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Badnaam Women of Bollywood: The Combative Sexual Politics of Item Songs in India

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Badnaam Women of Bollywood: The Combative Sexual Politics of Item Songs in India

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

by

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Abstract

This study analyzes the controversial Bollywood convention “item number,” a vampy song with suggestive lyrics and hypersexualized imagery of dancing women, as a crucial cultural artefact reflecting the gender and sexual uneasiness in India. Sex avoidance is a common theme in Bollywood films and in the country, where media and people are heavily censored and policed by anti-Romeo squads under the Modi administration. The item girl breaks the sexual tension with a mega hit song and hook step that fuels the economy of dance and desire in India. While the song is completely unrelated to the narrative of the film, this blockbuster dance number is a key factor that drives audiences to the theaters. Despite the commercial value, and cultural heritage of the item song and item girl, scholars and film critics have failed to acknowledge their value and establish item songs as separate category, rather than absorbing it under the larger umbrella of Bollywood musicals. Using a triangulation method that looks at item songs as cultural texts themselves this study analyzes the cultural and national contexts in which those texts are produced, and the industry that produces them (including interviews with the producers themselves.) This study specifically creates a space for studying item songs as crucial cultural artifacts that produce an anti-social feminism meant to decolonize Western feminist film criticism that fetishizes Bollywood films, and subsequently item songs.

Through a critical feminist reading of item songs as cultural texts, I examine the subjectivity of the item girl and the “insider-outsider” politics of nepotism and representation of the Hindi film industry that treat the item girl as an outsider. By setting media representations against material living conditions of women in India, this project employs an eclectic study of Intersectional and Marxist feminism to understand compounded discriminations such as colorism and the feminization of labor faced by item song dancers, as well as the rise of the white item girl

in corporatized Bollywood. This project argues that Bollywood uses the binaries of vamp vs. virgin to demarcate women, where the item girl/vamp emerges as an anti-heroine who practices the politics of refusal by being a shadow feminist and subsequently a cultural queer icon, who refuses to adhere to the Brahmanical, patriarchal construction of Indian femininity. To assert this claim, I traveled to Mumbai, the epicenter of Bollywood, to interview 15 industry insiders directly involved with the production of item songs, based on my networks and experience from the time I worked as an Assistant Director in Bollywood. Industry analysis revealed the cultural importance of the item girl as a key whistleblower in the #MeTooIndia movement despite being vilified as a scapegoat for the 2012 Delhi gang rape, both of which were key events for discourses on women's representation in Indian media.

Keywords: Mass Media, Women's Studies, Bollywood, Feminist Film Criticism, Cultural Studies

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Introduction

The 2012 gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a medical student from Delhi, garnered vast media attention due to the utter brutality of the incident. Singh and a friend were returning from a movie theater and boarded what they thought was a public transit bus. However, the bus was an off-duty charter vehicle that the driver and his friends were taking on a joy ride. As the driver deviated from the expected course, his accomplices attacked Singh's friend incapacitating him, then repeatedly raped, and sodomized her. The details of this rape shook the public because of the cruelty of the attack: the rapists had used a rusted, L-shaped wheel jack handle to sodomize her, heavily damaging her internal organs.

Although the authorities caught the perpetrators within 24 hours, people from India and all over the world were outraged and became heavily involved in the case, organizing various protests, marches, and candlelight vigils. Due to this public pressure, the federal government arranged for Singh to be transported to Singapore for medical treatment, but the extent of her injuries was too great. Jyoti Singh succumbed to her internal injuries a month later.

The 2012 Delhi Gang Rape, as the case came to be known, led the international media to dub India the "Rape Capital of the World." Both the case and the way India was portrayed, ignited discourse about women's rights and paved the way for more thorough investigations on women's representation in India media, especially in Bollywood films.

After the incident, the public focused their anxiety about sexual violence particularly on the portrayal and objectification of women in Bollywood. While this may, to them, seem logical and comforting, scapegoating the film and entertainment industries for incidents of sexual violence against women is a superficial approach to the problem as it reflects the classic "blame the media for violence." Besides ignoring the actual social and cultural factors that contributed to

the Delhi tragedy, this censorious interpretation failed to recognize the cultural and artistic heritage of the item song and its current function in Indian society. Instead, the intersections of class, caste, religion, history, and mythology and how they create power structures that have profited from the subjugation and abuse of women should be thoroughly investigated, despite the discomfort this may bring. For example, in Indian mythology wars and conflicts were often avenged through rape; women were sometimes bartered as commodities to protect men's honor, masculinity, and property. Both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the great Indian epics, are centered around the sexual assault of Draupadi and the kidnapping of Sita as the triggers for epic wars.

The relationship between how history and the film industry have shaped rape culture in India should serve as a catalyst for discussions about a complex subject that is too often oversimplified. Instead of blaming only one aspect of Indian culture, in this case Bollywood, the discourse needs to historicize and contextualize the tradition of commodifying and controlling women through violence and trauma.

The crucial questions that will be addressed in this dissertation will revolve around the ongoing debate about how item songs, a key convention of the Bollywood film, are harmful depictions that impact the "reel vs. real" representations of Indian women. An investigation that finds correlation between the media representations and the material, economic, and socio-political conditions of women in India, needs to be launched. This investigation needs to locate how sexual politics, gender relations, and item songs perpetuate rape culture in India. For example, questions such as: Is the cinematic (mis)representation, of item girls, the sole cause of the rape culture in India? Is there a research gap in discussing women's autonomy and agency in being represented as oversexualized beings in item songs, where other factors such as India's

deep-rooted patriarchal culture and dangerous casteist and religious ideologies are also crucial factors to consider? How do item songs, which sexualizes female dancers in cabaret-style dance numbers, surrounded by thronging men grabbing at them contribute to this discourse? The purpose of this analysis is to explore these questions by analyzing the social, political, economic, and historical implications that lead to the scapegoating of the item songs. The gang rape of Jyoti Singh and the #MeToo movement were the major events to that drew attention to Bollywood's gender misrepresentation and this study will also consider those events and how they influenced the discourse of gender politics in India.

In an episode of *Satyamev Jayate*, an Indian television talk show, three new-generation Bollywood actresses and youth icons—Kangana Ranaut, Deepika Padukone, and Parineeti Chopra—discussed the “reel vs. real” relationship of the "item song" to "rape culture". In this show, the three actresses talked about cinematic representations of women in Bollywood films and the depictions of the hero-heroine dynamic, which often displays sexual harassment as a form of courting the lady. This dynamic is often framed under the commonly used Bollywood trope “Her Yes Means No”, as the way of acquiring the heroine's love. These actresses corroborated that art does imitate life and shared that they have faced harassment in real life because films have influenced and shaped the perceptions of how men look at women. When asked if they would fall in love with the same man who harassed them under the guise of pursuing their affection, they responded “Never.” This episode became popular because, for the first time, actresses openly spoke about how they were depicted on screen and challenged these tropes in Bollywood cinema. In fact, all the actresses declared that they would never perform an item number as it would mean participating in her own commodification. Critics and discourses such as in *Satyamev Jayate* have often problematized these harmful depictions of consent in

Bollywood, which have come up in discourses as perpetrators of patriarchy and the rape culture in India and these popular Bollywood performers corroborated this perspective.

The problematic representation of female dancers in item songs has particularly become the focus when the topic of objectification of women in Bollywood films comes up. Item songs have gained popularity and became a staple in commercial Bollywood films since the 90s and to oversimplify and dismiss their historical significance because of their disturbing failings is counterproductive. What are the positive and negative influences of item songs and how do their representations relate to an appropriate interpretation of the social standing of women in India? In addressing this question, it must be recognized that item songs are important cultural indicators and serve what some critics would argue to be historical social function and an important commercial contribution. For example, the disturbing convention of assuming that when a woman says "No" she is saying "Yes" could be misconstrued for continued unwanted behavior in a Bollywood narrative. While the item girl might be dismissed as a loose, oversexualized vamp, this character may be seen in some narratives as an opportunity to provide more female agency rather than just a stereotype of the desexualized, virginal heroine.

The item number is a Bollywood convention that breaks the sexual tension between hero and heroine in each narrative, outside this principal couple's relationship, by focusing upon the sensual encounter where the item girl is situated dancing at the center of throngs of men for the purpose of accommodating male visual pleasure. Because it invokes the male gaze and teases the viewer, the item number has been challenged by critics for fulfilling gang rape fantasy and emphasizing the item girl's declaration of herself as a public commodity. While these disturbing interpretations raise important questions that will be addressed in this study, limiting one's perspective to these concerns ignores two important components of the item song that will be

defined and explored in this dissertation - the item girl's use and control of the gaze to dictate the market value of a film and her contrasting identity compared to that of the heroine. The traditional stark binary between the two major female representations in the popular Bollywood blockbuster contains a particularly important space for exploring and understanding an evolving Indian interpretation of "virgin and vamp".

This bifurcation of women into pure vs. impure has been present since early mythological stories- where vamps like *Maneka*, *Vishkanya* etc. were impure women who were distracting the gods and heroes with their sensuality. A sort of a she-devil figure and an anti-heroine tempting man to walk the path of sin, while their long-suffering wives/heroines wept for them. The story of the ultimate heroine Sita, in the mythological odyssey *Ramayana*, tells the story of Sita who jumped in the fire to prove her ultimate love and fidelity for Lord Ram. Sita is considered an epitome of Indian femininity who suffers for her hero and is bartered in the epic war of *Ramayana* which is a result of domestic and sexual violence against women. This sort of villanization of the vamp/item girl and the victimization of the heroine creates a binary which adheres to the patriarchal, Brahmanical construction of the Indian woman.

However, the popularity of "item" songs, disturbs this binary as more actresses who solely acted as virginal heroines in the past are now making guest appearances as vampy item girls in item numbers. The risqué depiction of item songs is also becoming normalized as the dancing gets more sexualized, the clothes get skimpier, the tunes are remixed, and the lyrics become more connotative. Although the discourses around item songs revolve around moral policing of the dances and vilification of Bollywood, they are often consumed and appreciated by non-male audiences too. While the contrast of "virgin" and "vamp" has served as an easily recognizable dialectic, the "good girl" has increasingly assumed character traits previously

associated only with the "bad". Changing character dynamics and audience expectation indicate that there is more to the cultural parameters related to the item song than associations with "rape culture," such as the power of the star performer. With heroines crossing over and making appearances in item songs, they have gained even more popularity and are being repurposed, remixed, and re-enacted by these non-male audiences such as women and young children.

The newer Bollywood commercial masala films also depend on the item songs for economic importance and promotional tactics. The dominant discussions revolve around female objectification for male pleasure but fail to address the blurriness of this convention in terms of the targeted audiences of these songs. This dismissal also fails to consider the dualities of this [type] of song which perceives the item girl not as a victim but as an agent of her own sexual autonomy, that breaks the mold of the sexually suppressed, desexualized virginal heroine. Does that then make the item number solely for the male gaze, where female objectification would occur only for the male gaze and consumption, or are they a part of the whole Bollywood spectacle that stickily grant female characters the boldness and audacity to take control of the gaze for their own profit? Assuming female objectification only occurs to satisfy consumption relative to the male gaze fails to address the fact that this Bollywood spectacle also can be seen as granting female characters the boldness and audacity to take control the gaze and the box office success the film. Additionally, the recent association of item songs with perpetuating rape culture, while item girls are some of the biggest whistle blowers of sexual harassment in the Hindi film industry, bring to attention the outsider politics of Bollywood's nepotism. The single sided attention and intervention of the category of musical item numbers, which have become essential to Hindi commercial film to increase the marketability of the film, are foundational for analyzing the cinematic representations of women in India.

Current Scholarship

A discussion that is focused upon the cinematic representations of women and the diagnosis of whether they are passive or active agents of the narrative cannot be initiated without recognizing a context of the previous research done in the field of feminist film criticism.

Dominant discourse on item song tends to associate them with mindless objectification and the male gaze and tends to overuse Laura Mulvey's theory on gender and spectatorship. Mulvey points out the differences in the spectatorship behaviors between men and women where men were the active agents and drivers of the film's narrative while women were only objects of the male desire; their presence was only meant for the male gaze. Mulvey's argument, pointing towards the phallogocentric imagery, explained that the males possessed the active roles of spectatorship while females were only passive. While Mulvey's rhetoric on spectatorship which focuses on the connotation of 'to-be-looked-at-ness' is crucial in understanding the item girl because she is displayed and exhibited as a sexual object it cannot be applied to Bollywood films which are an escapist fare and focus on spectacle. Mulvey's suggests that the spectacle-ness of musical films is especially notorious for creating the stark masculine/feminine binaries where the female performer is meant for objectification and exhibitionism. Whereas, the male spectator enjoys the voyeuristic gaze, the agency to spectate the performance, and exerts narrative control over the female dancer (Mulvey, 835.) However, to decolonize feminist film criticism, this study examines the demand and growing popularity for item songs has led to the hybridization of the heroine as well as the hero, both of whom now double as the "item," competing to be served up to the audience. Additionally later studies such as Bracha L. Ettinger's counter theory on the Matrixial Gaze which reverses Mulvey's theory and displaces the Lacanian phallic gaze and the gazed-upon where the displacement occurs not only by creating a reversal of the gaze but also by

inventing a border space where the female character drives the narrative and provokes the male to act the way he does. This proves that the item girl needs to be studied beyond the concept of the male gaze especially in India where theaters are an interactive space and the spectatorship is so vast and mixed.

The confusion over the proprietorship of the body of the item girl is commonplace for conjecture since the discourse on film studies and gendered cinematic viewership has been dictated by Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. While this work is revolutionary, Srinivas claims that using Western theories and theorists to study Indian films is problematic as they tend to view Indian artefacts mostly from an ideological or mythic studies perspective. (Srinivas, 2002.) In doing so, the theories are a misfit because they tend to overlook the diversity in India where the variables are different, and notions of *dharmik* codes¹, shame, honor, caste, religion, gender, rural vs. urban, etc., all of which cannot be quantified or studied with Eurocentric knowledge. To avoid epistemic violence, it is important to approach it with a wider lens and more authentic and organic knowledge.

This fits well in our understanding of the item girl, who is not passive while she is being looked at, instead, she is actively controlling the male and breaking the narrative tension with a hit song. Thus, the counter theories to Mulvey's hegemonic feminist film criticism theory become an important site to discourse upon the reigning and recurring need for item songs in male dominated Bollywood narratives. These dualities on gazing and gazed upon thus become central in analyzing item songs. The gaze drives the market for hit songs and the item girl controls the gaze and redirects it to box-office profits. Situating the song in the film, divorced from the narrative, to bring the audience to the theaters, highlights the cultural and economic

¹ Regulating laws and morality in Hinduism, found in Holy Scriptures.

importance of item songs to Bollywood films. However, it is also inadequate for understanding item songs because using Western perspectives to understand Indian films, since Bollywood films and their spectatorship is much larger in scope and reception than its Hollywood counterpart. Thus, the limited focus on the historicization of the rich cultural heritage of item songs requires a special need to apply research and work done in the field of feminist film criticism in India, especially focusing on Bollywood films.

