

# A SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF THE GENDER STEREOTYPING AND OBJECTIFICATION IN BOLLYWOOD SONGS

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**ABSTRACT--***Semiotic theory gives us a framework of how the relationship between the sign, the signifier, and the signified are interwoven with each other and how they develop into a cultural strategy. The songs in Bollywood movies show how both femininity and masculinity are represented, objectified and stereotyped. Gender roles are stereotyped and considered as an instrument to determine the superiority of the male over the female. Bollywood songs have lyrics that objectify women as embodiments of desire. At the same time, a strong and heroic label is attached to the male actors who are considered to have all the attributes to be placed on top of the hierarchy. The social construction of the lyrics has led to the establishment of male dominance over the female, thus placing it on false dichotomies. The colonisation of the female actors in Bollywood songs is one of the outcomes of power politics in gender representation. The lyrics of three Bollywood hits are analysed semiotically exposing their role in power engagement and gender stereotyping.*

**Keywords--** *semiotic theory, femininity, masculinity, sexual objectification, colonisation, power politics, gender stereotyping*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Songs can be treated as a symbolic icon of culture and cultural influence. A soulful lullaby shows hope and love, a tuneful romantic song stirs the soul, a wedding song brings the celebration mood and a Sufi song arouses certain kinds of ecstatic feelings. This shows how the aesthetics of songs tend to have a higher impact on the audience since the visual is combined with lyrics. But when we put all these elements into the production of songs, the question of the existence and relevance of item songs becomes debatable. This genre of songs, which is mainly brought forth in favour of the commercial branding of a movie, sometimes stands out of place to the context and plotline of the film. The assimilation of item songs into the visual culture has led to the unconscious as well as conscious acceptance of misogyny disregarding the theories of patriarchy, sexism, sexual objectification, the erotic portrayal of women, and stereotyping of gender roles.

The objectification in item songs is thus justified by the celebration and popularity of the genre, in comparison with the other genres. The name of the genre itself reveals the objectification that it puts forward. 'Item' which is another word used to represent a commodity has gained several meanings over time. Out of these, its association

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with the portrayal of a romantic or sexual relationship has led to the popularization of the word in the context of visual media.

The semiotic theory is based on interpretations that break down the process of reading signs focusing them on different cultures. Roland Barthes, a post-structuralist figure in his theory of semiotics, further developed the structuralist components of the sign, signifier and signified. A sign combines the signifier and the signified with a denotative meaning as well as a connotative meaning vested on it. A semiotic and psychoanalytical analysis of the representation of women in popular songs reveals such exposition of femininity and masculinity that create an impression that the women are weaker vessels in comparison with men.

## **II. OBJECTIVE**

The Bollywood songs that fall under this genre romanticize stalking, eve-teasing, objectification of women, body shaming, and present it as normal. The voyeurism and narcissism that these songs expose show the controlling power of men and the passive acceptance of women. The objective of the study is to explore these differences in representations semiotically and to identify gender roles and stereotyping niched into the dichotomy of power politics.

## **III. HYPOTHESIS**

### **Femininity and Masculinity in Semiotic Terms**

The male gaze theory defines how a female character is displayed in a male gaze based on the two levels of eroticism, firstly, as an erotic object to satisfy the desires of the characters in the film and secondly as an erotic object of desire for the male spectator for whom the film is made. The gazer is self-centered and wants the 'Gazed' to act according to his expectations. Male gaze positions woman as an object of heterosexual male desire and frames her feelings, thoughts, and sexual drives according to that of men. Laura Mulvey puts forward the idea that the women are seen as a signifier for the male and are bound by the symbolic order in which a man produces his fancies. Women are given a silent image of linguistic command by treating them as bearer of sexual meaning and not as the maker of meaning. Sexual assaults and sexual harassments of women through vulgar gestures, sexual remarks, whistling, groping, inappropriate touching, staring, winking, etc. are normalized. Women are seen as an object in the movies, especially in the song sequences in which they celebrate eve-teasing and stalking.

