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Phraseology in Item Songs: Auditory Objectification of Women

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Phrases, Objectification and Commodification, Voyeurism, Item Songs, Female Body.

Abstract:

Being one of the vital platforms of entertainment, songs greatly contribute to represent the culture and traditions of a particular community and state. Be it Bollywood, Tollywood, or Dhallywood, item songs are at the core of vogue nowadays. These songs are engulfed with erotic representation and vulgar phrases, especially metaphors, similes, and proper nouns, that purposefully target women to objectify and commodify them both visually and verbally. The objective of the study is to examine how the female characters in Bollywood item songs are being commodified through the tactful usage of phrases. For this study, the English translated version of a list of popular item songs from 2010 to 2017 was accumulated from different websites as data which were later thematically discussed in relation to the theory of voyeurism and objectification. The auditory phrases unveiled some exclusive findings, for example, emphasis on women's body part, the portrayal of women as intoxicating substance and sustenance, use of repulsive and salacious simile or metaphor, and appreciation of beauty especially for white skin (Dwivedi, 2017).

1. Introduction

“Every human body has its optimum weight and contour, which only health and efficiency can establish. Whenever we treat women's bodies as aesthetic objects without function, we deform them.”

— Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch*

1.1 History, Importance and Emergence of Item Song

Songs have become one of the parts and parcels of the Bollywood cinema since the inception of talkie movies in the 1930s. Vijayakar (2013) notes that the contemporary audiences of the 1930s were completely enthralled by the seven songs of the first-ever Indian talkie, *Alam Ara* (Light of the World), which happened to be in the Hindi language. The decade of the 1930s also saw the advent of songs in other cinemas such as *Indrasabha*, *Shakuntala*, *Shirin Farhad*, *Gulru Zarina*, and *Chatra Bakavali* (Vijayakar, 2013). That was just the beginning. After that, the Bollywood songs have gone through a lot of transitions till now. One of the transitions was the introduction of the item song which is a song that does not have any connection with an action of the film or may just have a little correlation with the story (Szurlej, 2017). She further extends that being used primarily to attract a larger audience to the cinema or to help promote the musical blockbuster, it is usually a song combined with a sensual dance, performed by an item number (character), who is quite unrelated to the storyline. She also supports that this could be, for example, a cabaret dancer, who appears just at the time. The item song trend, also known as vamp, was started by Cuckoo, an Anglo-Indian dancer and actress in Indian cinema in the 1940s and 1950s, in films like *Awaara* (1951), *Aan* (1952) and *Shabistan* (1951) (Anonymous, Item number, 2019). In the last seventy years, Bollywood saw innumerable item songs and item numbers including Helen, an Anglo-Burmese, of the 1960s and 1970s, Jayshree T., Bindu, Aruna Irani and Padma Khanna of 1970s. In the 1980s, the lead actress emerged as the main attraction for the item number. The legendary actress, Madhuri Dixit, played a crucial role to take the item songs into a newer dimension. Along with this, her contemporary and nearly contemporary actresses like Urmila Matondakar, Sonali Brendre, Shilpa Shetty, Ravina Tendon even the modern-day actresses like Karishma Kapoor, Tabu, Manisha Koirala, Susmita Sen, Oishwariya Roy, Kareena Kapoor, Katrina Kaif and Priyanka Chopra also cast in item songs (Darashiko, 2011).

1.2 Social Acceptance and Impact of Item Songs

Bollywood cinema has been well-known across the globe for its song and dance successions for decades. Songs combined with dance are not only functioning as commercial and promotional tools but also soaring up the 'feel and heel' of the movie without interrupting the flow of the plot. However, there are some special songs also commonly known as item songs which have no importance (or little importance) and connection to the main plot of the cinema but are still shown as part of the cinema. These songs characterize an actress, who is not at all associated with the cinema plot, dancing for the audiences, especially for the male ones. Moreover, these songs are usually spiced up with conspicuously and tastelessly indecent lyrics that represent women in a more lewd, demeaning, and lascivious way. In fact, in these songs, a woman is treated as a sexual object while a bunch of drunkards sexually harass her or fawn over her (Uppuleti, 2016). She also propounds that these songs promote the women as if they are enjoying the harassment, but no woman can enjoy dancing in such a hostile environment. More importantly, in Bangladesh, we are yet to be completely ready to accept a woman dancing the way we are accustomed to watching in item songs. Be it partial or wide-ranging, these songs are responsible for the ethical and moral degradation of people. Nowadays, we witness or come across the increased ratio of eve-teasing, drug addiction, sexual harassment, rape, and so on through both electronic and print media. Thus, these songs are unnecessary, unwarranted, unsavory, and they may even jeopardize our society.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 The Gaze and Voyeurism