One of the essential approaches for this study will focus on keeping the research as organic as possible by utilizing Indian film theorists to analyze and define the convention of item songs and to interview those directly involved with the production of the item song. To begin, the evolution of the Hindi/Bombay film industry will need to be historicized. Mihir Bose's book *Bollywood: A History* provides a theoretical journey that traces the growth of Bollywood from its formative years, from being promoted by the government as a cultural soft power to subsequently being congratulated with the industry status due to its major contributions to the Indian economy. Bose's section "A Laugh, a Song and a Tear" is especially useful in historicizing the "explosion of the Bombay film song" to develop a context for understanding the different song categories and their functions within the film. The production of the Bollywood song is completely different from and more interactive than the production of a film song in any other film industry. Bose delineates the finer nuances of the song production as he walks the reader through the interactions between the song composer, the singer, the lyricist, and the musicians (Bose, 223.)

In diagnosing the structures of the production methods of Bollywood before the images light up on celluloid, Tejaswini Ganti's *Producing Bollywood* is foundational in historicizing the evolution of the Hindi film industry and how it went on to have a global appeal as Bollywood

(Ganti 77.) Ganti refers to the “Bollywoodization” of the Hindi film industry as a sort of gentrification, that came in the form of neoliberal policies of the 90’s which acted as catalysts for the economic liberalization in India and did the following:

1. Changed the movie viewing habits of the cinemagoers. With the arrival of satellite TV and multiplex theaters, viewing habits and audience demographics changed drastically.
2. Caused a significant rise in the Indian diaspora. The economic liberalization and trade agreements also influenced immigration as more Indians went abroad for education and economic opportunities. This was a major contributing factor in the global rise of Bollywood (Ganti.)

While Bose focused on song production, Ganti’s work goes beyond that to involve the analysis of the structure, organization, and social relations of the Hindi film industry. Her research also goes beyond the production aspects to understand the audiences, which she bifurcates between the “aunties” and the “servants.” (Ganti, 281.) Ganti’s bifurcation of the audience demographic is important to understanding the masses vs. the classes, or the economic segregation that influenced Bollywood’s content that causes the ‘gentrification of the audience imaginaries’ (Ganti, 315.) Interestingly, Ganti is also focusing on the feminization of the audiences by separating the aunties from the house maids; this intervention creates a space to understand non-male audiences as prime consumers of Bollywood films. In conjunction with Ganti’s work on the production of Bollywood films, her supplementary work *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* will also be useful for understanding significant dates, films, and key figures of Bollywood. This will help in highlighting the key events that influenced and changed the face of Bollywood, as she writes extensively about the various eras of

Bollywood. The filmmakers, actors, and films she chose are also essential in gauging the influence and impact of Bollywood on a global level.

Finally, one cannot talk about item songs without using Jerry Pinto's biographical work on yesteryear cabaret dancer Helen. Pinto's groundbreaking literary work *Helen: The Life and Times of a Bollywood H-Bomb* (2006) traces Helen's journey from being a Burmese refugee in India to becoming a cult figure in Bollywood history (Pinto, 187.) Carving the niche of the cabaret dancer in Bollywood, Helen plays a key role in westernizing the Bollywood dancer. Her iconic outfits ranged from the flamenco to the belly dancer, to the tribal fisher woman *koli* dancer, to burlesque. And like her versatile outfits, she played versatile roles such as the vamp, the gangster's moll, the bad wife, the hippie, and the replacement heroine. (Pinto, 85.) Helen is iconic, for she was one of the first Anglo, blue eyed women in Bollywood who went on to create a space for women with European features who still dance in Bollywood films. In conjunction with Pinto's book, the Merchant-Ivory documentary *Helen, Queen of the Nautch Girls* (1973) will be crucial in understanding the emergence of the cabaret song in Bollywood, and especially Helen's journey as the dancer to the icon.

Purpose, Limits, Scope and Key Terms

The main purpose of this research is to look at the item songs from a non-Western lens and considers the socio-political and historical climate of India and its influence on Bollywood, which is significantly different from that of Hollywood's. The hope for this study is to create a space for studying the item songs as a separate category rather than absorbing it under the larger umbrella of Bollywood musicals. While there has been limited literature on the vampy songs, exclusive research defining the item songs as separate category is yet to be established. The bulk

of this study will be devoted to defining and structuring the trope of item songs and hopefully creating a scope for inviting and creating more discourses on the musical category of item songs.

In support of the lack of definitions for characterizing the item song category, Ravneet Kaur suggests that this song was never taken seriously or canonized in the research because, like Bollywood, it was simply reduced to being ‘kitschy’ and not a serious artifact (Kaur, 102.) While there is research on how this category emerged, there is little explanation of the intent of the placement of the item song in a film and the target demographic it is aimed towards. Besides lacking the study of spectatorship, the research also fails to delineate the elements that qualify a song as an “item” number. Film theorists have attempted to find some themes among some of the popular numbers of the last few years, but there are still limitations and gaps as to what qualifies as an item number. The set, backup dancers, music, costume, and the ambience of the item song need to be analyzed to produce the conventions that define item songs, which this project focuses on.

Much to the chagrin of several film critics, this study will refer to Hindi films as “Bollywood.” There has been a lot of discourse on decolonizing Bollywood by discarding the word “Bollywood” and replacing it with “Hindi film industry.” Filmmakers such as Mani Ratnam object to the use of Bollywood, as the terminology attempts to ape the West; however, Shakuntala Rao writes “The near universal legitimation of the term Bollywood (instead of Hindi cinema, Bombay cinema, Indian popular cinema, etc.) is an index of larger social transformations taking place in India” (Rao, 15.) The study will refer to cinema prior to the 90s as early Hindi cinema and the films after the economic liberalization as Bollywood. Similarly, the item girl and item song will be referred to as the courtesan’s song the *mujra* (1950s) and vamp’s cabaret (1960s -1980s) depending on the era they are being referred to. The vamp has

been affected by the social transformations of India and Bollywood, and with each era, she evolved in look and narrative contributions and yet her role in Indian cinema as the ideological opposite of the heroine always remained.

This opens an interesting dialect about the growing popularity and increasing consumption of the item songs under the crackdown of moral policing and right-wing conservative groups. A simple supply and demand argument could suffice as to why there is an economy thriving on the exploitation of women in a heavily patriarchal and gender oppressive country like India, but what is fascinating is that these women have become more rebellious. The boundaries between the raunchy item girl and the virginal Bollywood heroines are getting blurred as the typical A-list Bollywood heroine is now very commonly making guest appearances and doing item songs in big budget films. The item girl, who used to be a passive subject of the male gaze, unaware that she was being gazed at, has taken control of the gaze, and made it intentional and the gaze is driving the Bollywood market.

Methodology

In understanding the marginalization and objectification of item girls beyond Laura Mulvey's 'male gaze,' we need to look at the various axes that form the basis for compound discriminations in representations of Bollywood's item girls, especially beyond just gender. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw's *Mapping the Margins* provides an excellent framework to understanding the identity politics implied by depictions of darker skinned item girls. While the debate to understand caste as a racial paradigm has been ongoing in India, Crenshaw's observations on the systematic, structural, and political silencing of black women as they are suppressed and misrepresented intersect with understanding depictions of the dark-skinned item girl as sexualized for her submissiveness. Additionally, the deep-seated stereotypes of the dark

woman as the native savage amplified the binaries of the good woman (pure, white, and virginal) vs. the dark woman (impure, black, and uncivilized) and aligns with Crenshaw's observations on denying the black woman's vulnerability to rape and gendered violence (Crenshaw.) For instance, whether the item girl can be raped is a question that needs to be diagnosed using Crenshaw's Intersectionality theory. In understanding the sexual politics of the item girl, this study will explore concubines and consent to explore the intersectional struggles of the item girl as an outsider and a subaltern in Indian society. Additionally, while a lot of discourse is emerging on the sexist representations of women in Indian cinema, there are still gaps in approaching the dialogues on depictions of women of color in cinema as they remain absent in talks of social justice. To forward the production of the discourse on the item girls, it is essential to look at it with an intersectional lens and study the micro aggressions engineered by faulty depictions of darker skinned women in Indian cinema.

The discussion on darker skinned item girls has their own space in this discussion, where the discourse on skin complexions as an apparatus for marginalization of women comes to the forefront. The colorism and racism in India are a product of its post-colonial status and Bollywood continues to perpetuate this discrimination with the ever-growing demand for white item girls and back up dancers. Homi Bhabha talks about this post-colonial phenomenon, which creates spaces for mimicry and ambivalence towards the colonizer in his work on the *Location of Culture in the Colonial Discourse*. Bhabha explains colonial mimicry as, "the desire for a reformed, recognizable 'Other,' as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite," where the colonized subject is distinguished between the "good native" vs. the "bad native" for the practice of inclusion and exclusion (Bhabha, 122.) Using Lacan, Bhabha established that the mimicry of the colonizer by the colonized subject is deeply imbibed and practiced and is in fact a

colonization of the mind. The act of mimicking the colonizers is initiated to civilize the colonized subject and yet maintain the difference to exercise power, because mimicry creates ambivalence, where the colonized subject submits and adheres to the hegemonic, colonial structures and yet is only a mimicked identity that can never quite replace the colonizer. This mimicry is separated and removed from mockery, which uses the tool of mimicry to in fact resist and dissent against colonial power. The imposition of these hegemonic ideologies also makes way for the colonized subject to only be anglicized; in doing so, the colonized subject is tamed as “not quite/not white.” Bhabha’s theory is crucial in analyzing the colonized ideologies of white skin as superior, which has deeply permeated the beauty standards of Indian society.

In addition to all the literary works, the analysis of item songs will focus on looking at the songs as a text itself. The songs from early Hindi cinema to current Bollywood films will help understand patterns and recurring themes and assist in carving the features and elements that will help create the evolution of the vamp in the following ways:

1. The Tragic Courtesan: Early vamps essayed the role of the courtesan where heroines like Rekha, Madhubala and Meena Kumari performed the *mujra* (*kathak* dance form) at the *kothas* (brothel) for the kings and nobles all had one thing in common: the tragedy. The courtesans in early Hindi cinema all perished in their love for the hero; while the hero, often a king, loved them back, he always married someone who was chaste and virginal and shared their royal status. Class, in this case becomes the apparatus for the separation of the vamp from the virgin. The courtesan, as a public commodity, is shared by all, and the prince chooses the chaste and virginal princess who also shares his economic class and status. Film epics like *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), *Pakeezah* (1972) etc. essayed the

story of the heartbroken, tragic, jilted courtesan and who was rejected due to her reputation as a fallen woman.

2. The Cabaret dancer: The westernized vamp who gyrated to jazz and disco broke the mold of the tragedy from 1970-90s. She was the bad girl and the gangster's moll. Dancers like Helen, Bindu, Kalpana Iyer dominated the space until the 80s and were known for their iconic western outfits. The location for the cabaret was the posh hotel and the dance floor under the shining disco ball in discotheques. Different from the courtesan's tragedy, the vamp here is too modern and western for the hero, who in the end must choose the traditional and Indianized heroine over the cabaret dancer. Films such as *Kati Patang* (1971) and *Don* (1978) etc. highlighted Helen as the queen of cabaret and the vamp. This is the era that the vamp started reflecting ideological values that were opposite to the heroine's virtues.
3. The Bar Dancer: The 90s saw the rise of the gangster. While real life Mumbai was engulfed in gangster Dawood Ibrahim's terror with the 1993 Bombay bomb blasts, Bollywood gave rise to the gangster who visited seedy dance bars and drank his miseries away in the vulgar and coarse call girl's embrace. Sanjay Dutt's gangster films saw a rise of "item songs" as they came to be coined in this decade. Namrata Shirodkar, who plays the gangster Sanjay Dutt's moll and love in *Vaastav* (1999) became the quintessential item girl with a heart of gold.
4. Globalized Item Girl: Czech dancer Yana Gupta started the trend of the international (white) item girls. While the 90s marked the rise of A-list Bollywood actresses doing item song cameos, one of the biggest cultural changes in the item songs was the entrance of European looking actresses in the field of item songs. Katrina Kaif and Sunny Leone

created a visual dissonance as white women dancing in rustic rural spaces as village belles in some of the biggest blockbuster item songs in the two decades.

Historicizing a category like “Item Songs” can vary from discussions on its consumption to the analysis of its intentions; everything is slippery while discussing this category. The dilemma lies between the polarities of the songs as objectifying women to empowering them as sexual agents taking ownership of their bodies. The polarities are also evident in the audiences of item songs. Are they only directed towards the male gaze or are they a democratic experience that can be enjoyed by all? For instance, the item song category has been molded, reshaped, read, and re-read in numerous ways over the past years, which has not only made it more elastic but also more difficult to define. The item song’s role in a Bollywood film could be defined as an important investment, as it guarantees profit for the film’s box office success. Quite simply, while it can be defined and dismissed as a dance number laden with hypersexualized imagery, objectifying women in skimpy clothes dancing for a group of men solely to satisfy male viewing pleasure, this characterization ignores that the item song can also be a cultural and commercial "Hit" song that appeals to non-male audiences in its treatment of dance and desire.

1. The item song can be used to frame a conflict where the titillation ends with a high action-packed fight sequence between the hero and villain, as when the former bursts into the illegal space where drugs are dealt and unchaste women dance for men. The item girl provides a relief from the narrative tension with her mega hit song and hook step.
2. The item girl can reveal additional aspects of the hero's character by becoming his friend, different from a love interest, and pleases/teases the hero only in the song and exits the narrative as soon as the song ends. The item girl is not competing with the heroine for the hero’s love and attention outside the boundaries of the songs. The witty talkback of the

item girl mirrors the societal attitudes, where the hero and the heroine of Bollywood are demi-gods who were above their audiences, and the item girl, like the ancient Greek chorus, echoes the voice of the masses.

Despite the major social and cinematic contributions to the Bollywood film, the item girl is neglected and treated as an outsider in cultural conversations. In understanding the role of the item girl as an outsider, Rita Banerji delineates the lack of “interpersonal emotions” between the (heterosexual) man and the woman, or the hero and item girl, as this transaction is just implied to be a sexual one. Banerji also claims that the item song performances are reserved for male viewing pleasure and the item girl lacks all agency and sexual desires. She uses the example of *The Dirty Picture* (2011), the biopic based on the famous cabaret dancer² Silk Smitha, who was dismissed as *dirty* by the film industry and never accepted as an artist, but always an outsider (Banerji, 2013.) While Banerji makes a valid point, the film can also be reread and viewed as an act of resistance against the notions and expectations from the virginal and chaste Bollywood heroine where the item girl steps outside the patriarchal bargains and creates her own space. The item girl harbors no presumptions of becoming the heroine, and carves her own niche as an anti-heroine. She owns her body and her spaces and rejects the domestication of not only her body but also her role within Indian society and Bollywood boundaries, as set by the state and its repressive apparatus.

