroine uses it to emphasize social normativity, the hero refutes the question by disputing its validity, and parodies the admonishment with a playful irony; that is to say as she has sought the male erotic gaze, transgression is automatically implied since she has chosen to accentuate her body, and celebrate her femininity (*adaa'yain*). She is, thus, already condemned and need not fear any more censure. The whole interaction is framed within this dialectical structure where the heroine repeatedly invokes social codes only to be dismissed by the Hero.

When the heroine confesses to feel aroused with a transferred epithet of aroused weather - *deewana mausam*, again an erotic symbol indicative of fertility and productive libidinal energy, and thus attempts to exert her sexuality, she frames it as a stimulus for the response of leaving suddenly, as if she were defending her action (*main chali ab khoob chedo pyaar kay afsaanay/ kuch*

mausam hai deewana/kuch tum bhi hau deewanay: I am leaving, sing as many love ballads now as you please/ the weather is somewhat crazed/you too are infatuated to a degree). Besides, she reduces the adverse trait of *deewanapan* by juxtaposing it with *kuch* – somewhat, and therefore, places herself doubly in the agentive position – as responsible for the act, exonerating the hero completely for his repeated advances, including his tacit reminder of her aroused senses (*What will the good weather say?*). This conclusion is a light hearted rebuke to the heroine for contradicting her earlier position and marking her position as approval, as he changes his expression suddenly from being serious and attentive to a playful expression; he gently caresses the chin of the heroine to focus on *jaan-e-tamana* – companion of desire, indicating playfully that she is only restricted to a carrier of erotic charge. The coup de grace is delivered by his eye movements- by making a sudden appearance from behind and movement of his eyebrows indicating mischief and cynicism, the consummation being complete by the symbolic conjoining of the leaves, and the extended focus on vegetation. Furthermore the desire being satisfied, the narrative shows a marked twist.

Till this point the hero and heroine have been virtually seen together in close physical proximity to each other as the erotic interaction plays out. However, the next scene after metaphoric consummation shows the hero far from the heroine making no effort to engage with her, as he adopts a distant euphoric look. Simultaneously, the heroine having experienced an orgasmic culmination

(rain, trembling, giddiness) requests the hero to adopt the agentive role by placing her within his sphere of immunity:

Ye barasta saavan, thar thar kaanpe tan man

meri baiyaan dhar lo saajan

(This pouring monsoon, my heart and body tremble

Love, hold my hands)

But true to the phallogocentric otherness where the woman is viewed apart from the subject and an occupant of otherness, he refuses to take up the role. Instead, he shifts the agentive role back on to her, directing her to lose her individuality by suggesting that they are 'one' and therefore she must be amalgamated within him. The notion of dissolution or amalgamation carries within it a strong textual trace of ownership and dependence. The suggestion that in simple words can be rephrased as "You are mine", betrays a phallogocentric outlook as it commodifies the woman and place her in the charge of the masculine. As De Beauvoir noticed the phenomenon of equating men to women, is a relativist position and actually entails the presence of only one sex. The notion of differential equality is different from mere equality, and it is the former that contains the premise of feminine emancipation.

I will examine one more song - *teri jhuki nazar* (your lowered eyes) from *Murder 3*, which was released in February 2013. The song features Randeep Hooda as Vikram - a tempestuous wild life photographer and Sara Loren as Nisha- a waitress. It is set in a restaurant where Randeep is drinking the sorrow of a broken relationship

away at a lounge bar. The bar despite the evolution of 'modern Indian metropolis' still remains primarily a male space. The focus of the camera, therefore, remains typically male oriented as a head shot of Vikram is followed by a general widening to reveal another male drinking by himself followed by a male and the woman. The woman in the scene is a typical blurred figure, with the camera barely revealing a hazy face with facial features of the Han Chinese pool. The ratio in the bar thereof is 3:1 – three males and one female, and the female is chaperoned or attended to or accompanied by the male. The male gaze becomes paramount as Nisha comes into the focus attending on a customer and his female companion. Nisha is dressed in a half sleeved white shirt unbuttoned at the top, hair tied in a stylish bun, some facial makeup revealing her shapely eyes and giving her fair face a pleasing symmetry, and a short skirt. She smiles courteously to the customer and bows down with a pleasing grace, presenting the image of self – confident and self-conscious woman – the typical construct of female liberation, twentieth century likes to believe in. However a sartorial analysis will clearly reveal that the notion is opaque; if anything such a description fetishizes woman as a sexual commodity that is the subject of sustained male gaze- metaphorically as well as in practice here.