When we analyze the directors of these movies we find that the "gaze" of the medium is seen to be masculine as the songs "Desi Boys", "Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast", and "Fevicol Se" are written as well as directed by men. The three songs can be sub-categorized based on their nature. Desi Boys is a male-oriented song with two leading male heroes. The song "Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast" is a romantic item song while "Fevicol Se" belongs to the typical genre of a sexualised item song. Laura Mulvey throws light on the ideological basis of patriarchy in her essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" by defining the relationship between the gazer and the gazed. The gazed and the gazer are not established on equal terms. The visual perspective of the male gaze is based on the spectator's perspective. It is centered on a heterosexual man who lingers his gaze upon the features of a woman's body which in turn fosters male hegemony in Bollywood songs, especially of this genre.

#### **IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* by Laura Mulvey

Mulvey uses Freud's theory of Scopophilia in analyzing the Bollywood songs that treat women as objects and subjects of controlling and curious gaze. The idea of deriving sexual satisfaction from women through male voyeurism can be seen in these songs that we have taken into consideration. This sexual satisfaction is obtained from the sexual objectification where the male protagonist imagines the female protagonist as an object of sensuality. Another psychoanalytical thinker Lacan also debates this idea. He points out that cinema creates a fascination for the male-viewers to suppress their ego because they relate to what is seen on the screen. Also, it enforces the ego as they are likely to apply these in their own lives. The paradoxical state that is seen here implies that these songs set up a stereotypical frame of women and men which leads to the fascination within the minds of people which is thus represented in media through Bollywood songs.

#### **V. REVIEW**

Item songs have been widely criticized for their gender stereotyping and high levels of objectification. The commercial success that these songs bring for the filmmakers is of an immensely higher ratio in comparison with the criticism. Apart from that, these songs have a greater impact on the audience who enjoys them with all the misrepresentations it puts forward. The item songs remain a globally discussed issue as we can see based on the research done on the sexual objectification of item songs in and around the country

Zahabia Z. Slatwall, from the University of South Florida, in her paper the "Objectification of Women in Bollywood Item Numbers", discusses the visual objectification in comparison with the behavioural sexual objectification of women after analysing 201 songs of Bollywood. She concentrates on the objectification pattern over several years. Research scholar Supriya Dwivedi's paper on "Sexual Objectification of Females in Bollywood Rap and Item Songs" focuses on the thematic analysis of popular rap and item songs from the year 2010 to 2012. She looks at the portrayal of women and women's body parts along with the use of obscene similies and metaphors. The focus was mainly on the lyrical analysis of the songs and the treatment of women as sex objects. There are many ongoing areas of research based on the sexualisation of the female body and their misrepresentation.

#### **VI. ANALYSIS AND MAJOR FINDINGS**

Semiotic Analysis

Mise – en – a scene or 'placing on stage', is the arrangement of everything that a director places on the frame which includes the actors, lighting, decorations, camera, costume, properties, music, lyrics, locations, dance moves, and lightings. These elements add up to the semiotics of the songs and convey what the director wants the viewers to perceive.

Actors - The three songs Desi Boys, Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast, and Fevicol Se have a rich frame with leading actors and dancers. The male actors in these songs are picturized following the stereotype of "inferior women" and "superior men". They are misrepresented as sexual opponents, rather than as sexual equals. There is an inherent hierarchy based on the power politics between man and woman in such songs. Bollywood idolizes macho-men and

size zero women with a “presentable” body. The term presentable body is questionable to greater extent, as the artificial values of patriarchy focus on the "natural and normal" identity given to the representation of woman and man. The great difference in size ranges from the margin of zero to six. Six-packs have become the trademark of Bollywood masculinity and there are hardly any Bollywood heroes without a well-built body which makes him look grander and superior. As for the female actors of Bollywood, the size shrinks to zero which shows a greater difference in ratio. It strengthens the idea of weaker women. This justifies the concept of "prey and the predator" which is very relevant to the sexual culture of India. Man hunts for sexual authority while the woman gets submitted to the man's authority. The same is portrayed in the visual culture too, where the woman is made a subject of entertainment for men. The visualizations of these movies represent an aesthetic choice based upon the inequality of socio-political power between men and women. The social-pairing is done based on the functional basis of patriarchy by representing the passive-woman and active man. The woman is considered as a 'giver' and the man as a 'taker'. This is directly in proportion to the culturally reinforced aesthetics of the mainstream, commercial cinema.