Originated in the 1970s, the gaze is a term that describes how viewers engage with visual media such as advertisements, television programs, and cinema to have both mental and physical satisfaction (sub)consciously. Likewise, satisfying the patriarchal ideology, the male gaze invokes the sexual politics of the gaze and advocates a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women. In the male gaze, the woman is visually positioned as an object of heterosexual male desire where her feelings, thoughts, and own sexual drives are barely important than her being framed by male desire (Loreck, 2016). However, Mulvey (1999) has explicated this theory through the credence of Scopophilia, Voyeurism, Ego Libido, and Mirror Stage. According to her, films offer different types of satisfaction, and one of them is Scopophilia which indicates to take pleasure by watching. There are two aspects- the satisfaction of 'Looking' and 'Looked-at-ness' where she argues if our eyes are at ease after watching, other sensitive body parts are also satisfied. Thus, Mulvey connects Scopophilia with

other people who have been accounted as mere objects by controlling and confining them through a curious gaze. Eventually, she has attempted to shed light on voyeurism which is the practice of gaining sexual pleasure from watching others when they are naked or engaged in sexual activity. According to Mulvey (1999), gazing, in films, is a primitive desire. An individual himself or herself fulfills his or her desire, and the Mirror Stage plays the controlling roles here. An individual looks for the similarities within himself or herself while watching a film, and he or she wants to surpass himself or herself. This process is called Ego Libido. Eventually, (Mulvey, 1999) opines that the females are represented as objects to be ‘looked at’ and the males are represented as ‘spectators’.

This study underscores Gaze in collaboration with Scopophilia, Voyeurism, Ego Libido, and Mirror Stage from a different angle. Here, the ‘sexual desire fulfilling watching’ has been mirrored through ‘listening to the vulgar phrases’ used in the item songs. And, the gratification of listeners’ sexuality has been uncovered by subtle usage of the language, especially indecent phrases, provocative similes, and metaphors that incite the listeners to visualize the obscenity which ultimately leads to the auditory objectification of the female body.

2.2 Phraseology, Simile, and Metaphor

“Phraseology is the study of a set or fixed expressions, such as idioms, phrasal verbs, and other types of multi-word lexical units (often collectively referred to as phrasemes), in which the parts of the expression take on a meaning more specific than or otherwise not predictable from the sum of their meanings when used independently. For example, ‘Dutch auction’ is composed of the words Dutch ‘of or about the Netherlands’ and auction ‘a public sale in which goods are sold to the highest bidder’, but its meaning is not ‘a sale in the Netherlands where goods are sold to the highest bidder’. Instead, the phrase has a conventionalized meaning referring to any auction where, instead of rising, the prices fall” (Anonymous, 2019). However, Gries (2008) renames phraseology as phraseologism and explicates it with examples as the co-occurrence of a form or a lemma of a lexical item and one or more additional linguistic elements of various kinds which functions as one semantic unit in a clause or sentence and whose frequency of co-occurrence is larger than expected based on chance.

However, the phrases of item songs are mostly combined with spiced metaphors and similes. On the one hand, metaphor is an expression which describes a person or object in a literary way by referring to something that is considered to have similar characteristics to the person or object you are trying to describe (e.g. 'The mind is an ocean'. Here, ‘mind’ is directly referred as ‘ocean’.) On the other hand, a simile is an expression comparing one thing with another,

always including the words 'as' or 'like' (i.e. Mary is as innocent as an angel. Here, 'Mary' is indirectly compared to an 'angel'.) (Dictionary, 2008).

Thus, phraseology in item songs stands for how something is expressed in words, especially as metaphors and similes that crucially act on the auditory objectification of the female body (sexuality).