The male waiter who hands over the menu is dressed in a full sleeved white shirt, a sleeveless jacket and trousers. Moreover, his shirt is properly buttoned revealing no part of his chest. The plunging neckline and the short skirt of

the heroine are necessary to portray the image of fair and slim as the notion of beauty, as the place is masculine in its nature, and hence must cater to the male stereotype. Accordingly the half sleeved shirt reveals her fair smooth waxed skin – again a male preference as Adiga's White Tiger pointed out: I blushed. "Tell me," I said, "don't the women in cities-like her-have hair in their armpits and on their legs like women in our villages?". The commodification of woman is necessary to allow the male gaze of Vikram to linger on her and therefore get 'seduced' and forget his original girlfriend, who has hid in the house to punish him for his indiscretions.

The song is a lesson in male gaze as immediately the scene shifts to a close up of Nisha revealing shapely lips well outlined by a light lipstick, greenish eyes – another post-colonial male fantasy (the image of gori memsabs was, and remains a sexual fantasy) and ear rings shaped like a tear drop hanging by a thin silvery thread. The image then is of a hybrid Indian woman who charms the masculine by her ravishing looks accentuated to the fullest by the camera; symptomatic of a full scale male gaze. She is shown to have noticed the gaze and at first appears to be concerned about it but immediately smiles as if in self-recognition – a coquettish consent to the masculine to objectify her.

In the next frame the leaf scene of *chod do aanchal* is reworked into a symbolic exchange of goods whereby the masculine exchanges his class privilege (being a well off talented bachelor) for walking up to the heroine from

behind without any prior notice and therefore she is rather surprised at his impudence. The narrative of men surprising women and coming from back could be interpreted as the masculine privilege of countering the woman and limiting her movement as she is restricted to the space traced by his extended arms. It was the same when Jehangir – the Mughal Emperor proposed to Noor Jehan – then the widowed Mehr-un-Nisa by surprising her when he comes unannounced into her hujra or harem from behind and startling her. The act is an attestation and symbolic of the masculine power over the female as every territory is essentially masculine, more so if it is a public place. The exchange of the utensil which is supposed to be an indication of the ‘sacrifice’ the masculine hero makes in order to impress the “Cindrella” induces a smile from Nisha therefore signifying the success of the act. It is a telling comment upon the masculine belief in feminine intelligence if it believes that such a transparent act can be constructed as display of actual emotion, and not a mere ruse to gain attention.

The next scene again portrays Vikram spying on Nisha, therefore, assuming the role of a voyeur as Nisha loosens her hair. It goes without saying that both acts – voyeurism and loosening of hair to reveal pretty smooth hair is a male fantasy coined by innumerable narratives. However the woman is shown to take it as a compliment, and thereby encourage the male voyeurism and fascination with her body. This immediately becomes clear in the next scene where the camera focuses on a red stiletto which indicates that the heroine has made a class jump as the

red stiletto is a signifier of elite fashionable women, and a waitress from working class can't be expected to wear such footwear, as it will be beyond her means. The gaze then shifts to a full exploration of smooth waxed female legs to indicate the transition of the heroine - from a mere working class 'Cinderella' the prince charming who saw her at the restaurant (the modern equivalent of ball) is transmogrified into a fashionable diva who satiates all the aspects of masculine stereotype of feminine beauty. The class transition becomes evident when Nisha is portrayed as alighting from an expensive car driven by Vikram who drops her home. The implication is that the class equations have changed and the masculine Vikram has persuaded her to be co-opted by the upper-class sensibility, as the confirmation of the romantic nature of their relationship remains a mere formality. True to her class origins, she displays considerable anxiety at this co-option as she is lost in reflection for a moment or two. But Vikram - the male realizes the danger and immediately alights to salvage the situation by displaying a token of affection and care (hands over the phone she had forgotten in the car. This gesture is shown to be enough to convince the audience, and Nisha of his affection and love towards her.