The song “Fevicol Se” from the Bollywood movie *Dabang 2* can be considered as a representative item song featuring Salman Khan, Kareena Kapoor, and Arbaz Khan. The lyrics of the song have been written by Sajid-Wajid and Ashraf Ali. The song opens in a brothel where Kareena Kapoor dances in the middle of several men who are drinking and dancing. She is accompanied by dancers and other women who appear very much like prostitutes. The costume, the setting, and the lyrics give us the impression that she is a demanded sex worker in the brothel. She is the central character in the song around which everything revolves. She is surrounded by men who are observing her curves and body movements. They are watching her every move while dancing. The character is considered as an erotic object to please the people surrounding her. Picturising one of the leading Bollywood heroines as a local street girl who is available for people for sensual pleasures fits in the idea of symbolizing women as erotic objects. Thus the actor switches from more dignified roles she has played in Bollywood to that of a local sex worker, whose only purpose in the movie is to entertain the men around. Here the gazers are of three types - firstly, the director of the song who designs such a song and positions the actors in such a theme; secondly, the alcoholic men who dance with the heroine; thirdly, the viewers watching the song. The female actor is considered as an embodiment of eroticism whose main aim is to please the drunkards as well as the viewers.

The song “Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast” from the movie *Machine* starring Mustafa and Kiara Advani is the remake of an older version of the same song. The song belongs to the genre of sexualised songs with its highly objectified lyrics on a romantic theme. The title of the song is the perfect exemplification of sexual objectification. The male dancer who leads the song addresses the female actor as "Tu cheez Badi hai mast" which means “you are an amazing thing/object”. The word “thing” is used to objectify the female actor as well as her position in relation to the male actor. The lyrics of the song are what make it highly objectified. We can see that the female actor, who is a bar dancer, is treated as the object of gaze for the male actor who appears as a customer in the bar. He sees his lover in place of the bar dancer and sees her performing the song. Thus a scopophilic pleasure is derived by the actor as well as the viewers. On analyzing the song based on the male gaze theory we can see that the female actor is represented as the seducer and the male actor is represented as the seduced.

Male objectification is brought on different levels in the song “Desi Boyz” featuring Akshay Kumar and John Abraham. Both the characters flaunt their heavy built chests and abs to show off their muscular fitness. They move around several female dancers fulfilling their fantasies. The song is a perfect example of power politics in the body representation in Bollywood songs. The song clearly defines the female dancers as sexual stimulators while the male actors are represented as someone being seduced by them. Even in a male-oriented item song, the existing ideologies of male gaze have the same function as in the female-centered item songs.

Female actors are subjected to the colonizing gaze of the male protagonists. Songs like “Desi Boys”, “Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast”, and “Fevicol Se” argue that men have the right to harass women with aggression and persuasion, which defines the hegemonic masculinity that makes them the “real man”. The powerful, strong male lead and the doting submissive female show how Bollywood sexism shapes reality. Bollywood portrays women as flimsy and willing to fall into the arms of the men. Thus Bollywood songs can be used as tools to expose the elements of masculinity as perpetuated through social gender norms, by engaging with the ongoing feminist debates around masculinity and its portrayal in media.

Locations – These songs are mainly picturized in bars, nightclub, and brothels. The locations play a crucial role in determining the nature of the character as well as in the establishment of the dignity of the characters. This genre of Bollywood songs intends to define the female actors as the pleasure-givers of the male community and thus places them in such locations. In the song “Fevicol Se”, the male actor, who is a police officer, arrives at a brothel where the song sequence takes place. “Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast” is shot in a bar where the male actor comes as a guest and substitutes the bar dancer for the heroine of the movie in his imagination. The male item song Desi Boyz is shot in various locations which include swimming pool, aerodrome, car-garage, etc where the heroes are surrounded by female dancers who adore them and try to seduce them.

Camera – The cinemascopic outcome of Bollywood songs is portrayed by the shots from various angles of the camera. The camera has a great role in establishing the patriarchal treatment of the body as mere sexual instruments as the viewers see only what the camera shows. The camera pans, zooms, and panoramises the various levels of body framings through the eye of the director. Thus according to Mulvey's theory, the director is the primary agent responsible for the representation of women in this visual medium who determines the gaze of the rest of the agents in the medium.