One of the most crucial chapter that asserts all these claims is the one that moves beyond the theory and integrates empirical research from interviews conducted in Mumbai from December 2019-March 2020. I was able to meet 15 participants who work in various departments of Bollywood. My interviews with them were stressful essentially because several participants were

² Before the label “item girl” who danced in item songs emerged, women who danced in Bollywood films were known as “cabaret dancers” who danced in Hindi cabaret songs.

following Mumbai standard times, which meant often waiting on them for hours due to crazy Mumbai traffic. Despite being busy, they were available for me and often shared and divulged so much more than I was expecting to find. Their interviews reflect some fascinating information about item songs and the various histories of Bollywood. I attempted to extract as much information from those interviews that was relevant for this study and focus on creating a clear definition and in-depth understanding of the item songs.

Brief Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1: Sexual Politics of Item Songs

There has been a lack of definitions of who the “item” girl really is and what constitutes the item song convention. One of the most vital things that stand out in the terminology of “item” is the direct reference to the female performer as an “item” and thus an object. No longer is this objectification connotative, but it is now direct and has been co-opted by the film industry as a descriptive word for the song category. While there is no standard definition of what qualifies as an item number, it would be helpful to isolate some elements that seem recurrent in Bollywood item songs in the 2000’s. Some of these themes are:

1. Obvious and direct references to the body with the use of verbiage like ‘figure’ or *jawani*, and sensuality, such as *Munni Badnaam Hui - Dabangg* (2010) where item girl Malaika Arora Khan sings about her curves and her ‘figure.’
2. Connotative lyrics hinting towards sex and loss of morality (referencing Munni as careless and shameless in love). For example, *Munni badnaam hui, darling tere liye* translates as how Munni has lost her morality and values and is willing to do anything for her darling’s pleasure. The word *Badnaam* also signifies loss of reputation and being bad and impure- a complete opposite to the subjectivity of heroines.

3. Skimpy, westernized or Indianized costume depending on the song setting. The locations are based on the song sequence and can be picturized in urban or rural settings depending on the narrative. We also see men being active participants of the scene in the item songs by drinking alcohol and providing chorus. The men in earlier *mujra* and cabaret numbers sat at the periphery of the performance, mostly smoking, drinking, and spectating the performance. Whereas, in the current item songs, men join the dance not only as a partner, but also as back up.
4. Ample backup dancers (mostly female and white) also skimpily clad like the item girl. The trend of Caucasian female backup dancers is also a popular trend in several item numbers. The colorism in the film industry is a definite postcolonial phenomenon where the colonized feels ambivalent towards the colonizer. The exoticism of the Caucasian race depicted in the Indian films stems from not only envy towards them but also because they (along with the Western culture they bring) are connoted to be morally corrupt. Hence, their placement in item numbers is a form of hybridity which produces the mixed emotions of fetishism, and contempt towards the colonizer. (Bhabha, 122.)

It is almost impossible to separate the item girl from the item song as the lyrics, the costumes, the mise-en-scene, and the countless men dancing and fetishizing the item girl all focus towards the objectification of her body. The ‘perfect body’ of the performer/ item girl a stand corrected, modified, cosmeticized, and tattooed and becomes an important site to understand Bollywood’s women and their relationship to cosmetic surgeries. For instance, the popular item girl Rakhi Sawant once exclaimed in an interview, “What god doesn't give you, the doctor can,” obviously referencing her breast implants. (Shrestova, 61.) That statement came to be associated with Sawant’s audacious charm which turned her into a cult phenomenon. The

cosmetic alterations also go in conjunction with character alterations, where the item girl, like a reality tv star, is expected to be brash and scandalous outside of the filmic space, just like her cinematic alter-ego. (Kaur, 102.) She is bold and has transformed from the tragic courtesan that was always rejected in the film by the hero to the bold dancer who is aware of her status and does not harness any notions of trespassing the virginal space and having a happily ever life after with the hero. She knows she is expected to entertain, and she does just that and demands financial compensation for the intimate labor.

The spectatorship and depiction of oversexualized women is at the crux of this discussion and, the economics of the item song provide an important opportunity to deconstruct the phenomenon. Ganti points out that the item song is the “mega song,” although unnecessary to the narrative, it is a high budget lavish spectacle with numerous backup dancers, decadent sets, and bawdy costumes that attract the audiences to the cinema halls. These songs are often placed in a formulaic Bollywood film due to the pressures from film financiers and producers to increase the marketability of the film, as a promotional tactic. (Ganti, 2012.) The production process of the Hindi film industry involves recording the soundtracks before filming and the item songs are not only recorded in advance but are also filmed prior to wrapping the shooting schedule of the entire film. These songs are then circulated as promotional videos for the film³ and played along with the trailers or by themselves between advertisements and TV shows. The popularity of an item song can often even dictate the box office result of a Bollywood film. Due to the demand for these songs have been so high in the last few decades, the producers allocate a large budget for them by employing top ranking actresses, models, and item girls to perform them and top choreographers to direct these songs (Ganti, 2012.) Thus, the whole item song trope has become

³ These numbers hit the nightclubs and are often released on YouTube and often enjoy popularity among all audiences.

a crucial part of the “(show) bizness.” The singers and choreographers who were mostly involved in the pre-production stage now perform alongside the item girls at award functions. These item songs are rewritten, reconstructed, re-performed, and re-consumed regularly on different platforms. Fans upload their own performances to the popular item songs on YouTube, InstaReels and Tik-Tok and dance to these songs in their weddings and watch other celebrities repurpose these item songs to perform at award functions, even if it does not feature them. The item song is not just about the visual image and the objectified gaze on the item anymore; it is the choreography, the background score, the vocals, the sets, and the placement in the narrative. Therefore, an exploration about its cultural and sexual politics and how it relates to India’s patriarchal culture is crucial.

Chapter 2 Sturgis Research in Mumbai on the popularity of Item Songs.

In December 2019, Sturgis scholarship enabled me to travel to India to conduct research on the Body Politics of the Item Songs of Bollywood. As noted, these guest appearance dance numbers are a necessary formula to enhance the sales of films at the box office and are often used to market a film. Having grown up in a family full of actors, I have always been intrigued with Indian cinema, particularly with how women are represented in cinema and how these reel representations impact the social locations of women in India. Equipped with necessary funds from Sturgis and the benefit of being raised in a family of film actors, I was able to access various people from the film industry through my parents, who are both actors. Interviewing choreographers, dancers, directors, and scriptwriters from Bollywood helped me not only conceptualize an operational definition for “Item Songs” or cabaret-style dance numbers but also their purpose in a Bollywood formula film. However, I had to put my project on hold and come back to the United States due to the Covid-19 lockdown. Although my trip to India was cut short,

it was also extremely fruitful in terms of research. I was able to interview 15 diverse candidates and collect over 18 hours of audio footage and archives from the Indian Film Institute.

Additionally, the changing landscape of entertainment in pre and post covid times, has provided a remarkably interesting trajectory to this research that has created a space for me to expand my project to generate new discourse on how the pandemic has altered the structure of Bollywood formula films.

I reached Mumbai mid- December when the conversations on Coronavirus were just starting to formulate. The panic of a pandemic mixed with an already fumbling economy⁴ in India, really showed distress among most of my interviewees. Analyzing those 15 interviews now, post Covid, are fascinating to unpack as they already clearly signal the crumbling socio-economic state of the country vulnerable in the face of a pandemic. The interviews revealed the politics of the item song dancer as an outsider in a nepotistic and caste conscious industry like Bollywood, divulging openly about the rampant abuse and sexual harassment faced by the item song dancers.

Using open ended questions helped (questionnaire attached below) to understand the gender and sexual politics in India reflected through the cinematic apparatus. For instance, one of the interviewees, a famous lyricist who has penned the lyrics for item songs, broke down the whole pre-production process for me, including the pressures they faced at the hands of several filmmakers who forced them to fit an item song in a film that did not need one. Also, the choreographers I interviewed all agreed that nepotism in Bollywood overshadows all the casting procedures and that the item song dancers, common victims of the casting couch, were among the most prominent whistleblowers during the "MeToo India movement. Using the following

⁴ India has been facing one of the worst economic crises for the last two years due to the current administration's decision for demonetization and tensions with China over the border.

questionnaire, I approached my participants with an open dialogue to understand the real and reel life of the dancers of Bollywood who are often on the fringes of the industry while making useful cultural contributions to it. These discussions helped reiterate some of the distinctions and cultural conventions already developed in my early research on item songs. Additionally, these interviews helped me understand how the subjectivity of the "Bollywood vamp" contains perspectives that oppose the rape culture stereotype while confirming the need for further discussion relative to sexual agency and combative sexual politics for women in India. The interviews provided great empirical research on the sexual and cultural politics of the vamp and the virgin and how they bargain with patriarchy in Bollywood. The questions for the interviews (attached below) were open-ended and qualitative to generate a dialogue on item songs.

Principal Investigator: Ketaki Deshpande

Project: Sturgis Fellowship for International Research

Title: Bollywood Burlesque: The Body Politics of Item Songs

Questionnaire

1. What is the main purpose of the item song to a Bollywood film?
2. Who are the main spectators and targeted audience for item songs?
3. How does the item girl contrast the lead heroine in a film's narrative?
4. How do the item songs increase the marketability of a film?
5. What are the technical differences between shooting an item song vs. a regular film song? For e.g. Is there a difference between the principal choreography of an item song and a romantic Bollywood song? What is the lighting technique used for shooting an item song? How are the backup dancers arranged differently from a non-item song?

6. Can you help identify some recurring themes and tropes of an item songs to help develop its conventions and definitions?

Chapter 3: Cultural Politics of Item songs

The transformation of the Hindi or Bombay film industry has been influenced and shaped by colonization, political upheavals of the post-colonial India and finally Globalization. The early silent cinema did not even cast women in films and instead feminine men cross-dressed and played the female roles. The fear and shame associated with women in performance arts shaped the early representations of women in Indian cinema. With the British coming down hard on the nobles, kings, and the courtesans who performed for them soon found themselves displaced and the film industry was a new place for the dancers to find a refuge with the British crackdown. Additionally, the concubines, courtesans and *devdasis* who are all historically women who perform intimate and private labor in public spaces of performances, themselves evolved alongside their reel representations as discourses on shame and honor changed in India's imaginations. A contrast analysis between the reel vs. the real-life dancers and performers is important to understand the cinematic representations of the item girl and the real-life material conditions of exotic dancers and subsequently of Indian women at large. This analysis will be analyzed within the larger framework of theorizing and historicizing the evolution of Hindi film industry in contrast to a more globalized impact of Bollywood.

It is hard to breakdown the 'Bollywood' phenomenon and the multilingual film factory of India that churns out an average of 800- 1,000 films a year, twice as many as Hollywood, given its complex history and economy (Sridhar & Mattoo.) Srinivas briefly historicizes the growth of the Indian film industry which traces its roots back to 1913 with Dadasaheb Phalke's *Raja Harishchandra*. Despite its early beginnings the government did not recognize it as an industry

or a vital economic contributor until the 1990's. Even though Bollywood is synonymous with Indian films, several states have their own regional films, which have their own unique production, marketing, and distribution strategies, and each of those industries boast a large local and global market because of the rise of Indian diaspora. Additionally, with globalization and diaspora audiences, Indian films are released and circulated worldwide and enjoy popularity in Middle East, former-Soviet countries, several regions of Southeast Asia, and among the Indian immigrants in the UK and USA. (Srinivas, 155.) One of the main reasons that led to the worldwide circulations of Indian films, besides immigration and diaspora, is Globalization.

David J. Schaefer uses Lechner's definition of globalization in his study of tracking dimensions of Bollywood as, "the worldwide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness." (Lechner) This definition is particularly foundational to our study as it dilutes the boundaries of nationhood and introduces the transnational conflation of global and local into the glocal⁵ nexus. Schaefer predominantly identifies the economic liberalization policies, coming of satellite and cable television, and videocassette and DVD productions etc. in the 1990's as the catalysts for changing the mindsets of filmmakers, as they made their products, not only keeping their domestic target audiences in mind, but also as the diaspora Indians settled abroad (Schaefer & Karan, 710.) Thus, Bollywood became a glocal phenomenon, often borrowing stories from Hollywood, action stunts from Hong Kong, artists from the Middle East and even incorporating hip-hop in item songs becoming a true amalgamation of globalization.

Despite worldwide circulation and popularity, the diverse Indian film industry still largely remains underrepresented and unacknowledged in world cinema as a serious film

⁵ Conflation of Global and Local

industry and lack their own unique film theories and studies. Why are the western perspectives still applied to studying Indian films? Srinivas claims that using the western lens to study Indian cinema can be problematic as it only approaches film from an ideological or mythic studies perspective. Additionally, the western studies on the spectatorship of Indian cinema have been reduced to only gauging audiences on the spectrum of class and gender⁶. Besides the variables of class and gender, the theorists fail to take into consideration the diversity of the audiences in India. For instance, the reception also includes lively, interactive, and participatory theater going audiences that have diverse social and cultural experiences. Srinivas further adds that the research is mostly conducted by western theorists and educated middle and upper-class intelligentsia who are not familiar with the aesthetics and demographic that most of the commercial films are aimed towards (Srinivas, 160.) The common assumption that commercial films are made for the masses and the arthouse parallel films are made for the high classes is a misconception among theorists. This endangers the study of spectatorship, as commercial films and their item songs are consumed by everyone in India. Also, it is important to mention that most of the traditionally accepted work done in the field of postcolonial studies which has been canonized, like Frederick Jameson's theory on nationhood being the dominant trope in most of the arts emerging from postcolonial countries, has been questioned by critics like Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad argues that it is vital to eradicate categories like the first, second and third world while looking at literature and other arts emerging from a postcolonial nation. While India has been repeatedly colonized and then imperialized by the Metropolis, Ahmad reveals that the country is preoccupied with other issues such as economic conditions, civil liberties of the lower caste

⁶ The western scholars emphasize on India being an ex-colony and insist on it being slotted to the Third world category. This has affected how Indian films have been viewed and theorized by Western studies, as mostly and only a postcolonial phenomenon.

populations, and women's rights. The impulse of western theorists to conflate civil issues and especially women's rights discourses and classify them under the tropes of national allegory can be problematic⁷. He also states that women's discourses are different and cannot be categorized using the same code words to understand nationhood, and that they are the radically separate "others" (Ahmad.)