In the next scene Vikram is seen driving her around in an expensive looking car as the two go out on a date to the sea. The conquest now complete, Vikram claims his ownership and thus allows himself the luxury of a sensuous caress of Nisha's cheek as she is in tears out of either sheer gratitude for nature and love, or overawed by

the emotion of such a rapid change. In either case the male touch is shown to be sympathetic and innocent but the reaction it produces in the heroine is startling. From being the meek subject of his gaze till now, she grasps the concerned looking masculine Vikram in a hug which signifies foreplay before engaging in the sexual act in the next scene. The agentive role of the 'real thing' – the taboo consummation of physical desire is attributed to the woman, which conveniently obliterates the role of the hero's erotic gaze. In a very convenient reworking of the mad woman in the attic symbol, the song ends with a hysterical female silhouette expressing her resentment and displeasure at the sexual playing again on the naivety and emotionality of woman being an agent of lust and madness while the male is portrayed as a passive concerned subject, who is the victim of female desire both at the beginning and at the end.

Kristeva has argued that language is fundamentally masculine "articulating a male ideology and a male view of the world...founded on the repression of difference. Because the subjective woman does not exist in the male view – she is other, different, lacking – it follows that woman as a speaking 'I' doesn't exist even in language...even in language woman is mute." (Tolan 335). Kristeva's analysis is validated by the song. Though, the song is pictured on both hero and the heroine, the entire interaction is commented upon only by the male. We only have a male centric view of the entire discourse, and can't therefore gauge the female psyche. Moreover, the phallogocentric male recognizing the slippage frames his

commentary by presuming at the very beginning that “*Bhale chup tu rehna/Mujhe hai pata, tere pyar ka* (Even if you remain silent/ I know of your love for me).” This subject creation is a typical male construct as it leaves the woman with no representation. The emotions and point of view of the female become the male emotions de-facto, as he is the enlightened subject and the woman is an alienated ‘other’ in the wilderness.

This presumption is followed by another manifestation of the somatic obsession of the male gaze by the technique of blazon, where each anatomical part is highlighted in the vein of traditional love poetry. The hero undertakes a glorification of her downcast eyes which he presumes and rightly so signify the discourse of *haya or sharam* - a combination of modesty and grace, which regulates the life of women in the patriarchal discourse. Not content with presuming her to be in love with him (for all we know it might be a tacit gambit to rise in class), he interprets her actions as his fancy dictates. Her actions reveal to him, he opines, that some person occupies her thoughts these days. Having reiterated his male privilege in the very first lines, it is not farfetched then to assume that the person being referred to is ‘him’. The center of attention and focus, therefore is the male, as the female is conveniently displaced from the center of male imagination, as her thoughts serve only to accentuate the hero’s gaze. If any doubt remains of fetishizing the female body, it is removed in the next couplet where he glorifies her loose tresses. The praise of the sensuous ‘*zulf*’ or ‘*gessu*’ is an old trope, but what differentiates its usage in the song is that

it is intimately linked to fiction. To the hero, the female in question is an incarnation of the '*pari*' or 'faery' that he has read about in books:

Teri zulf jab bikhar jaati hai

Aye haseen tu haseen aur hoti jaati hai

Jo kitaabo.n main padhte rahay aaj tak

Woh pari tujh mein nazar aati hai

It raises a valid question about whose imagination caters to the construct of 'faery' or *pari* in myth and folklore. The masculine of faery or *pari* is *jin* which can be loosely translated as a monster or gaint. There is no equivalent masculine of faery or *pari* in either Urdu or English. If the woman in question is an incarnation of pure phallogocentric fantasy, the woman is naturally transformed into a fictional character, who has no identity except that the male attributes to her.