The camera usually takes control of the entire set, the physical appearance, and the aesthetic quality of the elements in the Bollywood songs. The camera has a great role in depicting women from a masculine, heterosexual perspective that presents and represents women as sexual objects. The focused close ups on the female body parts like the breast, cleavage, belly, curves, thighs, and lips of the woman gives present her as a sum of parts. She is treated as something flexible and weak. On the contrary, the camera scans the entire chest of the male actors in these items songs focusing on their chest which is the only exposed portion of the male body. The chest, the biceps and the muscular figure is vividly represented as a dominant and characteristic element of the male figure. The camera never zooms on the thighs, belly or lips of man thus polarizing the body representation based on gender.

Costume - Costumes are important to the representation of whole situation, dramatize the situation effectively with the lyrics, actors, camera, location and music. Over the years, item song costumes have come a long way, from saris to sexy skirts for women, and from suits to bathing shorts in case of men. Even a towel might be used in many ways to make the heroes look sexy and appealing. Women, in Bollywood, have always made their mark

in an assortment of clothes. Not just that, men has consistently changed their looks to go with the flow. The most common costumes used by the bollywood item songs are based on the numbers they perform.

For men, shirts with a deep neck or open neck are known for its sex appeal. Their appeal lie with the chest which is exposed to the hungry gaze, and it looks very attractive on them. Men find it easy to follow this fashion without much hassle as all they need is a good, smart shirt, and preferably a good looking chest. The erotic imagery of the bollywood actresses can be brought out in an artfully draped sari with a barely-there blouse which of the traditional kinf. Complementing them with knee length skirts exposes their lower body. The costume also follows the politics of male gaze as it exposes the soft side of the female actors and the power and physical strength of the male characters.

Lyrics – The various terms used in the construction of Bollywood songs shows how these women are positioned based on gender. Women are termed as non-living objects with various negative connotations. They are also termed as something sweet, fragile and tender. The song “Tu Cheez Badi Hai Mast” begins with the heroine singing that she has got beauty like flower buds. The lyrics of all these three songs are written by male lyricists and it is the male consciousness that portray women as soft and fragile. A flower bud is weak and can be withered away by a heavy rain or storm. It can also be plucked by anyone who gets attracted to its beauty.

Kareena Kapoor addresses herself as a tandoori chicken and asks the fellow dancers to consume her with alcohol. Later on, she addresses herself as a smooth savoury butter that she wishes to be cut by the male actor. Comparing the female body to an eatable presents it as a consumable object and offers a huge contrast with lyrics comparing the male body to that of a king, warrior etc. Desi Boyz gives perfectly contrasting lyrics by addressing themselves as ‘someone who rules the hearts of the girls/ after making ourselves smart and presentable/ showing off our chest and muscles/we dance with force’. The entire song praises the authority of the man and the strength they seem to possess.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Semiotic comparisons of male and female actors give us an idea about the representation of male and female figures in bollywood songs. Female actors are represented as tender, soft, and vulnerable individuals who are available for the purpose of entertaining the men and male viewers. They are mostly pictured as prostitutes and bar dancers while the roles of men in these songs are that of elite-class men. The patriarchal attempt of visual narration has created the female characters as seducers who try to seduce the male actors who occupy a position of power with respect to these female characters. Thus the cinematic gaze foreshadows the ideological treatment of gender as men and women are treated as unequal sexual partners and place them on false dichotomies. The vulnerability and availability of women give them the identification as erotic objects that favour the male authority. The contrasting nature of the authoritative male and the subjugated female is what these Bollywood songs try to establish in the visual culture.

The media portray masculinity by linking it with power, authority, dominance, and control. On the contrary, femininity is represented as subjugated and seductive. The above-mentioned songs showcase these ideologies. The existing system of patriarchy rules the Bollywood industry with its superior and dominating attributes. Despite encouraging eve-teasing and sexual objectification of women, the industry finds the only way for attracting an

audience is by using women and their bodies. They are treated as decorative items playing sexualised roles. There is a rampant and unapologetic sexual stereotyping and biasing in Bollywood songs. These songs thus give the impression that women are vulnerable and passive by romanticising sexual objectification and normalizing the patriarchal notions of gender representation.

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