2.3 Objectification

Objectification or commodification refers to a structure that helps to understand the experiences of men and women who are regarded as mere bodies (objects) while they not only have their bodies but also have their minds and souls which are disregarded. Elaborately speaking, sexual objectification is the portrayal of treating a person as a mere sexual commodity or a sexual object that satisfies sexual desire without regard to their personality or dignity. However, sexual objectification of females refers to treating the female sex as a mere object and not as persons as Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) propound that looking at a person as a mere object only for having sexual pleasure or as an object for use is considered objectification which involves beauty and appearance." (p. 174) Similarly, Marx (1990) relates objectification and commodification to the 'use-value' and 'exchange value' respectively. In other words, something must have some real-life use to be an 'object', and it must have an exchange value with which other valuable commodities can be exchanged. Thus, in reality, women are sexually objectified and treated as an object to be valued for its use by the male gender and the media (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Eventually, the sexual objectification of women is socially sanctioned right of all males regardless of age or status. Therefore, the sexual objectification process encompasses denial of personhood- treating women as a means rather than an end- and the notion of instrumentality- treating women as an instrument.

Around the world, sexual objectification is now one of the most common scenarios noticed in the songs, advertisements, TV series, and movies that help promote and establish the notion of sexual objectification of women among the communities. Kistler and Lee (2010) report that male college undergraduate students, who usually spend much of their time listening to and watching highly sexual hip-hop music videos, express greater objectification of female sexuality, sexual broadmindedness, and stereotyped attitudes relating to gender than the males who listen to and watch less sexual hip-hop videos. (p. 82) It is found that in the context of media especially music contained more sexual content than any other media (Pardun et al. 2005). Female sexuality has been used in advertisements for tempting customers and promoting products, such as jeans, perfumes, alcohol, watches, personal products, and cars. Women's

body is targeted for sexual objectification more often than men. This targeted objectification paves the way for self-objectification that conveys that women who watch females as sex object internalize to varying degrees an outsider view and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated based on appearance as (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997). Subsequently, women, who get completely involved in self-objectification, are more likely to develop adverse psychological dispositions including depression and post-traumatic stress disorder (Fitzgerald et al. 1997). Likewise, the young girls, who are overtly exposed to sexually objectifying phrases and images relating to female sexuality, become more sexually aggressive and are very much prone to start having sexual experimentation in their earlier age (English, 2003). It has been also evident that younger women may express higher levels of sexual objectification, body surveillance, body shame, and eating disorder symptoms (Augustus-Horvath & Tylka, 2009; McKinley, 2006).

2.4 Scope of the Study

From the literature review, it can be inferred that only visual objectification of women has been concentrated, and very little has been done focusing on the item songs' language that intensifies the auditory objectification of the female body. This study endeavors to uncover the auditory objectification of women through analyzing the auditory schemas of item songs.

2.5 Research Question

This qualitative research looks forward to unveiling how the item songs intensify the auditory objectification of the female body. The research question for this study is the following.

1. Do the phrases, similes, and metaphors of item songs intensify auditory objectification of women? If yes, how?

3. Methodology

This study aims to find out how item songs intensify the objectification of women, and to exhume the result, data have been collected quantitatively to conduct this study.

3.1 Data Collection

For this study, six popular item songs from 2010 to 2017 were purposively sampled as data. Although the selected songs were originally in Hindi (the native language of India), the English translated version of those songs were collected from websites. Besides, all the songs (Hindi version) were given to two university teachers, who know both Hindi and English, of the

department of English to translate into English to ensure the meanings do not differ. Providing the selected songs of Bollywood to translate in English, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to them. Once the translation was done, it was ensured that the meaning of the website translated version and the English translation done by university teachers is the same.

3.2 Data Analysis

Through applying the qualitative approach, collected data were analyzed in terms of the ways those objectify female sexuality. To find out the objective of the study, firstly, the data were thoroughly and contextually read many times to sort out the metaphors and similes that led the findings of the patterns of objectification of females. The metaphors and similes were considered as hints. Secondly, the selected six songs were repeatedly watched. Then, thematic analysis was used for the interpretation of metaphors and similes. The themes were the emphasis on women's body part, the portrayal of women as intoxicating substance and sustenance, use of repulsive and salacious simile or metaphor, and appreciation of beauty especially for white skin (Dwivedi, 2017)

4. Discussion

4.1 Thematic Analysis

The songs that were selected for thematic analysis are *Sheila Ki Jawani* from *Tees Mar Khan* (2010), *Munni Badnaam Hui* from *Dabang* (2010), *Chikni Chameli* from *Agneepath* (2011), *Pinky* from *Zanjeer* (2013), *Babli Badmaash* from *Shootout at Wadala* (2013), and *Laila Main Laila* from *Raees* (2017). In the following figure, the songs are thematically analyzed.