In a significant other variation in duet songs like *acha tau hum chaltay hain*, *Tuu chali aayi duhayi*, *pyaar hua ikraar hua and ek daal pay baitha tota*, *jhoot bolay kawa kaatay*, patriarchy is also manifested in the structure of the song as the song is structured in terms of the hero establishing the premise of the song by incremental repetition, typical to ballad structures, while the heroine only reiterates without any significant reiteration, or by allowing the hero the final word. Consider *acha tau hum chaltay hain*, where the female halts the male in his tracks: *baaki sab shaadi kay baad (rest, everything after marriage)*, after assuring him *sab (gharwalay) hain tayaar (my family has consented)*, the hero expresses his deep resentment with a sigh of

resignation that attributes his appropriation of female farewell: *acha tau hum chaltay hain* (Alright, I will take your leave) with non-committal ambivalence concerning the act of marriage. Or consider, *jhoot bolay kawa katay* (Tell a lie, and the black crow shall bite you) filmed on Reshi Kapoor and a young Dimple Kapadia. The woman exposes the masculine tendency towards aggression by appropriating a suicidal and non-confrontational personality reiterating: *main kunway main gir jaaongi, main paid pay chad jaaongi* (I will jump into a well, I will climb a tree), protesting masculine sense of entitlement with *aisay aashiq say daryo* (Beware of such a lover). However, soon she leaves all pretence of resistance and defense when she is threatened with a *souten* – an ‘other woman’, affirming *main saato.n vachan nibhaongi, main maikay nahee jaaongi* (I will abide by the seven vows, I will not leave you for my parent’s house). The modulation in voice – from a parity with the high-pitched male to a lower, concerned voice convenes her unequivocal surrender.

However lest there be an impression that Bollywood is a monolithic entity with strong patriarchal biases, I propose to briefly examine that like any other cultural construct it is fragmented and riddled with oppositional multiplicities. I intend to focus on an ostensibly patriarchal construct in the Hindi film and try to examine its internal contradictions and fissures that appear in such a reading on a close reading. The song I have chosen is the famous cabaret number filmed on Helen in the 1969 Hindi film *Intaquam*.

The song is based on the theme of the popular myth of woman as a seductress who leads men to their doom. The transaction involved between Helen who assumes the role of a dancing seductress and an imprisoned black man is strongly suggestive of unfulfilled sexual consummation and ensuing psychical frustration. In that light then the narrative works on the binary outlined by Schowalter when she proposed that women are viewed as an unintelligible other divergent from the rational masculine. In that respect the song is patriarchy embodied. However, a more nuanced reading unveils several aspects that are missed by such a reading.

It can be observed that while constructing the binary of female –seductress vs. male- victim, the male chosen is dark skinned symptomatic of tropics, and by extension unstable and impulsive sexual behaviour. The narrative is then inadvertently transacted in orientalist terms - a colonial residue, justifying the incarceration of the black man in a cage by the white culture – cabaret in the Bollywood is enacted in an English styled bourgeoisie space. The oriental reading notwithstanding, the seduction of a dark skinned ‘ugly’ masculine is not in consonance with the oriental tale as it is the charming young unsuspecting man usually a royal prince who is seduced and trapped. The facial contortions and gestures of the male are strongly suggestive of savagery and violence. How then should this puzzling interaction be charted? It seems to me that a parodic reading of the interaction has the greatest claim to our attention, especially considering the strong burlesque tradition of

cabaret. What is being parodied then? It appears to me that the song reworks the typical male centric interaction, to infect it with a subtle underlying co-existing meaning of sensuous feminine liberation based on Cixous' notion of libidinal '*jouissance*'.

The song starts with a shot of a bright disc of light dispelling the darkness alternating between a three dimensional display to a one-dimensional space. The bright disc could be taken as synonymous with the notion of enlightened male – the paternal sun, as a feminist critique would yield. However the next shot presents a multiplicity of light discs with the logocentric sun considerably dimmed. The disruptive value of the gesture is immediately evident in the next shot where the male is ushered in a cage by a few fellow dark skinned men. The ushering of the cage by men is obviously meant to indicate enthrallment and servility acquired by the charm of magical beauty in tune with the oriental masculine tone. However, the tone is immediately contradicted in the next scene where Helen is introduced with a pointed reed that closely resembles a reed pen and clutching a peacock fan – a typical symbol of masculinized beauty, in the other hand. The vertical reed pen is an interesting appendage; since the pen, as outlined by Susan and Glibert, is symptomatic of the Freudian Phallus – an instrument of masculine power. The possession of the phallic pen by the woman parodies the masculine appropriation of the pen, and by extension knowledge. The parody is heightened further when Helen – the woman deconstructs the canonic significance of the pen by voluntarily parting with it and

handing it over to one of the men who serve as accompaniments. The gesture seems to indicate the triviality of phallogocentric discourse such that the feminine is only located in a wilderness outside the normative enlightened circle of reason and coherence.