It is crucial to date the development of the item number, so we can get a context of how it evolved through decades given that the *mujra* or the courtesan's song has been around since the 1930's. The tragedy of the courtesan is a trend that makes a comeback every decade from *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960), to *Pakeezah* (1972) to *Umrao Jaan* (1981) to the recent *Devdas* (2002). This trend is still popular in most contemporary period films like *Devdas* (2002), remake of *Umrao Jaan* (2006), *Mangal Pandey* (2005). The courtesan is typically abandoned by the hero for the chaste heroine, as the courtesan only serves the function of a shoulder to cry on for the hero who yearns for his lover. Although the courtesan convention makes a comeback often, the dominant tragic courtesan trope changed as the courtesan became more modern and the film settings changed. The courtesan became the vamp and her performance space moved from the king's courtyard as she gyrated in a disco. As more western-looking performers such as Helen and Bindu in the 1960s and 70s played similar roles in most films of that decade, the vamp was type cast. (Kaur, 103.) The vamps of the 70s typically reformed in the end but their western ideals and open sexuality was still what differentiated them from the virginal Indianized heroines. The changing face of the item girl was precisely captured by Jerry Pinto in *Helen: The Life and Times of an H-Bomb*, a biographical project on Helen, the popular cabaret dancer of the

⁷ While most theorists seem preoccupied with India essentially as a postcolonial phenomenon, Indian films have move passed that narrative and display the same or even higher level of sophistication and technology as mainstream Hollywood films.

1960s and 70s. Pinto points out that brothels or *kothas* where the courtesans of early cinema performed⁸ were now replaced by posh hotels with discotheques and dance floors. Pinto suggests that the item number has been recognized and popularized by its title and absorbed in the public discourse only in the last few decades. (Pinto) While the cabaret dancers from the 1960's and 70's had some role in the films, the item girls now make a short appearance only for the song in the film. The trend further started transforming from the 1990's as more of the item numbers were performed by top actresses, where they were typically portrayed as the urban call girl who is just a victim to the circumstances.

Ranjani Mazumdar highlights this element of the changing representations of the 'vamp' to an item girl in her book *Bombay Cinema* by stating that:

The prevalence of certain techniques has become important in the 1990s as the heroine began to occupy the space of the vamp ... the space of the nightclub has today lost its iconic status ... the dances were no longer located in a morally coded space but moved into multiple locations. These fragments negotiate fashion, the female body, dance and music, to present a performance through which a 'spatial relocation of the metropolis occurs. (Mazumdar, 90)

The 90's changed the casting of the item girl as she became more accepted and co-opted even in formulaic Bollywood films and rather than a typecast performer reoccurring in the cabaret songs, the convention became more hybrid. It is quite common in the current Bollywood films to find the A-list actresses making a cameo in films for an item number to promote the marketability of the film.

Finally, this chapter will identify the cultural politics of item songs through popular item girl and ex adult entertainment star Sunny Leone. Born to Punjabi parents in Canada, Sunny Leone was named as Maxim's top 12 porn stars, Penthouse Pet of the year 2003 and a popular

⁸ The courtesans danced the classical *kathak* form of dancing, in their traditional, conservative *anarkali* outfits and sang *urdu* poetry.

performer signed by Vivid Entertainment. Leone entered Bollywood through the Indian version of British reality show Big Brother. Soon, the offers for item songs started pouring in and Sunny became a household name featuring in every big and small Bollywood film in cameo item song appearances. What is fascinating with the Sunny craze is that despite being a porn star, Sunny has been adulated and adored by everyone in India. The 2016 biographical documentary *Mostly Sunny* shows the popularity of Sunny Leone across all classes and masses in India despite her humble beginnings and a lengthy career in adult entertainment. The bizarreness of the popularity of a former porn star thriving in the recent surge of nationalists, conservative Hindu administration is worth diagnosing. Sunny's backstory after all is an odd one; she willingly joined the adult film industry and even made a name for herself. Her career is managed by her spouse, and together they quietly adopted an orphan girl from the impoverished village of Latur and further trumped their audiences as they recently had twin boys through surrogacy. Unconventional, consensual, and untraditional, the life of Sunny Leone provides a fascinating construct for the contemporary item girl. Understanding Sunny's success through her cultural commentary on women's rights and the various examples of #MeToo movement in India, where several item girls were major whistleblowers on the sexual harassment in Bollywood, enables better comprehension of the complexity of the item girl as a feminist icon, challenging patriarchy, and rape culture.

Chapter One: Sexual Politics of Item Songs in India

If a woman enjoys doing a certain thing on screen, it is her prerogative. Men do a lot of vulgar dances too, but they are not condemned. Why do we expect women's morals to be on a higher plane than the men? They do not resonate with today's times. I am not exonerating sexism, but we need to revisit these values and not pass judgement on an ad-hoc basis.

- Sharmila Tagore, Actor.

In as early as the first Indian motion picture *Raja Harishchandra* (1913), male actors were cast to play female roles, because Indian society has always stigmatized the working woman and more so, the female entertainer, as an outcast and impure. When Phalke put out an ad for "Handsome Faces" to play the female roles for the first Indian moving picture, Phalke's call only yielded prostitutes and "dark, ugly and emaciated persons," (Chakravarty, 39) following which Phalke cast a female impersonator to play his female lead. This highlights how colorism and sexism has shaped Indian cinema since its birth. Prior to the motion pictures, the practice of casting fair skinned, effeminate males to play female characters was also carried out in the live theater⁹ and plays, and the only women who turned up to perform in public spaces were prostitutes and women of "foreign" and "Anglo-Indian" descent who were already considered "loose." Kathryn Hansen historicizes this practice of *Stri Bhumika*: Female Impersonators, where males were cast to play females roles because of the stigma connected to acting.

It has been held that because of the stigma connected to acting and the relegation of singing, dancing, and other performance arts to a marginalized courtesan class, 'respectable' women were at an extreme social disadvantage with respect to the stage and were not only unwilling to become actresses but were ill-equipped for its rigors and lacking in skills. (Hansen, 2298)

As Hansen implies the need for courtesan class women has always been crucial to performance arts, where they brought with them a set of skills and experience, that the "respectable" women

⁹ This practice was also present in the live vaudeville theater

from good homes were incapable and untrained to perform. This highlights the historic importance and artistic contributions by the female performers who have a key role in shaping and enhancing Indian cinema.

While contemporary Bollywood has a spectrum of roles for female actors now, the gender expectations and representations are still constructed and perpetuated via the cinematic culture in a problematic manner. This chapter will discuss the sexual politics of item songs within the Indian socio-political context, and the stark subjectivity of the vamp as an ideological opposite of the virgin. At the end of the chapter, I have attached some pictures (in the Artifacts section) from my trip to the National Museum of Indian Cinema, Mumbai which yielded visual support through the historic posters that clearly demarcate the binaries between the vamp and the virgin, through visual and narrative representation. To understand the politics of the subject and the spectator, we need to diagnose the gender performativity and the body politics that shape the item girl as a vamp, an outsider within Indian society and cinema, and as a "villain vs. the (heroine) victim."

Sexuality, like gender roles, is also represented subversively and symbolically in Bollywood films, such as when two flowers meet covering the hero and heroine's faces, it is implying a lip-to-lip kiss. A thunderclap on a rainy night implies the consummation between the two lovers, never actually divulging any literal images of intercourse or even foreplay. However, foreplay is often indicated with a song. Take *Aradhana* (1969) for example, where Rajesh Khanna serenades Sharmila Tagore, who is drenched from the rain, and is drying herself in front of the fire to *Roop Tera Mastana, Pyar Mera Deewana, bhool koi humse na ho jaye* (Translation: Your intoxicating beauty is driving me crazy and I might commit a grave sin), they "sin" at the end of the song, as implied by the loud thunderclaps. The implication of sex, indicated by the

song, is to invoke the spectator's desire and imagination and is a part of the consciousness of the Indian film viewer.

The absence of direct sexual imagery and even the lack of a kiss from a typical Bollywood film, is Indian-izing a medium like cinema, and is connotative of the general attitude about maintaining the "purity" of the film for "family"¹⁰ audiences. A "*sanskari*"¹¹ Bollywood masala film is the one that you can watch with your friends, grandparents, kids and appeals to the sensibilities of a diverse spectrum of audiences and in short, is a "clean" film. The uneasiness of placing a kiss in a Bollywood film lies in India's cultural yearning for indigenizing (and *sanskari-izing*) the cinematic medium, by preserving its Indianness from Western symbolisms such as loose women (vamps) and open sexuality. Sangita Gopal points out that it is not that Indians do not kiss, but that they must not do that in public. This is because the public and the cinematic kiss is prohibited and policed by state actors such as censor officials, who regulate popular culture and modernity to align with India's hyper nationalism and feudal patriarchal norms. Gopal argues that despite cinema being an important agent of modernizing masses and reflecting realism, by cutting out the depiction of sexuality as a suggestive and symbolic imagery, the state subversively interferes with its production and instead uses cinema for promoting hyper nationalism and gender misrepresentation (Gopal, 167). For cinema to reflect reality, it must be listed under the genre of "Parallel Cinema" or art-house films that reflect depressing realities of gender inequality in grim ways and gritty tints. Subversive visuals and messages, including nudity and sex scenes are typically reserved for the alternate cinema and not a mainstream Bollywood blockbuster film. The on-screen kiss, however, is becoming more

¹⁰ "Family audiences" is a term many filmmakers use to describe a "clean" film, free of any sexual content.

¹¹ *Sanskari* simply means well- cultured. However, in recent times, the election of the right-wing Hindu supremacist political party BJP, has led to the "*sanskari-zation*" of cinema with stricter censorship and witch hunt of filmmakers with anti-national sentiments.

normalized and mainstream in Bollywood films, and makes for an interesting representational artifact that needs to be diagnosed in understanding how sexuality is regulated in India via the cinematic apparatus.

Kissing in public has been a sticky subject for Indians and is considered very culturally inappropriate in India. Growing up in Mumbai, youngsters like me were required to be innovative in finding quiet places to go spend time with our partners (to kiss) from fear of being policed, both morally and literally. During one such instance, my fiancé and I were harassed by a man claiming to be a police officer (dressed in civil clothes,) threatening to book us under public indecency. We were simply sitting on the hood of the car and chatting, and yet the man proceeded to shame me for being a loose woman for sitting with a man and tried to extort money from us 19-year-old kids, else he would call our parents. Capturing this witch hunt and harassment, Annavarapu dismantles the cultural politics of public kissing and other displays of affection by asking the crucial question, “Where do lovers go?” (...to kiss). Exploring the cartographic demarcations of the sexual landscapes in Mumbai, where do couples go to find seclusion (in a city of 22 million people), and share an intimate moment, a kiss? Annavarapu locates these spaces as “haunted houses¹² which are often secluded beaches, shady motels and under deserted bridges. Interestingly, these spaces are also hotbeds for “Gangs Terrorizing Couples,” who make a lucrative business by robbing, sexually assaulting women and extorting money out of the couples. (Annavarapu ,410) Apart from the horrific vulnerability to violence, these couples face a lot of shame for indulging in “American behavior” in public (Sharma). Leading nationalist political party in Mumbai called Shiv Sena, responsible for inciting the 1993 Mumbai communal riots, are also notorious for brutally beating up and arresting couples

¹² A common expression in Indian English that refers to cat-calling and harassing women in the streets. A very common cultural occurrence in India.

celebrating Valentine's Day, which is considered the epitome of the shameless Western culture according to the Shiv Sainik political terrorists. Under Modi and Yogi Adityanath 's administration, problematic policies such as the anti-Romeo squads and Love Jihad continue to terrorize young couples and especially target inter-faith (Hindu-Muslim) lovers to further their casteist and Islamophobic agenda in India.

Similar anti-Western sensibilities towards public displays of affection are echoed and reflected through the cinematic apparatus. Dismantling the lack of direct depictions of sexuality in Bollywood films, Sangita Gopal reflects on the climax of Danny Boyle's British (not Indian, nor Bollywood) film, *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) -- where the hero and heroine first share a brief lip-to-lip kiss and then abruptly break away for "Jai Ho" a full throttle Bollywood style song and dance sequence. This is purposeful, according to Gopal, where Boyle is paying homage to Bollywood's vehicle of sexuality: the song and dance sequence, juxtaposed alongside the literal Western kiss. (Gopal, 160) The song exemplifies the direct and indirect intimacy in what Mumbai/Bollywood chronicler Jerry Pinto describes as "unreal in the rational sense – no hundred-piece orchestra plays when two people fall in love, nor can a woman walking through a cemetery be audible to everyone simultaneously in a huge mansion – but certainly not meaningless in its symbolic reality" (Pinto, 103). The replacement of a kiss with a song and dance sequence in Bollywood, is in fact hinting towards a lack of autonomy from the repressive societal and familial expectations of young lovers. The couple in a Bollywood film seeks refuge in a fantasy song and dance sequence, which often takes place in a separate temporal and spatial landscape, breaking away from reality. (Pinto, 154) This suggestiveness and implication of a kiss or a sex scene, when analyzed through a Foucauldian framework, creates a productive tension or a "coitus interruptus", as Lalitha Gopalan deems it. These interruptions or substitutions to the

kiss, according to Gopalan, are enhancing the spectator's pleasure and reaping the profits that a Bollywood song adds to its box office collections (Gopalan, 128).

While the subversive kiss is meant to tease the audience and to appease the hyper nationalist state, ironically, India also is one of the leading consumers of pornography, where cyber pornography distributed and accessed at Cyber Cafes is becoming an increasing problem. Through the Information Technology Amendment Act, 2008, the Indian government is trying to regulate these spaces and cafes where the Indian youth, mostly male, frequent to access pornography. (Verma, 69) Unpacking this tension of hyper conservative attitudes clashing with technology (especially the internet and mobile phones), Gopalan Ravindran claims that this type of conflict leads to a moral panic. Catalyzed by Deleuze's notion of a control society and Foucault's disciplinary society, Ravindran explains moral panic as an attempt to control images through an institutionalized panopticon consisting of state, repressive and religious apparatuses. Constructing the images of youth corrupted by technology, as "folk devils" armed with mobiles, moral panic is typically circulated among primary and secondary definers¹³ who fret about modernization. (Ravindran, 98) The onset of modernity, marked by technology, has shaped the public and the private politics of expressing sexuality, especially with globalization and the entrance of satellite television in India in the 1990's. While throngs of cinemagoers religiously spectated the spectacular Bollywood new releases in the theaters, the 1990's altered and privatized this public spectatorship, when cable and satellite television entered most homes, opening people's periphery to transnational media such as MTV, FTV and *Baywatch*¹⁴. While

¹³ These strata of Indians can be compared to the Baby Boomers, Republican demographic of the United States. The middle class, Savarna Brahmin (upper caste) Indians that hold positions in government office shape the sensibilities of socio-political issues and morally police the millennials.