Serial	Hints	English Translation	Themes
1	“Munni ke gaal gulabi, nain sharabi, chaal nawabi re.”	Munni has got rosy cheeks, intoxicating eyes, and a princess walk.	<i>Emphasis on women's body part:</i> Emphasis on Women's body part refers to excessive focus on female actors' breasts, waist, eyes, lips and body curves in
	“...Shilpa sa figure”	The figure like Shilpa (referring to a Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty)	
	Har Mohalle Mein Haaye Mera Tower Khada O Bada Mehanga Hai Network Tera... Ho...	In every neighborhood, my tower stands (Tower that relays her connection). Your network is very expensive.	

	Yeh toh trailer hai poori filam dikhane aayi.	This is just the trailer; I have come to show the complete film.	obscene manner.
	Tod ke tijoriyon ko loot le zara.	Just break into the cash chest and loot it.	
	Jism ko chhoo le aaj haathon se	Come touch my body with Your hands.	
2	“Le zandu balm hui, darling tere liye.”	She became Zandu Balm (A very popular ointment which is rubbed on the forehead to get rid of headache), darling just for Your sake	Using obscene simile or metaphor refers to comparing women with fire crackers, pain relieving ointment and fatal instruments or ferocious animals.
	“Tu item bomb hui, darling mere liye.”	You became an item bomb, darling just for me.	
	Aaye Cable Connection Key Jaisa Mazaa.	You’ll get fun from me like You get from a cable connection (satellite TV) (Metaphorically saying that I’ll be so clear and near to You like a Cable TV connection)	
	Bichhoo mere naina; badi zehereeli ankh maare. Kamsin kamariya saali ik thumke se lakh maare.	My eyes are like scorpions; they give a very poisonous wink. A jerk of my thin (sexy) waist kills a lac.	
	Jungle mein aaj mangal karungi. Bhookhe sheron se khelungi main.	I will do something magical in the jungle. I will play with hungry lions	
	Choom ke zakhmo pe thoda malham lagaane aayi.	It has come to kiss and put a balm on the wounds.	
	Pyaas jaagi hai kitni raaton se Aa bujha lein hum behke jazbaton se	A thirst has awakened since so many nights. Let's quench this thirst with these intoxicated emotions	
	Mohabbat Ka Dasta Tumhe Naag Hai Kya/Tumhare Bhi Dil Mein Lagi Aag Hai Kya	Does the snake of love bite You also? Is Your heart on fire too?	

3		“Bebo si adaa, Bebo si adaa.”	Style like Bebo (referring to a Bollywood actress Kareena Kapoor)	Use of (repulsive and salacious) simile or metaphor: and appreciation of beauty especially for white skin
		World Famous Hai Mera Glamour Bada.	My glamour is world famous.	
		Husn ki teeli se beedi chillam jalaane aayi.	She has come to light cigarettes and pipes with the matchstick of beauty.	
		Paisa gaadi mehnga ghar/I need a man who can gimme all that/Jebein khaali fatichar/No no I don't like him like that/Chal yahan se nikal tujhe sab laa dunga/Kadmon mein tere laake jag rakh dunga/Khwaab main kar dunga poore/Na rahenge adhoore	I need a man who can give me all that money, car, an expensive house. No no I don't like him like empty pockets, jobless. Come out from this place, and I will get You everything. I will put everything at your feet. I'll fulfill all your desires. None shall remain left	
		Aaja jalwon ke shaamiyaane mein	Come under the marquee of the charisma (abode of beauties)	
		Laila Main Laila, Aisi Hoon Laila/Har Koi Chaahe Mujhse Milna Akela	I'm such a beauty that everyone wants to meet me in private.	
4		“Hai tujh mein poori botal ka nasha, botal ka nasha.”	In you, there is the whole intoxication of a bottle (indicating to a bottle of wine)	<i>Portrayal of women as intoxicating substance and sustenance:</i> Portraying women as intoxicating substance and food refers to presenting actress as spicy food and liquor in songs.
		Kadkon Ko No, Birthday Ka Cake.	The bankrupt ones won't get the Birthday cake.	
		Makkhan jaisi hatheli pe angaare le lungi main. Haaye! gehre paani ki machhli hoon Raja.	I'll take fireballs on my butter like palm Oh! I am a fish of deep waters my dear.	
		Haye re aise tarse humko Ho gaye sau arse re/Sookhey dil pe megha ban ke/Teri nazariya barse re	We have been thirsty for a million years and your eyes shower on this dry heart of ours like a rain.	