The value of this gesture is further complimented by the next scene where Helen engages in a performative dance that is strongly suggestive of the *Nataraja* dance form by adopting specific poses like the raising of the left leg. In the dance form this represents the demolition of the *Apasmara Purusha*, the male personification of illusion and ignorance by lord Shiva –the dancer. The *Nataraja* dance form itself is a representation of “the '*Anandatandava*,' meaning the Dance of Bliss, and symbolizes the cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, as well as the daily rhythm of birth and death. The dance is a pictorial allegory of the five principle manifestations of eternal energy — creation, destruction, preservation, salvation, and illusion.” (Das) The transference of the dance from the cosmic divine male Shiva to the erotic siren female Helen is a parodic reflection on the phallogocentric mythology of worldly creation. The notion of masculine as writer and creator is decentered then. A complex reassigning of values emerges as envisioned by Cixous in *Sorties* where she envisions exchange of power in a libidinal economy rather than politico-rational economy. The dance can be read as an attestation of the feminine creativity, and power subjugated by phallogocentric discourse.

An analysis of the lyrics throws further light upon this aspect. The song starts with a traditional erotic yearning for sexual consummation – a Bollywood trope, which lends itself easily to a feminist and queer interpretation about the heterosexist male gaze manifest in the notion of feminine sexual consummation requiring male presence. However, the lyrics succeeding present a different position questioning and claiming the male epistemological authority with the next three stanzas taking the refrain verb +suffix *na* translated as not+ verb. The verbs are *tuu dekhay na* – you can't see, *tuu samjhay na*: you can't understand, *tuu jaanay na*: you don't know, *tuu maanay na*: you don't agree. This clearly is a repudiation of the logocentric notion of muted woman claiming therein that the deprivation lies not at the female level a la the oriental discourse of *naqis-ul-aqal* (deficient in mind), but seemingly at the masculine level. The complete reversal is in consonance with the parodic nature of the text, where caricature and exaggeration are the standard tools for deconstructing the canonic discourse.

The deconstruction however works on a gestural level too. As established earlier the song is based on the oriental myth of *femme-fetale*. Yet, the female is as vulnerable here as in non-parodic text; case in point being the spirited chase of and desperate lunges at Helen by the now freed dark skinned man. Yet the woman is also in an agentive position as she is the instigator of the central action – seduction and other peripheral stimuli like possessing an overflowing desire or offering the gift of youth. Her physical proximity too renders the central

premise of the text: the invocation paradoxical since the male is secluded at her behest rather than on accord of his own volition. In that case, the narrative appears to parody the naivety of the 'unsuspecting male' with the lyrics being a sort of an appropriation of a death song. However, since the male is neither unsuspecting nor helpless in this case, as is evident by his ferocious gestures and his breaking through the confinement, the death song evolves as a comic act. This is borne by the visual text which is strongly suggestive of self-reflexive play acting. The effect, therefore, is a ridiculing of the male centric myth, and destabilizing it such that the narrative is located in a more fluid world of libidinal wilderness where power relations are not vested in hegemonic categories.

Queer Bollywood

An important aspect of the songs from the now expanding Queer theorists is to examine how these songs subsume within themselves elaborate queer representations by focalizing homosociality. The queer texture of Bollywood is most prominent in the songs rather than the main narrative especially of the 70's era when the 'buddy movies' were at the nadir of their popularity. Such movies and songs inadvertently gave adequate expression to homo-social bonding strongly suggestive of latent queer sexuality. Sohini Ghosh observes: "The buddy melodramas could now be read by queer friendly spectators to be evocative of homoerotic love. In films like *Namak Haraam*, *Anand*, *Anurodh* and even the masculinist *Sholay*, homoeroticism can be read between the overlapping lines

of love and friendship.” (Ghosh 421). Cult movies like *Sholay* in fact thrived on such homosocial bonding to power the narrative. Consider the song *Yeh Dosti Hum nahee todengay* (We shall never let our friendship falter), from *Sholay*.