¹⁴ *Baywatch* was considered as the ultimate artifact of corrupting the youth in the 1990s. Restricting children from having cable television became the common form of regulating the youth in middle class homes. Middle class Indian values are often positioned as the gatekeepers and perpetrators of traditional patriarchy and casteism.

this wreaked an anxiety about the Westernization and corruption of Indian-ness, it also invoked curiosities of the expanding middle class, who influenced the consumer trends for Western commodities. The transnational media reconfigured the Indian cultural production of sexuality in the 1990s as this decade was transformative for television shows, pop songs and Bollywood films. (Purnima Mankekar, 407) Additionally, the diaspora shaped the communal moralities, as Indians migrated to Western countries, on and off-screen¹⁵, bastardizing the so-called “pure” Indian traditions.

Women who Kiss

The kiss, however, remained ambivalent, and almost selective in its appearance. While most Bollywood’s celebs confessed on the popular show *Koffee with Karan*, that they would enact a kiss on-screen only if it were shot “aesthetically”¹⁶, most of the A-listers still refrain from the career-killing kiss. B-grade Bollywood films, however, acquired a special demographic for their hit item numbers and ample kisses. Filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt’s nepotistic product *Emraan Hashmi*, often cast opposite struggling models who are willing to bare it all, made a career out of his Bollywood sexy thriller films, where he earned the epithet “Serial Kisser.” *Emraan Hashmi*’s forceful and “un-aesthetically shot” kiss in *Tumsa Nahin Dekha* (2004) is a stellar example of the portrayal of a smooch in contemporary Bollywood films, as a B-grade and raucous move to sensationalize and popularize an otherwise mediocre film. The plot for *Hashmi*’s film, revolved around the brash hero rescuing the fallen stripper and item girl, the apparatus for schooling her is mostly always a forceful kiss, claiming his ownership over her body. The kiss here is used as a tool to not only add sleaze to the film, but also used by the filmmaker to exploit struggling

¹⁵ This 90s trend started by Bollywood honchos Karan Johar and Yash Chopra started portraying transnational love stories of Indian diaspora living abroad and longing for their nation and authentic Indian love.

¹⁶ A loosely- defined and recurring repertoire in Bollywood fraternity’s dialogue on kissing and intimacy on screen

actresses who are willing to participate in their own subjugation due to the unimaginable competition in the Bollywood film industry. Bollywood actresses are constantly expected to reinvent their bodies to keep up with the competition where an item song or a kiss is used to shock and revive slowing film careers. An item song can be a vehicle for the heroines to feature their new weight loss¹⁷, to make a comeback after a long hiatus,¹⁸ to increase the marketability of a film¹⁹ or to stay relevant in the film industry after marriage or a baby. Additionally, the trend of trash Bollywood films in the early 2000s not only normalized the Bollywood kiss but they came to segregate the actors, those who kiss and those who do not. The younger, more hip actors were okay with a kiss, Salman Khan and the older ones still have not kissed on-screen even once, just like we have never seen our parents' kiss.

On-screen sexuality and item songs are often portrayed together in conjunction as a strategy to revive weak films and are now becoming important ingredients of the Bollywood formula film. Coincidentally, a kiss, like an item song, is not only used to revive an average Bollywood film's box office success, but also several heroine's careers. The models and actors are then assorted into a hierarchy of virgin vs. vamp, the good heroine vs. the bad heroine. The bad heroine, or the vamp earns the categorization because of her kissing scenes and item songs, which map the heroine's decline into a B-grade actor or a full-time item girl. Take Mallika Sherawat for example, who debuted with 17 on-screen smooches in her first film and was

¹⁷ See Katrina Kaif's every song. But specifically, "Suraiya" from *Thugs of Hindostan* (2018), where the entire focus was on her slender waist and newly acquired abs.

¹⁸ See Shilpa Shetty's "Shut up and Bounce" from *Dostana* (2008) after her "Big Boss" UK win. Her newly trim figure launched her as a popular item girl and then a popular dance reality show judge.

¹⁹ Alia Bhatt's item song "Hook Up Song" from *Student of the Year 2* which launched two debutantes. Alia's cameo song became very popular and boosted the sales of the film, since casting debutantes is always a risk for film producers.

typecast in hypersexualized B-grade films as an item girl. Describing the vamp Mallika Sherwat as an antithesis to the virginal heroine Aishwarya Rai (Ash), Kennedy writes:

During interviews, rather than fluttering her eyelids modestly at the camera, as do Ash and the other pious virgin types, she makes suggestive comments about her “male friends.” Mallika will never be cast as the innocent girl in a moralistic coming-of-age blockbuster – Bollywood audiences would not find that believable – but she does not need such roles. She has proved that it is possible, even in Bollywood, to be a vamp and be successful. (Kennedy, 56)

While the upward mobility occurs occasionally, where vamps and item girls get a breakthrough “serious” Bollywood role, Bollywood royalty such as star-kids and other nepotistic products are an exception, and rarely make the downward mobility from A-list stars to item girls. This remarkable machinery of labeling performers, especially female, into categories based on their level of comfort kissing and exposing their skin on screen is then remodeling the idea of bifurcating gender representations in vamp vs. virgin. Using the theory of Madonna vs. Whore complex will assist in examining the subjectivity and sexual politics of the vamp and item girl against the virginal chaste heroine, as a popular Bollywood trope. Expanding on the concept Shoaib Daniyal writes:

Bollywood is probably the single greatest display of what, in psychoanalytic literature, is referred to as the Madonna-Whore Complex. Coined by Freud, the term refers to the idea that divides women into two mutually exclusive categories: saintly “Madonnas” and debased “whores.” Madonnas are “good girls”: virtuous, pure, innocent and, like their namesake, virginal, almost to the point of being asexual. Given their almost childlike nature, “Madonnas” almost always are subservient to men, who protect and care for them. “Whores,” on the other hand, are independent, sexual beings not afraid to aggressively express their desires and, curiously, have a temperament very similar to that expected of men (Daniyal.)

This creates space for discourse on the role of women performing private and sexual labor in public spaces as debased women vs. the private woman who enjoys patriarchal protections of the hero. While one stem of this discourse dismisses item songs as purely sexist infrastructures, the other branch is invested in exploring the sexual agency and independence of

women who have found a way to demand compensation for providing intimate labor to men, in a culture heavily dictated by patriarchy.

Vamp vs. Virgin

Exploring the depiction of sexuality in Bollywood is tricky, especially given its intertextuality, where the kiss and the sexual tension is denoted by the symbolic song; and yet, when the kiss does take place, it is most often initiated or forced by the mostly brash hero. The female sexuality, as it appears in Bollywood films, is mostly absent, as Rita Banerji states:

Sex is not the real glitch in the stagnant embattled lovers plot, nor is male sexuality. The idea that is unpalatable to Indian films, is the same one that Indian society cannot digest: that of female sexuality as a woman's independent identity and choice. The real villain in India's unyielding 'love' plot is India's patriarchy which needs to reduce women to sexual objects, to then place within whatever context serves the patriarchy's need and hierarchical power structure. (Banerji, 20)

Banerji's work specifically focuses on Bollywood's unease with female sexuality which has resulted in the dormant, desexualized virginal Bollywood heroine. The confusion, according to Banerji, is created by the item song, which displays female sexuality, but is entirely, "Served up as an item, a commodity for the male audience's consumption, and to gross money at the box office, but it is almost never acknowledged or allowed an acceptable expression in the female protagonists' role and character definition." (Banerji, 25) Rendering the item girl powerless, Banerji and several other critics deem the item song as an item, served up to cater to the heterosexual male audience's appetite. In that case, locating and placing power in the item song as the redistribution of sexual power and domination can prove to be challenging, but also needs to be investigated. Using body and sexual politics, examining the role of the item girl as an antithesis to the hyper conservative subjectivity of the mainstream Bollywood heroine will help redistribute the sexual power from the male hero's hands to the mostly female item girl, who not only controls the gaze but also takes ownership of it and makes a profit from it.

The bifurcation of the pure virgin and the impure vamp can be clearly seen in the classic love story “Devadas,” about a wealthy Brahmin man who gets rejected by his childhood love. He spirals downwards into a fatal alcohol addiction and is cared for by the gold hearted courtesan who loves him blindly, despite his humiliations and bigotry. The Devdas narrative has been adapted in several films and plays and been re-enacted in several modern ways. Take the 2002 melodramatic magnum opus adaptation directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, which shows Devdas as an arrogant, Brahmin, elite who finds pleasure venting his frustrations and rage from rejections on the tragic courtesan Chandramukhi. He calls her “*Baazaru*” (a public commodity for sale) and treats her like an untouchable until his health fails and she must care for him, and therefore touch him. In each version of the retelling of this story, Devadas rejects and humiliates her for status as a sex worker, thereby making Chandramukhi a continued symbol of tolerance, heartbreak, and ultimate sacrifice in Indian narrative. In some more contemporary versions like the (2009) adaptation *Dev D*, directed by Anurag Kashyap, the story is reversed and Dev returns to Chandramukhi and accepts her eternal love, but not before rejecting her for being “impure” first.

On the contrary, Bollywood's quintessential heroine is the Madonna, symbolizing purity and chastity. Through song lyrics, costume, narrative symbolisms and sometimes direct reference, the heroine's chastity is implied. The heroine's location and social affiliations within a Bollywood film's narrative guarantee her the protection of the hero, the family and society. Jerry Pinto elaborates on this by bringing our attention to the paraphernalia and appendages that make up an assemblage of the item girl. Pinto writes:

In almost everything that has been written about the vamps of Hindi cinema, there has been a tendency to reduce the figure of the bad girl to a caricature. Her story as seen as the Progress of Harlot; she fell, she smoked, she drank, she danced, she smuggled, she smuggled, she died. (Pinto, 84)

Pinto's analysis is important to demarcate the vamp's position as an outsider, where her lifestyle and career designate her as an immoral gangster's moll or a bar dancer, one that does not fit into the frames of heteronormative or respectful lifestyle (See Fig.1 in Artifacts). Unlike the vamp, the virginal heroine is to be touched only by her hero and only realistic parallel/ arthouse films mix tropes of the fallen, raped, unprotected woman as the protagonist or the contemporary of the hero. In the example of Devdas, discussed above, Paro is depicted as the virginal Madonna and Chandramukhi's ideological opposite, who saves herself emotionally and physically for her childhood love Devdas, only to be married off, against her wishes, to an old widowed feudal lord. She spends her life trapped in a loveless patriarchal marriage. Unlike the tragic courtesan, she is continued to be economically protected by patriarchy when she marries the wealthy widower but is not able to love Devdas as freely as Chandramukhi. The deification of the heroine as a pure and pious Madonna figure is problematic given India's relationship to rape and gender violence, which subtly suggests that to be protected from gendered violence, women must adhere to patriarchal bargains.

To elaborate further on the narrative contributions made by the vamp and the virgin, the key framing of the next section will focus on the body and sexual politics of item songs and understanding the progression of the hypersexualized item girl in globalized Bollywood. This hyper-sexualization was almost abrupt, where the item girl was reduced to merely an object to add glamor to the film without any narrative contributions and her appearance was only reduced to the song. Early films created the space for a vamp to add narrative tension, for example the tragic courtesan with a heart of gold, or the cigarette smoking cabaret dancer etc. who is trying to woo the hero away from the heroine. However, the modern item girl is merely assigned a formula hit song for the success of commercial Bollywood film, which often plays in the end

with credits, or is released separately as a trailer. Due to the reduction of the item girl's role in comparison to the early vamp, critics have reduced the item girl to a hypersexualized object without narrative or cultural significance. However, the modern item girl is more than a formulaic component of commercial Bollywood and there needs to be an acknowledgement of the item song as the hit song that pulls audiences to the theaters.

The Desexualized Heroine vs. The Feminist Killjoy Item Girl

Jessica Valenti's groundbreaking work on understanding a cultural obsession with women's virginity describes the purity myth as:

[...] the lie that women's sexuality has some bearing on who we are and how good we are. Because really, I think that we all know that young women are so much more than whether or not they have sex. We really should be teaching our daughters that their ability to be good people is based on their intelligence, their compassion, their kindness – not what they do with their bodies. (Valenti, 23)

While Valenti's work primarily focuses on the cultural productions of virginity-fetishization particularly in the United States, this analysis of the Virginity Industrial Complex as explained above is an important framework to understand the bifurcation between Purity vs. Promiscuity manufactured via the vamp vs. virgin binary in Bollywood. The obsession with virginity projected through the desexualized, virginal Bollywood heroine is not divorced from reality and is also reflected through the matrimonial market in India, where virginity is an important contract in most arranged as well as love marriages. While Bollywood is successfully perpetuating the virginity fetish through its plot that restores the heroine's place as the hero's prized possession, the item girl subversively rejects his interests and therefore his ideologies. The vamp not only acts as an opposition for heteronormative virginal myth but is also an incubator for queer subcultures. The dancer's fluidity expressed through her role reversal, power play and sexual fluidity has made her an icon for the queer community. Like Lady Gaga and Beyonce, her

mystical outfits, the spectacle and drama of her glamour and most importantly her top chartbuster hits are an important apparatus for expressing gender fluidity in queer communities. Queer spaces such as underground gay clubs orchestrate their elaborate drag shows to item songs. For example, popular South Asian drag artist who goes by the drag name LaWhore Vagistan (after Lahore, Pakistan) writes about the item girl as an icon for queer communities. Referring to the enormous influence of item songs in queer dance parties, where everyone grooves to Bollywood's dancing legend Madhuri Dixit's item song *Choli ke Peeche kya hai?* (What's underneath your blouse?) (Khubchandani, 69).

The association of the item girl as a queer figure is a fascinating dynamic of collaboration between queer communities and women, where both are actively fighting the Indian hetero-patriarchal system by collaborating. The item girl as an icon for queer communities, and a feminist killjoy is directly opposing the nation and its cultural expectations from women. The item girl as an ideological opponent of nationalism, propaganda and gender inequality then becomes a powerful figure to inspect during the rise of feminism in India especially after the Delhi gang-rape, where item songs were scape-goated for the rise of sexual assaults in the country. The Delhi gang-rape makes for an interesting artifact to understand these sexual politics in India. The politics of dealing with a public tragedy such as Jyoti Singh's gruesome rape and murder echoes sentiments of people comparing her to their daughter, mother, or sister. Paternalizing and placing familial value on Jyoti, places her among the patriarchal protections that virgins and Madonnas occupy, as opposed to the countless sex workers whose rapes and sexual assaults do not gain the same media attention.

Calling our attention to this divide, Jerry Pinto describes the vamp vs. virgin trope as a deep chasm, where the moralities of both are opposites. In describing the classic Bollywood

vamp, Pinto first establishes the figure as a sticky construction, one that cannot be distinguished as ‘a monolith of evil.’ Pinto wants to, however, separate the vamp from an item girl, a comparison that he deems nonsensical as the latter is merely an accessory for invoking male desire and being a visual spectacle without any narrative contribution (Pinto, 86.)