Figure 1: Thematic analysis of selected item songs

4.2 Auditory Objectification

All the hints under serial 1 are the strong indicators of representing women as sex objects and not as human beings. For example, “gaal gulabi, nain sharabi” and “...Shilpa sa figure” stand for ‘attractive cheek, intoxicating eyes and body like Shilpa Shetty’. Besides, “Mera Tower Khada” and “poori filam” refer to the ‘easily noticeable breasts’ and ‘a stark-naked female body’. Here, all of these hints place a great deal of emphasis on women’s sexual appeal and reinforce the stereotype of women as sex objects for the pleasure of male spectators.

The hints of serial 2 portray women as deadly instruments or ferocious animals, bombs, and ointment which indicate that these item songs do not consider women as persons. For example, “zandu balm and malham” and “Cable Connection” indicate an ointment that relieves physical pain and a medium of having mental satisfaction. Both of them metaphorically allude to sexual pleasure either by doing it or by watching it. Similarly, “item bomb”, “Bichhoo mere naina” and “Bhookhe sheron” mean “very hot female”, “intoxicating eyes” and “hungry lions”, all of them are examples of dangerous metaphors and similes. All of the instances intensify the fact that women are less human beings more animals and objects that can be purchased and consumed. (Gries, 2008).

The hints of serial 3 reveal fetishistic appreciation for white skin and beauty. In other words, a great emphasis is put on skin color, and fair skin is given more importance as compared to black or brown skin such as “Bebo”, Kareena Kapoor who is a famous fair-skinned Bollywood actress, “World Famous Glamour” and “husne ki teeli”, fire like beauty, ‘jalwon ke shaamiyaane’ marquee of the charisma – an abode of beauties – exemplify the appreciation for beauty. Here, self-objectification is strongly evident as Sheila urges for ‘Paisa gaadi mehnga ghar’ in exchange of ‘her everything’, body, and beauty. Thus, the women are represented as objects to be ‘looked at’, and the males are represented as ‘spectators’ (Mulvey, 1999)

The hints of serial 4 present women as some intoxicating liquor or food that is consumable. For instance, “botal ka nasha”, “Birthday Ka Cake”, “Makkhan jaisi hatheli” and “gehre paani ki machhli” referring to accordingly a bottle of wine, herself (a female) as a birthday cake (food), a palm-like butter and a fish of deep water are the stances of self-objectification of women as liquor or food (Fredrickson and Roberts, 1997). Thus, they have become mere consumable products that can be exchanged or purchased with money or other property.

5. Conclusion

It is undoubted that visual objectification of the body, especially the female body, has been intensified to a great extent with the introduction of item songs in cinemas. Along with this, auditory objectification has been hand in hand with visual objectification as obscene and salacious words, and libidinous remarks about women are so frequently used in such songs that it has become normal for both men and women to hear them out. Most of the women and young girls do not even realize that they are being objectified by such vulgar words prevalent in these songs. Thus, the way in the male gaze, a woman is visually positioned as an object of heterosexual male desire (Loreck, 2016). Similarly, through the delicate use of phrases like similes, metaphors, and proper nouns, women are portrayed as sexual objects that satisfy the ‘male hearing sexuality’.

And, this intensified objectification of the female body has been obvious because the film as a medium is much more popular than literature or theater; therefore, it has an impact on people of all classes of the society. Undeniably, the viewers perceive the screen stories as the world around them, hence it becomes easy for them to accept the screen reality and move it to everyday life. Thus, the lyrics of item songs have been full of increasingly sexually explicit metaphors and similes, and consequently, the prevalence of objectification of the female body has been established. As a result, not only women are both depicted and presented as sexual objects to satisfy the lustful sexual gratification of the patriarchal and phallogocentric society but also the female characters extend the diminishing constructions by being willing participants in the item songs.

Although the sampling frame included lyrics over 8 years (2010–2017), the study is limited in its ability to make inferences beyond the time frame examined. Future research could detect broader trends related to sexual objectification in item songs, for example how the reel life’s item songs impact the real-life of the women and girls who share the same name used in the item songs analyzed in this study and beyond.

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