The song features two outlaws who first steal a motorcycle and then proceed to sing an ode to their friendship. The ode sounds more like a love ballad rather than an ode to platonic friendship with lines like *jeena marna saath hai/ khaana peena saath hai, saari zindagi*: we shall eat and drink together/ we shall live and die together, all life. The notion of ‘love till death’ is a typical heterosexist construct in Bollywood. There are dime a dozen songs, but for the sake of an example consider the song: *teray meray sapnay* from *Guide* where *Tere dukh abb mere, mere sukh abb tere/Tere yeh do naina, chand aur suraj mere, O mere jivan sathee* (Your sorrows are mine, my joys are yours. These two eyes of yours are my sun and moon, O my companion for life). Bollywood itself takes the concept from the notion of Hindu marriage that considers marriage as a *sanskar* – sacrosanct and indissoluble. Unless the song is taken apriori to be manifesting a non-matrimonial discourse, this queer reading emerges as a credible alternative. An objection raised often to such reading is that the song clearly defines the relationship as ‘*Dosti*’ and nothing more can be or should be read between the lines. This heterosexist reading doesn’t take into account the gender fluidity indicated by either *dosti* or its agents *yaars*. *Yaar* is a gender neutral term and is more often than not used to indicate a heterosexual love in Bollywood as the song

yaara-o-yaara, filmed on Sunny Deol would indicate. Even the notion of dosti as a precursor to a romantic relationship is indicated by the title of a movie like *Mujhsay Dosti karoge*. The song also contains another moment of queer rupture where the two 'friends' come across a woman, who is clearly sexually attracted to both. However, as she is unable to pick between the two friends, they go for a toss of the coin which ironically lands standing on the ground, landing on neither side. The woman horrified by the import of the toss, runs away. But rather than showing any signs of disappointment, the two friends just shrug it off with great affectation. This landing of the toss (mind you the toss can be manipulated with considerable practice), is often presented as a testimony to the friendship of the two friends, who don't want a 'woman' to ruin their friendship, as she can take of only one lover. However this could be equally read as a symbolic reluctance to engage in a heterosexual relationship as it would entail an exposure of the queer relationship.

This reading is consistent with the earlier declaration of '*pyaar*' – love (*aisa apna pyaar*), which is a common trope in mainstream Bollywood for romantic heterosexual love. And moving on, you have a line like: *teray liye laylengay* – again a slang for 'deflowering', as a controversy over the item song: *Laila teri laylegi* asserts. Move a little ahead and the characters assert: *logon ko aatay hain hum nazar do magar/ye tau dau nahee/ Arre ho judaa ya khafa ae khuda hai dua Aisa ho nahin* (the world thinks we are two/ but no we aren't two/ Lord accept our prayer, never may anger or separation come between us two), which lays down the

ground for the classical lines: *Khaana peena saath hai/ marna jeena saath hai saari zindagi*. This is ridiculously close to a legendary romantic song like *janam janam ka saath hai humara tumhara*. A simple device to realize this queerness is to substitute either of the two men with a heroine and observe how the song gets transformed into a love song. Further, the frequent body contact of the men especially at the end where Dharmendra foists himself on Amitabh's shoulders – his genitals in close contact with Amitabh's body, and subsequent reward by stroking Amitabh's hair. As Rao reminds us that these images are rich in gay iconography, and any western audience will immediately perceive them as 'gay songs'. (Rao) A similar instance would be the song *yaari hai imaan mera/ yaar meri zindagi*: friendship is my faith and my friend is my life, or the famous song: *meray dost yeh qissa yeh kya hogaya: My friend what has occurred (to make you unfaithful to me?)* where the singer accuses his friend of being 'bewafa' or unfaithful to him. Normative faithfulness or unfaithfulness is a term restricted to the realm of a romantic or marital relationship. But here they are brandished with equal ease at the other 'male'.

An earlier precursor - the older *Dosti*, features the famous dirge "*Chahoga main tujhe sham savere*": (I shall desire you in the morning and at evening too). *Chahat* or desire is clearly and unambiguously associated with a friend who also serves to be the love of the speaker's life (*meri dosti mera pyaar*). Similarly the song: *Didi tera devar deewana* (Sister, your brother in law is frenzied) exhibits a clear instance of cross dressing. As pointed out by 'Gayatri

Gopinath', the song starts with an erotic interplay between Madhuri who is represented as the traditional shy woman, and a cross dressed woman who courts her with societal approval (the guests present serve as the metaphor for the society). Similarly, Salman cross dresses as a woman and even shows off a baby bump which reflects a clear desire to be incorporated within the female only bonhomie, and thus the appropriation of that role.