Although Pinto’s argument appeals to Mulvey’s theory of male gaze, Pinto fails to address how the entire Bollywood industry’s neoliberal, post nineties, globalized cinema has minimized the role of supporting characters to maximize the portrayal of hero-oriented formula films. The vamp has thus also been shrunk into the item girl who simply makes a song related guest appearance in the film and does not play a part in the narrative as the vamp of yesteryear Bollywood cinema did. The cinematic ratios shrunk the role of the hero's mother and sister, whose prominence in the early cinema revolved around validating the hero’s roots and origins and their absence creates more cinematic space for the larger-than-life Bollywood heroes. Pinto does however place the vamp at “an alternate moral pole in the cinematic universe whose center was the hero... as the epitome of destructive femininity, she [the vamp] threw into prominence the virtue of the other women, chiefly the heroine [the virgin]” (Pinto, 86.)

While the Bollywood heroine has been reduced to a mere decoration to the hero’s narrative, the vamp too has been simmered down to an item girl and both their representations have become hyper-feminized. The hero-centric plot has become so hyper-masculinized and hero-centric that recent films such as *Dabangg 3* (2019) have the hero Salman Khan performing an item song and replacing the item girl by wanting to monetize on these popular dance songs. As will be discussed in the following chapter, several casting agents confirm that although item girls get paid little for their feature in the film, more money is made from performing their mega hit songs live, at events such as award nights, dance tours and even wealthy people’s

weddings²⁰ Thus, the demand and growing popularity for item songs has led to the hybridization of the heroine as well as the hero, both of whom now double as the “item,” competing to be served up to the audience. Despite the popularity, the item girl representation remains a controversial one, in this case the hypersexualized images of dancing women cause an uneasiness and moral panic in the Indian conservative class.

The Scapegoating of Item songs

Every society’s culture and legal politics are shaped by an event that incites a purge in its people. The nature of the event in turn shapes and influences the purge. The institutional and emotional purging of anxieties, incited by the gruesome Delhi gang-rape, was fueled by suspicion and led to an overall radicalization in the gender politics of surveillance and security. In contemporary times, public tragedies such as Delhi gang-rape or even 9/11 can be looked at as events that invited public responses and discourses that affected policy and subsequently people’s living conditions. For example, the United States experienced a surge of white hyper nationalism, institutional racism, and Islamophobia via micro-aggressive surveilling of brown people at airports and other oppressive spaces after 9/11. The very nationalist framing of 9/11 as a public tragedy and an attack on the United States and American freedoms shaped modern politics and policies. Similarly, the 2012 Delhi gang rape of medical student Jyoti Singh influenced and shaped the feminist discourses and the women's rights movement in India. While rape and other forms of sexual and gendered crimes are common in India, a society divided by religious bigotry and founded on traditional patriarchy, the horrific nature of the Delhi gang rape nauseated the population that was already in search of a massive purge and item girls seemed like a perfect scapegoat.

²⁰ Beyonce’ performed live at billionaire Mukhesh Ambani’s daughter’s wedding. Several top Bollywood stars such as Katrina Kaif and Shahrukh Khan are regular performers at billionaire weddings.

Before we delve into analyzing the ways that the people coped with this tragedy, I find it important to mention my own experience with the “Nirbhaya” gang rape. I left the United States for my wedding on the morning of 16th December, after some 24+ hours of traveling; I was greeted by my family with sullen faces. As we walked towards the car, I saw several candlelit vigils and posters pasted all over the city. These sights became increasingly common as the days leading to the court hearing of the rape case approached. The people had taken to the streets to burn effigies of the rapists, protest the rape laws and the status of women in the country and were also demanding immediate action by the law-and-order system to give the severest punishments to the rapists. At this point, it is important to ask some questions which would help us analyze the aftermath of the “Nirbhaya” case: why had Jyoti’s rape case gained so much attention? As most of the news sources reported and the citizen’s knowledge of a woman’s status in India, rape was a common occurrence in India and yet why had this solitary case shocked the nation? Was it the gruesome details of the rape that initiated this response, or was it because Jyoti was a girl next door, a female student aspiring to be a doctor to help the poor and treat them for free? Was she more vulnerable now because she was returning home from a movie and not a nightclub? To address these questions or attempt to answer them, it is crucial to study public behavior in the lieu of this tragedy. What were the media reactions, specifically the rage towards item songs and consequently how it affected the legal response towards this case in post-colonial India? A media response analysis is important to understand the scapegoating of item girls to negotiate with the horrific gang-rape and how the popular Bollywood convention became controversial and problematized.

In their article “The Politics of Negotiating Public Tragedy” Ott and Aoki use the Burkean framework of symbolic action to talk about the public discourse and media framing of a

tragedy which helps people with “coming to terms” and dealing with a tragedy. The story, as framed by news and other discourses, carries various meanings often leading to existential questions about policies, politics, and their status in society. Simply, how does that tragedy affect them and what are the measures taken to ensure that they will be protected from such a tragedy (Ott & Aoki, 2002.) Using Ott and Aoki’s structure will help in identifying some of the behaviors in the aftermath of the gang-rape such as scapegoating item songs for inciting rape.

The national identity of India in the global news coverage was challenged after the 2012 Delhi gang rape of medical student Jyoti Singh. The horrific details of the rape unfolded in front of the entire world as India looked for ways to deal with the public tragedy. The victim Jyoti Singh, whose name could not be revealed when the case first came out, was given the moniker “Nirbhaya” or the fearless one by the media to show her as symbolizing the fearless martyr fighting against gendered crimes in India. The name giving becomes an interesting apparatus in this case, to console and nurse people’s anxieties in times of sensational public tragedies.

The insurgence of PSAs, female centric films and anti-rape campaigns made a breakthrough in media discourses as the rape case gained more attention. Celebrities and public figures lent their names to the anti-rape campaigns such as ‘It is not your fault’ by Kalki Koechlin and Juhi Pandey, ‘MARD: Men Against Rape and Discrimination’ by Farhan Akhtar who urged other Bollywood superstars to lend their names to the campaign etc. These discourses were leading to a wave of activism and initiated amplified responses by the citizens. Among these various politics of negotiating with the public tragedy of the Delhi gang rape, item songs came under fire for objectifying women in Bollywood films and contributing to the atmosphere of gender inequality. The Nirbhaya rape case became a crucial event to dismantle gender

relations and reactions to gender crimes in India and the item song a perfect artefact to blame media for the violence against women.

One of those crucial coping mechanisms to deal with the Delhi gang-rape was people and media's response to women's representation in Hindi cinema. But the stickiness in assigning blame to item songs as the vehicle of perpetuating rape culture comes from the complexities of its viewership and its rich cultural heritage in cinematic traditions. The study of spectatorship is difficult as these songs are consumed by all demographics and even integrated in familial spaces and events such as weddings. They have not only become formulaic in commercial Bollywood films but have also become heteronormative to the spectators. The sex and sensuousness of these songs is often turned up because it does not shock the spectators anymore and the songs have become more dance and performance oriented than their earlier versions. Although new discourse emerged after the 2012 Delhi gang rape, several women, intellectuals, and activists voiced their concerns about item songs and the negative influences it has on the depiction of women in Hindi films, despite its continued mass production and consumption. This discourse was important because for the first-time actresses and former item girls gained agency and a public platform to voice their concerns against or in support of this representation. Even though they only make a short appearance for their item numbers in the films, they are celebrities with a huge fan following and are a large attraction to pull the crowds to cinema halls (See Figure 2).

The body politics for the vamp and the item girl, which frames the hyper-sexualization of the public women under patriarchy, and in turn allows for and justifies their subjugation regularly, is an important trajectory in understanding the subjectivity of item girls. Most importantly, the production of the item girl as a vamp and a contrast to the virgin, creates the dangerous binary, which, dictated by communal morality, bifurcates women as either pure or

impure. The burden of purity and chastity is used to manufacture the vamp as the outsider who cannot be controlled by patriarchy, must be punished, and scapegoated (See Figure 3). The recurring trope of the item girl as a public property is often reflected through the item song where a lone girl dances for throngs of men, as they grab her, dangerously mimicking gang rape fantasies. (Nagpal) This then not only justifies her bodily subjugation but also makes scapegoating the item girl easy, especially for provoking men to rape. The two essential elements while understanding the sexual politics of item songs are: a) how they came to be scapegoated for contributing to the gender crimes such as the Delhi gang-rape and, b) the production of the item girl as a hypersexualized being, outside of patriarchal bargains and protections and as an antithesis to the desexualized virginal heroine. Cynthia Enlow writes about these bargains in her work “The Big Push: Exposing and Challenging the Persistence of Patriarchy”:

Patriarchy’s workings are not automatically rejected by women and girls. There are many rewards bestowed on a woman who finds ways to fit into a patriarchal system: marital economic security. Societal respectability; even occasionally state honors. The woman who does not rebel against patriarchy will be complimented on her beauty, on her femininity, on her loyalty (as a daughter, a wife, a secretary); she will be praised for her endurance, her good sense, her domestic skills, her maternal devotion. Her sexual appeal, her caring sacrifice, her patriotism (Enlow, 49.)

The anti-rape rhetoric framed by the media mostly tended to villainize item songs, which led to the public redirecting their anxieties about the rising sexual violence not exactly towards patriarchal policy but more so towards the portrayal and objectification of women in Bollywood films and sometimes the item girls themselves. While this may seem logical and comforting; scapegoating the film and entertainment industries for incidents of sexual violence against women is but a singular approach to the wide scope of growing problems in a massively neo liberalized country governed by a hyper conservative government. Instead, attention should be directed towards the intersections of class, caste, religion, history, and socio-political

infrastructures and how they create power structures that have profited from the subjugation and abuse of women, despite the discomfort this may bring. For example, in Indian mythology, wars and conflicts were often avenged through rape; women were sometimes bartered as commodities to protect men's honor, masculinity, and property. Both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, the great Indian epics, are centered around the rape of Draupadi and the kidnapping of Sita as the triggers for epic wars. The woman as a property of patriarchy, privatizes and regulates her body, sexuality, and emotions. The depiction or the lack of depicting sexual agency and autonomy in women such as Draupadi and Sita have helped carve the trope of the ever-suffering desexualized, virginal, and chaste heroines of Bollywood.

The scapegoating of Bollywood, especially item songs as a sole reason for objectification of women then becomes a crucial coping mechanism to deal with the Delhi gang-rape. But the stickiness in assigning blame to item songs as the vehicle of perpetuating rape culture comes from the complexities of its viewership, as discussed above. The interactive and performative architecture of social media apps such as Tik-Tok, Snapchat and Instagram are not only becoming vehicles for item song dancers and choreographers to democratize their talent but also collaborate with their fans for performances, making item songs wildly popular. Item girls like Nora Fatehi, Elli Avram²¹ and even veteran item girl Rakhi Sawant are wildly popular for doing Instagram live talkbacks and collab performance via Tik Tok with their fans, of all ages.

The popularity of item songs is not only determined by their ever-growing demand for formulaic appearances in commercial Bollywood films but have also become heteronormative and casual to the spectators. The sex and sensuousness of these songs is often turned up because it does not shock the desensitized spectators anymore. Consequently, the news media and

²¹ Elli Avram is the latest in the line to come out with #MeToo allegations against Bollywood directors.

intellectual discourse post the Delhi gang-rape tended to scapegoat item songs for the negative influences it has on the depiction of women in Hindi films. However, item songs not only continue to be in high demand but are also mass produced. Additional discourses on item songs brought the agents to the forefront, where the actresses and former item girls are always adding to the dialogue surrounding item songs. While some actresses are vocally against item songs, most contemporary item girls such as Nora Fatehi dismiss the baiting by disassociating the sleazy aspect and focusing on the performative aspect of item songs. In an all-exclusive interview, Fatehi parallels item song dancers to Beyonce' and Jennifer Lopez, stating that "They don't look at the item songs as sexy, titillating numbers but they look at it as heavy, high-octane dance numbers." Like many other item girls, Fatehi too is a foreigner and an industry outsider, hailing from a Moroccan Canadian descent as she states in her interview:

For an outsider, it is difficult to survive in this industry, which is common knowledge for everybody. If you don't have a good network then finding the right opportunities, and convincing people to take your audition is very hard. And then you're bullied at the auditions, and even duped by casting agents. On one hand, you are competing with other outsiders, some of who are very good-looking and talented, and on the other hand, you have to compete with industry kids, star kids, and also their cousins. It is a scary and intimidating world... (Sinha)

Performers like Fatehi are a rage among fans where, even though they only make a short appearance for their item numbers in the films, they are celebrities with a large fan following and are hugely successful. Former item song dancers and choreographers such as Shilpa Shetty, Sunny Leone and Remo are popular household names as reality dance show judges for shows like the "... Got Talent" series which mostly highlight people dancing to item songs.

The cultural soft power exerted via Bollywood has an enormous impact on Indian audiences where people idolize Bollywood celebs, and the film industry is a huge economic and cultural contributor. Despite that, filmmakers have always been stifled by the censor boards

(CBFC) who used film for propaganda by controlling the images that oppose the conservative right ideology dominating Indian politics. Their main rhetoric is always pointed towards preserving the cultural and traditional values of the country because depictions of sexuality are anti-Indian and Western. Moral panic and policing were especially imposed even more heavily starting from the 1990's with the arrival of cable television, as the state television channels were more regulated and mostly showed educational and cultural programs. MTV was considered a bigger threat than the national cable channels and was accused of invading Indian culture with their Western ideals (Bose 78.)

Similarly, item songs too became problematized not only by conservative nationalists but also by progressive Indian elite feminists, who are pushing towards the complete removal of item songs from Bollywood films. At the same time, academics like Nijhawan argue that while this type of discourse is useful, it is also detrimental to overall feminist film criticism as the women in these item numbers are approaching desire and sexuality in non-traditional ways. While situated for male gaze, shifting the perspective towards the item girl as a performer, who is challenging the trope of the disempowered and desexualized Bollywood heroine, is crucial to be investigated. These women are not chaste, desexualized Bollywood 'wives' according to Nijhawan, but talented dancers who are not simply objectified and subjected to the male gaze but are adored and admired by all spectrums of audiences across all classes, genders, and age groups (Nijhawan,106.)

The stigma associated with the female public performer transcends the cinematic representation and is exaggerated towards women in the line of exotic dancing in the dance bars of India. While reel life item girls have large support from their fans, the real-life public dancers or bar dancers as they are referred to in India, remain marginalized and ostracized. After the

2005 ban on dance bars²² The whole question of morality and hypocrisy was raised as displaced bar dancers were banned from protesting on the streets of Mumbai. The main rhetoric of their protest was why were the bar dancers being displaced under the guise of moral policing when the same scenarios were being depicted in films and so much revenue was being made from their on-screen depictions and representations? Their protest posters showed pictures of Bollywood item girls with slogans like, “Same dances, same dresses; film stars celebrated, bar dancers despised” and “We are only imitating those you admire!” This was the beginning of the discussion of morality and item songs. (Agnes, 10) This hypocrisy is detrimental to assess how women are treated in films vs. in society.