It would be simplistic to assume that these songs are actually queer songs, just as it is fallacious to assume they are purely hetero-sexual songs. Rather they tend to be the representations of the complex outside world where the closet subsumes many homosexuals who pass off as heterosexual. These songs tend to show that the reality is far more complex than we assume by a division into binaries. I shall attempt to put this multiplicity into context in discussion of the spatial practices of the cinema in the Indian context.

Cinema as a Space

This critique notwithstanding, the song remains an integral aspect of the film since it had a lengthening effect on the narrative. It allowed for the impression of optimal marginal utility, complimented significantly by the pervasive darkness of the hall that allowed a physical intimacy inconceivable outside the cinema, mingling of opposite sex, clandestine flirting and other manifestations of sexual desire. Post-Independence India has reinforced and regurgitated the cultural amnesia imposed by the

Victorian messianic colonizer. One of the overt manifestations has been a strict policing and demarcation of gendered interactions that reflects in the continuation of section 377 of IPC. Opposite gender interactions remain a policed act even in the 21st century as a plethora of radical right parties opposed to Valentine's Day and resistance to criminalization of marital rape shows. The segregation of hostels into strict same gender hostels serves to only point out further the necessity and relevance of the cinema as an alternate site of sexual expression.

Further, unlike most social institutions it doesn't promote the bias of 'compulsory heterosexuality', as it only serves to provide an effective cover to queer sexual practices and creation of a queer subject. Paola Bachetta argues that "queer-phobia is one of the pillars of Hindu nationalism. Second, the constructions of queer genders and sexualities, which appear in Hindu nationalism, are largely effects of Hindu nationalist reworkings of misogynist notions of gender and heterosexist notions of sexual normativity imposed through colonialism." (143) The cinema under its cover of darkness offers a liberatory experience, a space excavated from "a fairly universal heteronormative code that validates the heterosexual as a dominant signifier.....the 'traditional heteronorm - the older bread winning protecting husband, the younger pliant dependent wife, the missionary position and the two children quickly conceived of it, the proud compliance with conjugal heterosexual morals that see sex as sticky, icky bed room business ratified by and in heterosexual

marriage alone.” (Bose and Bhattacharya 13). Confronted with such a normative notion of sex as fundamentally procreative that rarely leaves room for conceiving sex for pleasure, the cinema allows a transgression and transcendence of the norm. It creates other possibilities including but not confined to homosexual sex and oral sex.

The cinema can thus be conceived of as a ‘space’ transformed by specific practices of intimacy from a ‘place’. I am relying on the distinction between ‘space’ and ‘place’ as envisioned by Michel De Certeau who distinguishes the two as part of evolving a semiotics of resistance against the ‘panoptic’ gaze of city. Certeau argues that a place is marked by an adherence to discipline and hierarchy, and thus a stable “configuration of positions.” A space on the other hand is an unstable configuration formed by “intersections of mobile elements.... vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.” (De Certeau 117). In context of the Indian cinema, the operations can be traced to expression of sexual energy, escapist fantasy in a dehistoricised, and de-casted scenario, or simply an intersection of ideological politics with an ‘apolitical’ act; witness the huge debate generated over standing up to the national anthem played before a movie, or the *sanskari* edicts of censor board led by Pankaj Nihalani.

How do songs contribute to this spatial reconstruction? As pointed out above, the songs lengthened the narrative, and allowed a sense of fulfilment or *paisa vasool*, in a society where the popular psyche is reflected in the Maruti (Maruti 800 remains peerless in terms of public acceptance): *kitna deti hai?*ⁱ

The songs also represent a queering moment within a heteronormative framework. Allan Ivanchikova follows Judith Butler and suggests that queering must be understood as “something that upsets and exposes passing and is opposed to compliance with the set of repressive rulers that structure a conversation, an act or any other social situation. Thus understood, the concept can be used as a generic term for describing any disruptive act, occurrence or event that brings to the surface social and linguistic conventions that structure our understanding of gender, race, class, or sexuality, regardless of who performs it or is involved in it.....exposes the inherent instability underlying the social cultural or linguistic matrix.” (17) The question that arises then is, do songs represent a moment of queering – a rupture of heteronormative matrixes only by their delaying effect? This presumption carries with it the echo of the inquiry: are cinemas, in context of Bollywood, only sexual spaces? Such an appropriation of the cinema space would push the ‘movie’ and the ‘songs’ to an incidental detail, as mere addendums that play no role in informing subjectivities. But, as I have been at pains to explain in the two sections preceding this, such inferences would only run the risk of being considered ill-informed and

fallacious. What other functions do the songs perform then to constitute a queer rupture?