While elite feminists demand the complete banishment of item songs from Bollywood, they pledge no solidarity and resources towards the upliftment of sex workers and bar dancers in India. They are stripped of their agency and identity under the guise of moral policing. And while the moral police often lash out at the item girls for disrupting the Indian traditions and culture, the hypocrisy is evident in how the sex workers remain underrepresented and marginalized in the Indian society. However, in recent times, the Supreme Court overturned the 2005 ban on dance bars in Mumbai and have allowed dance bars to operate legally, after as close to 150,000 workers, women, were displaced and left unemployed. (Gopinath) The frequent displacement and vulnerability of women in sex work and public entertainment ties directly to their subjectivity as an outsider who corrupts culture and traditional family values. Their subjectivity as an outsider frame them as the vamp against the virginal women whose rapes and sexual exploitation is mourned nationally, while India remains a hotbed for sex trafficking and violence against sex workers, without any intervention. After the restrictions and bans on the

²² Dance bars in India are the western equivalent of strip clubs. Except the women dance in similar outfits as the item girls depicted in films. They dance to Bollywood item songs.

dance bars in India, call girls who were being interviewed by the media said that they were keeping the women safe and the rapists off the streets as they were the vessels into whom male customers purged their deviancies and violent fantasies. It is the prostitute who fulfills the imaginations and perverse desires of their customers who are often stifling in heterosexual, arranged marriages and it is the sex workers who often endure the most of their violent sexual frustrations.

The item girl as an outsider and a public woman, and the antithesis to the heroine, is placed outside the “protections” of patriarchy, so as not to threaten the private family unit. Not only is the public woman and the item girl scapegoated for scandalizing the audiences, but she is also targeted for inciting sexual violence in Indian men. This is an interesting conjecture to analyze, where the tension between hyper conservative patriarchal Indian culture clashes with the popularity of the scintillating item songs and pornography in India creating a vacuum that has not yet been fully investigated.

The relationship between how patriarchal societal structures have shaped the popular culture which in turn molded the rape culture in India should serve as a catalyst for discussions about a complex subject that is too often oversimplified. Instead of blaming only one aspect of Indian culture, in this case item songs, the discourse needs to historicize and contextualize the tradition of commodifying and controlling women through violence and trauma. The sexual politics and imaginations of Bollywood does indeed create the binary between the vampy item girl and the virginal chaste heroine which places the sexual autonomy in the male consumers and spectators’ hands rather than the female characters of these epic narratives. The patriarchal umbrella then covers and protects the virginal heroine whilst controlling her, meanwhile the

uncontrolled vampy item girl is outcasted and rendered vulnerable and deemed as an outsider and a scapegoat for victim blaming.

Concubines and Consent

The representation and material conditions of sex workers in India remains visibly poor, while trans and female sex workers are often homeless and begging for money. Child and sex trafficking in India is not only hyper visible but also neglected since most of the victims belong to the oppressed, low-income class and Dalit Bahujan caste. Expanding on this idea of marginalizing the sex workers, Mary Sullivan writes:

Clearly violence is the norm for women in prostitution. Incest, sexual harassment, verbal abuse, stalking, rape, battering, and torture – are points on a continuum of violence, all of which occur regularly in prostitution. In fact, prostitution itself is a form of sexual violence that results in economic profit for those who sell women, men and children. Though often denied or minimized, other types of gender violence (while epidemic) are not sources of revenue (Sullivan, 60)

The notion of the prostitute as a subaltern tie into the ownership politics of private/public property, and when tied with the vamp/virgin trope, it clearly renders the sex worker as a vulnerable victim. To understand the body politics and sexual autonomy we must diagnose concubines and the notion of consent in their own subjugation and exploitation. Melissa Farley, whose scholarly work revolves around questioning who controls the act of prostitution, dismisses it as a transactional model between two equal parties. Through her work as a scholar and an activist, Farley focuses on this power imbalance which “excludes any mutuality of privilege or pleasure.” (Farley, 34) Farley’s work is important in understanding how the notion of consent frames sex work, which often structures prostitutes as agents and negotiators in their profession. The imbalanced transaction of sexual violence leads to the commodification of domestic labor in the new global market economy, which then gives rise to identities such as ‘immigrant bar dancer,’ ‘sex tourist,’ and ‘item girl.’ Nicole Constable uses Marxism to explain the

commodification of labor as “refer[ring] to the process of assigning market value to goods or services that previously existed outside of the market.” (Constable, 50) She particularly focuses her attention on the labor of emotions and intimacy where marriage, love, sex, childbearing and rearing and other forms sexual labors are performed as services and further commodified.

Constable explains that this labor is then “bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices; and linked in many cases to transnational mobility and migration, echoing a global capitalist flow of goods.”

(Constable, 50) However, the Marxist exploration of familial and intimate social relations in peasant pre-capitalist families are starkly different from the social relations in the industrial and globalized world, mostly because Marx considered pre-capitalist times to be more altruistic and authentic. Constable uses the title of Denise Brennan’s essay “What’s love got to do with it?” to describe the ‘hostile worldview’ that has blurred the boundaries between domestic spheres and marketplaces. (Constable, 54) Therefore, the public and the private spaces of globalized capitalism have conflated making intimacy *performative*. This intervention on the intimate labor provided by

However, cultures like India still struggle with a bastardized economy that is swinging dangerously between the imperialist, white-supremacist, capitalist patriarchy and traditional classic patriarchy. Given this bastardization, India is at a clash, in this hyper technologized glocal culture that’s currently under the political administration of the popular neo-fascist, alt-right and hyper conservative Bharatiya Janata Party and RSS. The #MeToo movement is literally and simultaneously occurring alongside child rapes of minority Muslim children of the country by Hindu fundamentalists and religious fanatics. One of the most vulnerable demographics to be controlled and policed in this hyper conservative atmosphere is women. Bollywood

representations of women, where item songs are essential in formula films, are clearly reflected through the mindless objectification, gender gap and dehumanization of Bollywood female actors. And yet, through these slivers, the Bollywood fraternity debates the word Feminist, dividing most female actors between Team “I’m a Feminist” and Team “I’d rather not say the F word.” Meanwhile, there is a rise of very, vocal, and brash Bollywood feminists who are also blowing the whistle of Bollywood’s rape culture and sexism. Often, the item girls, are becoming the killjoys for men who are trying to commodify these women on-screen and of screen, by being the spokespeople of #MeToo. In the last chapter we illustrated how Sunny Leone is a feminist icon, much to the squeamish of “Feminists” who exclude the very women they set out to represent.

The emerging discourse of the #MeToo movement, the India version has come to put a spotlight on Bollywood which is clearly built on the backs of women’s trauma and sexual harassment. Prominent actors who are seniors in Bollywood have surfaced as protected abusers and rapists by the industry. And yet, Bollywood remains particularly silent on how the rape fantasy is often played out through the item songs. Blogger Ishmeet Nagpal for Feminism in India writes about the gang rape fantasy not-so-subtle enacted in highly choreographed dance numbers where the (mostly female) item girl is fondled by (mostly male) backup dancers as a part of the song. The enactment of a gang rape fantasy should be an uneasy topic for India after the much-publicized 2012 Delhi gang-rape, but the depiction is common in item songs. Nagpal writes about the cartography of claustrophobic, male-dominated spaces which are dangerous as “for a woman, the crowds become dangerous places of fondling, pinching, and outright molestation.” And yet, Nagpal states that the purposeless function of item songs that frame these despicable themes are merely for “voyeuristic marketing” (Nagpal).

The trope where throngs of men dancing aggressively around item girls have been evident and can be traced to even the early cabaret numbers. However, it seems to be played out even more forcefully since the early 2000s. In *DUM* (2003), Czech model Yana Gupta gyrated to the remixed²³ song “Babuji Zara Dheere Chalo” in a dual theme of the same song; one featuring a rural setting among hay and cattle and the other in a nightclub. One thing, however, remained the same- throngs of men dancing around Gupta, groping, and grabbing her. The song, *Babuji Zara Dheere Chalo* was inspired from the 1954 classic *Aar Ya Paar*. The original features Shashikala dancing in an upscale bar to a mixed audience of men and women. Filmed in a flamenco styled theme and outfit, Shashikala is modestly dressed, with a flower tucked behind her hair, while the narrative plays alongside the song. The 2003 rendition is starkly different from the original, where a skimpily clad white European Yana is seducing and teasing gangs of Indian (native looking) village men and singing about her white body as a thunder strike on men’s hearts. The song is divorced from reality and is simply inserted to show how villainous the bad guys are. The modern version is shot in two parts, the rural setting is shamelessly sexist and objectifying, Yana riding a black buffalo and hounded by men drinking, while the contemporary setting affords Yana the company of female backup dancers. The rural setting, however, offers much more to analyze along with the racist representation of the rape as it connotes the gang rape of a white woman at the hands of native, savage, black men. Hansen writes about this phenomenon of using the Anglo-Indian (white) woman as a prop which began as early as silent cinema:

In the silent films then, the 'white' female image not only affords the pleasures of colonial inversion through sexual domination but adds the pleasures of consumption of the 'modern'. The Anglo-Indian actress's outsider status permits her a greater degree of

²³ The trend of old Bollywood songs remixed as sexy item pop songs started with *Kaanta Laga* (2002) by DJ Doll where Shefali Zariwala was popularized as the “thong girl” because her g-string panties are not only visible through her jeans but the peeking thong is also the focus of the dance number.

freedom of dress and action, and several films openly flaunt the possibilities, even showing the later-banned kiss (Hansen, 2299)

The body politics of the item girls which hierarchize them according to race, physicality and social location is an important opening to understand the sexual politics of domination and division of intimate labor. The next section will focus on these body politics that frame the subjectivity of the item girl.

Bartering the Body: Body Politics of Item Songs

The conversation on body politics came to the forefront with the “The Personal is Political” agenda of second wave feminism that aimed to demystify, de-objectify and de-weaponize the female body that has been a battleground for regulation particularly with reproductive rights. While problematic and exclusionary, the second wave did not translate to represent the transwomen and women of color that were doubly oppressed by compounded discriminations. The colonial interventions in India, compounded with caste created the acquiescent subject that was outside of the patriarchal bargains and vulnerable in the face of sexual and gendered oppressions. In explaining patriarchal bargains, Deniz Kandiyoti describes the term, “different strategies to maximize security and optimize life options with varying potential for active or passive resistance in the face of oppression.” Elaborating on these strategies, Kandiyoti explains it as a trade between women’s autonomy and men's responsibility, where the object of trade is the gender protection men offer to women who fall under their patriarchal unit. (Kandiyoti, 274) While classic patriarchy is dangerously oppressive and cannot compensate for subjugation with emotional and financial security, women in these units are protected and less vulnerable than the women who exist in sexist cultures but are outside the protections of patriarchal bargains. Describing it as a difficult compromise, Kandiyoti talks about women in various cultures who find coping mechanisms to negotiate their spaces within these

systems of dominations. Iranian model and item girl Mandana Karimi, who, like thousands of foreigners who come to India every year to try their luck in Bollywood due to a high demand for white models and back-up dancers, talks about how a lot of foreigners are continually harassed because they do not have a local boyfriend/husband to protect or negotiate on their behalf (TNN).

India's fetishization with fair skin has its roots in the Aryan invasion of the country as well as the British occupation and colonization, but also within its own casteist history. However, that culture has seeped in so strongly that it has come to dominate the current market²⁴ and culture of modern India. The caste system that promotes colorism views people of fairer skin complexions to belong to the higher caste of Brahminism and those with darker skin to belong to the Dalit caste. (Jha, 67) This discussion of linking colorism to the hierarchies of caste are well reflected and yet only subversively implied in the way item girls are depicted in songs. The rural vs. urban settings of these songs are connected to how modern India understands rural, and darker skinned women to be uncivilized and display a form of savage sexuality that is evident in these songs (and also implied to belong to lower castes). Feminist scholars like bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins situate this stereotype in the way whiteness uses black bodies to overtly sexualize them. hooks write about this very phenomenon in *Selling Hot Pussy* where black women are exhibited and othered in their "uncivilized" and exoticized depictions. (hooks, 123) While black "butts" are the icons of sexual deviancy in the depictions of black women, in a comparable way the dusky skin acts as an apparatus of nymphomaniac behavior in the depictions of item girls. Even when actresses that are fair skinned like Aishwarya Rai and Kareena Kapoor act in these ruralized item songs, they are doused in bronzers and sport a dark tan to enact the

²⁴ Markets of beauty products, fairness creams, skin bleaching and whitening products.

village belle look, donning a blackface. While there are darker skinned actresses like Nandita Das and Radhika Apte, they have been popularized in the arthouse²⁵ films that aim to break these molds and they often portray the (rural) woman who fights back. Although these films are deeply rooted in feminist and antiracist ideologies, they still cast dark skinned actresses to play a rural woman.

The mainstream, commercial Bollywood films reflect a completely opposite counterculture as they continue to be absorbed and in turn perpetuate a culture of globalized white skinned beauty standards. The item songs, however, provide an interesting contrast in the discourse as more sexualized darker women gyrate in rural settings. The item song has also come to be a site of conflict due to the lack of structure in this type of a depiction. While darker women are a staple, there has also been a surge of white backup dancers in these songs since the 1990s. The phenomenon of “whitewashing” Bollywood is fascinating as these white back-up dancers are becoming a norm in songs dancing behind males in urban settings, whereas the item songs that are in a village setting are becoming increasingly exaggerated and hyper-sexualized. But what is of interest to understanding the dark skinned, hypersexual, shamelessly objectified item girl is her relationship to the narrative and the protagonists (See Figure: Poster of film *Daasi*).

While item songs are meant to be a break in the narrative, that are often placed outside the temporality and spatiality of the screenplay; the item girl can never take the place of the heroine. She will only enter the film, like the outcast(e) to appease the hero, while he is distracted by the villains, and gyrate for the many male gazes and take a quick exit once the

²⁵ Indian arthouse films, or Parallel Cinema is an interesting subset of the film industry that almost counterattacks and challenges the ideologies that are propagated by the mainstream Bollywood films. These films are made on social issues and the actors who act in them are often from grassroots theater movements and are associated with the intellectual leftist organizations.

showdown between the good and bad guys begins. Never can she imagine being in spaces of morality and purity, like the heroine, and being dark skinned she can never be situated in “civilized” urban spaces nor have access to love and comfort. Her expressions are more animated and intimate, providing an earthiness as compared to her white counterparts; for she is the rejected lower caste that must accept her subalternity and model her submissiveness as a sexual opportunity for the men (See posters in Artifacts).