Althusser has argued that ideology interpellates through lived practices, and cinema cannot be considered as an exception to this unconscious creation of subjectivity, hence Raj Kapoor's fabled definition of Bollywood as "merchants of dreams." A typical movie, as discussed earlier, occurred in a heteronormative mould informed by the restrictive gender policing. Any romance must necessarily lead to a marital consummation – the moral middle class ideal. Although films like *Shudh Desi Romance*, attempt to resist this appropriation yet the whole narrative is shaped by the anxiety of lead characters about their non-conformity. The hero necessarily emerges as a chivalric figure, a platonic figure while the heroine often emerges as a demure, properly shy and submissive woman, equally platonic in her interactions. A device used often to project the hero-villain binary was the sudden entry of hero to 'save' the 'honour' of a heroine in the clutches of sexually charged villain eager to consummate his desire. This policing of sexual desire as perverse follows logically from the heteronorm, and is least surprising. The 'romantic' song, however, represents a libidinal moment where an unbridled expression of desire could be articulated. The metaphor of embracing flowers – a common trope in such songs, was a veiled discharge of this desire that allowed the narrative to function according to platonic morals. The songs, therefore, represent an aside charged with sexual desire policed heavily in the outside world. The rain songs like *aaj phisal jaaye tau*

humain na uthayo (If I were to slip today, don't get me back on my feet) or a song of passion like *roop tera mastana* (*Your beauty is a metaphor for sensuality*), or *chanchal sa badan* (*Your delicate swaying body*), are direct manifestations of the latent sexuality in romantic songs of other hues. Adiga in 'White Tiger' gives an accurate impression of the family dynamics of normative India: "At night they (women) sleep together, their legs falling one over the other, like one creature, a millipede. Men and boys sleep in another corner of the house." (21) *Paan Singh Tomar*, also offers an accurate aside into this sexual policing. Paan Singh on a holiday desires to enjoy a moment of intimacy with his wife played by Mahie Gill. He has to resort to bribing the children with money, so that they can go to the market and buy some candy. Confronted with such sexual policing, the song on the screen offers a voyeuristic delight, a stimulus for satiation of fantasy. The songs allowed for a chemistry charged with well concealed erotic energy to flourish between the hero and the heroine leading to the establishment of regular couples – a set combination of a particular actor and actress as Rajesh Khanna and Mumtaz, or Dharmendra and Hema Malini.

I have endeavoured to trace the multiplicities inherent in the songs to underscore my claim that the songs refuse to yield to a single tilt of meaning. Although patriarchal subjectivity emerges over a large corpus of songs – my two selections function as metaphors for this corpus, yet a variety of songs exist (the cabaret number as a representative of this class) that undermine this patriarchal shift. Further, the songs allow the transformation of cinema into a queer space that allows a spatiality of desire – hetero and homo both, that

stands at cross roads with the hetero-patriarchal structures embedded in the songs. The songs, therefore, appear as destabilized fluid movements that resist any fixed categorisation by their interpretative fluidity. The only definite conclusion that one can draw about Bollywood are not linear monolithic discourses but reveal significant meanings and social commentary when read closely in conjunction with the socio-political ethos of the setup. I am aware of the limitations of my approach: I have only examined one genre of song – the romantic song. Owing to constraints of space and time, I have not examined the other genres: the sad song, the devotional song and the lullaby etc. The subjectivities and analyses that such songs may yield could be an effective point of research to be dealt at some point in times to come.

ⁱ On the creative brief from Maruti, Parshu Narayanan, managing partner and creative head, Publicis Capital, said “The Kitna deti hai series developed was based on the insight that Indians are a nation are extremely mileage conscious under all circumstances.”

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