The commodification of the women’s body, especially the item girl’s is not only visually reiterated but is also denoted by the lyrics. Songs such as “*Fevicol Se*,” “*Mohabbat hai Mirchi*,” “*Doodh ban jaungi, malai ban jaungi*” etc. are always comparing a woman’s body to a non-human object (mostly exotic foods), not only dehumanizes but also directly commodifies their bodies for direct consumption. The terminology “Item” here alone is directly declaring her body as an object and in turn dehumanizing her. Take the item song “*Fevicol se*” for example, the lyrics “*Main toh tandoori murgi hoon yaar, gatka le ise alcohol se*” (translation: I am a spicy chicken wing, wash me down with some alcohol) directly references the item girl’s body as a commodity to be consumed and fetishized. Using Mark Liechty’s parallels on the commodification of food and sex, Rita Brara brilliantly explains it as:

the labelling of the item number and the underlying linguistic work is not entirely accidental. For one, the term item is etched in the menu cards peddled by urban eateries. Items here constitute distinct entities that are tempting, chilli-hot, and often what men drool and salivate over. Moreover, such items are served outside the home or the domestic sphere. When in street language, an attractive girl, especially one who is viewed as provocatively dressed, is termed an item, some of the connotations that spill over from food items served in eateries outside the home are carried across to the context of the girl who is outside her domestic realm, bringing out intersemiotic associations between these domains. And so, the sense of an item number that may be difficult to verbalize gathers its meaning from associational fields that commodify sex and eating. (Brara, 68)

Brara’s use of Liechty is a conscious one as his work on carnal economies in Kathmandu looks at the sex trade and places it in various dimensions such as caste and class and the

commodification of flesh (Liechty). This distinction is crucial, because it separates and places the item girl outside the domestic sphere, marking her status between public and private spaces, for the item girl is a common commodity, not a woman, but an “item.”

In understanding the role of the item girl as the outside girl, Rita Banerji delineates the lack of “interpersonal emotions” between the (heterosexual) man and the woman, or the hero and item girl, for this transaction is just implied to be a sexual one. Banerji also claims that the item song performances are reserved for male viewing pleasure and the item girl lacks any and all agency and sexual desires. She uses the example of *The Dirty Picture* (2011), the biopic based on the famous cabaret dancer²⁶ Silk Smita, who was dismissed as *dirty* by the film industry and never accepted as an artist but always an outsider (Banerji 24). While Banerji makes a valid point, the film can also be reread and viewed as an act of resistance against the notions and expectations from the virginal and chaste Bollywood heroine. The item girl harbors no such presumptions. She owns her body and her spaces and rejects the domestication of not only her body but also her role within Indian society and Bollywood boundaries.

The confusion over the proprietorship of the body of the item girl is commonplace for conjecture since the discourse on film studies and gendered cinematic viewership has been dictated by Laura Mulvey’s *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. While this work is revolutionary, Srinivas claims that using Western theories with colonial bias to study Indian films is problematic as they tend to view Indian artifacts mostly from an ideological or mythic studies perspective (Srinivas). In doing so, the theories are a misfit because they tend to overlook the diversity in India where the variables are different, and notions of *dharmik* codes²⁷, shame,

²⁶ Before the label “item girl” who danced in item songs emerged, women who danced in Bollywood films were known as “cabaret dancers” who danced in Hindi cabaret songs.

²⁷ Regulating laws and morality in Hinduism, found in holy scriptures.

honor, caste, religion, gender, rural vs. urban, etc. all of which cannot be quantified or studied with Eurocentric knowledge. To avoid epistemic violence, it is important to approach it with a wider lens and more authentic and organic knowledge. Thus, as depicted in this chapter, the item girl does not only highlight a turbulent relationship with sexuality and consent but is also subverting the popularized media scapegoating. The item girl figure is resisting hegemonic structures of chastity and presenting an alternate perspective in which agency is centered, queerness is celebrated, and the vamp vs. virgin dichotomy is challenged.

To further highlight the bifurcation between the virgin and the vamp through cinematic and narrative imagery, I have attached photographs below in the Artifacts section which are a collection of posters I photographed on my trip to the National Museum of Indian Cinema, Mumbai as part of my Sturgis research trip to Mumbai. These film posters and still shots clearly highlight the appendages that make up the subjectivity of the vamp and the captions explain the framing of their identities.

Artifacts

As indicated in the chapter, all figures are taken by me during my visit to the National Museum of Indian Cinema in Mumbai, India in January 2020.

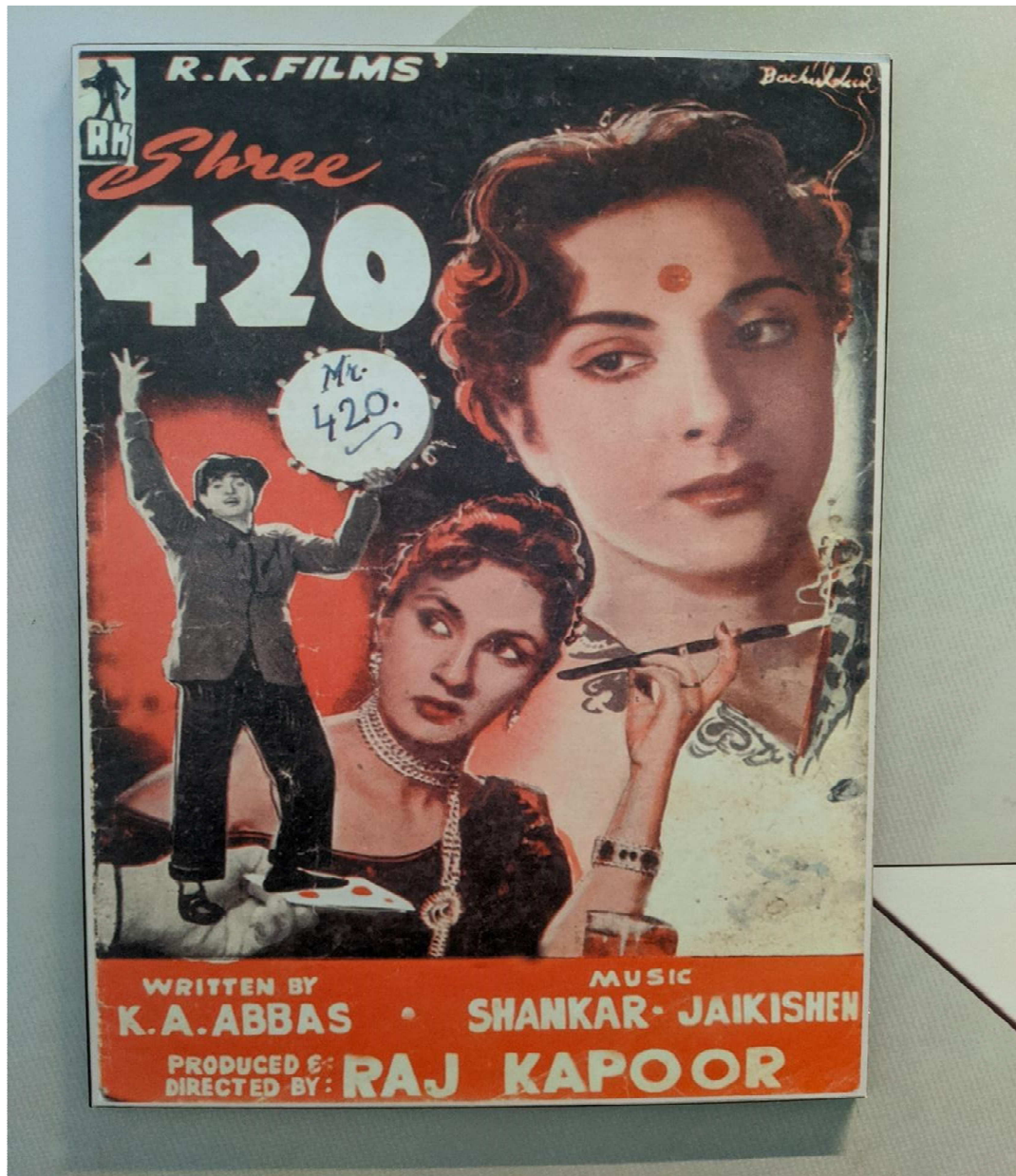


Figure 1: Nadira vs. Nargis. The assemblages of Nadira's identity that denote her western-ness, such as the cigarette, the revealing dress, the vampish look and the attitude directly contrast Nargis's Indianness and coyish virginity.



Figure 2: Item Girl Rakhi Sawant (in the black bikini top) featured on the poster of 2003 film *Chura Liya Hai Tumne*. The early 2000s saw a rise in item songs and remixed pop songs featuring Sawant as a star attraction to pull audiences to theaters.

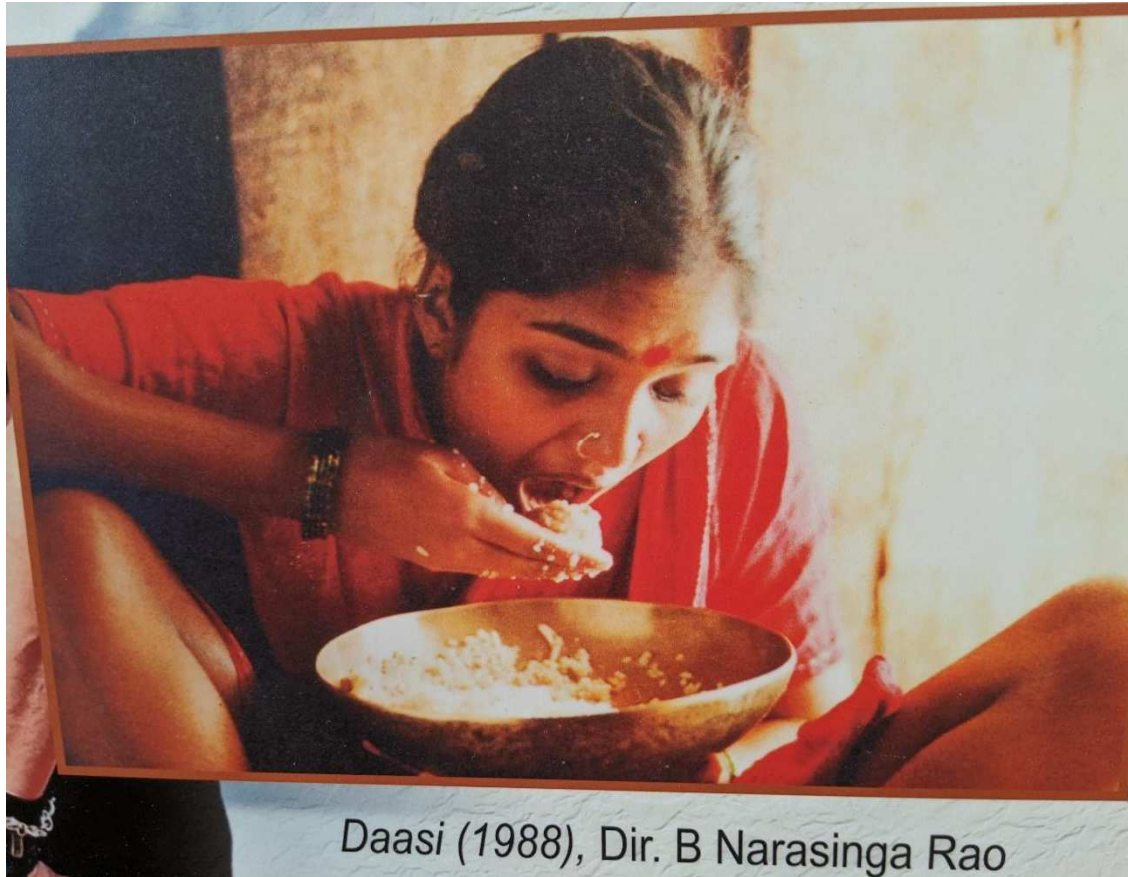


Figure 3: The nakedness and audacity of a female eating savagely in public is denoted by the raw sexuality that is exuded in this poster of the 1988 film *Daasi*. The film title and the protagonist a Dalit, female bonded slave.



Figure 4: *Khilona* (1970) (Translation: Toy) tells the story who Chand, the tawaif or courtesan who pretends to be a stand in wife and faces the humiliations of the family and is raped by her stand in husband.

ENTERTAINMENT

I don't consider my performances as item numbers, they are dance numbers: Nora Fatehi



Rimuka.Vyas@timesgroup.com

After dancing her way into people's hearts, Canadian artiste Nora Fatehi is excited about her next outing — the Remo D'Souza directorial *Street Dancer 3D*. In a quick chat with ET, she talks about her journey so far and more. Excerpts...

Street Dancer 3D also features Varun Dhawan, Sharadha Kapoor and the dancing legend, Prabhudeva. Recently, Varun had talked about how Prabhudeva, who is otherwise extremely quiet and calm, becomes a different person when he dances. Given your passion for dance, how was it working with him?

Well, I didn't get to dance with him in the film, but I watched him when he was shooting for his scenes. It's like dance gets his alter ego out. He is a quiet person, but the moment music starts, he goes all out. It's phenomenal, he's like Michael Jackson. Apparently even he was quite shy when he wasn't on stage performing. That's how great artistes are. Prabhudeva is an icon, I could see why he is who he is.

Over the years, you have become one of the most sought-after dancers in Bollywood. So, this film feels like an apt choice...

I am not a trained dancer, I am self-taught. So, it was intimidating to dance with some of the finest talents in this film. I freaked out initially as it was challenging, both physically and mentally, to match up to them. It made me push my level of dancing. I play Varun's girlfriend in the film,

and my character is supportive and instrumental in his rise as a dancer.

You are a Canadian. How did you make a foray into Indian showbiz?

I was born and raised in Canada. I was always inclined towards dancing, but couldn't afford a dance class or formal training. My family never encouraged arts as they wanted me to focus on academics and become a doctor. So, I had to teach myself. I would watch dance videos online — be it Bollywood songs, Turkish

I AM A SELF-TAUGHT DANCER, SOME OF THE FINEST TALENTS IN AS IT WAS CHALLENGING, BOTH PH THEM. IT MADE ME PUSH MY LEVE

dancers, Beyoncé, Rihanna... I am extremely observant and that helped. I chose to pursue my career in Bollywood, as it's the second biggest movie industry in the world and a place where I can dance and act. From doing five-minute dance numbers, I have moved on to acting in films and so, I am happy. It's only getting bigger and better. Also, I don't consider my performances as item numbers, they are dance numbers. I am proud of them, as they are performance-oriented.

According to you, who are the best dancers in Bollywood?

Hrithik Roshan is the best. Katrina Kaif is also good. However, my idols have always been Alakshya Desai, Nene and Helen.

Figure 5: Nora Fatehi's front page interview from Bombay Times. Headline: "I don't consider my performances as item numbers; they are dance numbers"

performances as item
 dance numbers: **Nora Fatehi**

Renuka.Vyavahare@timesgroup.com

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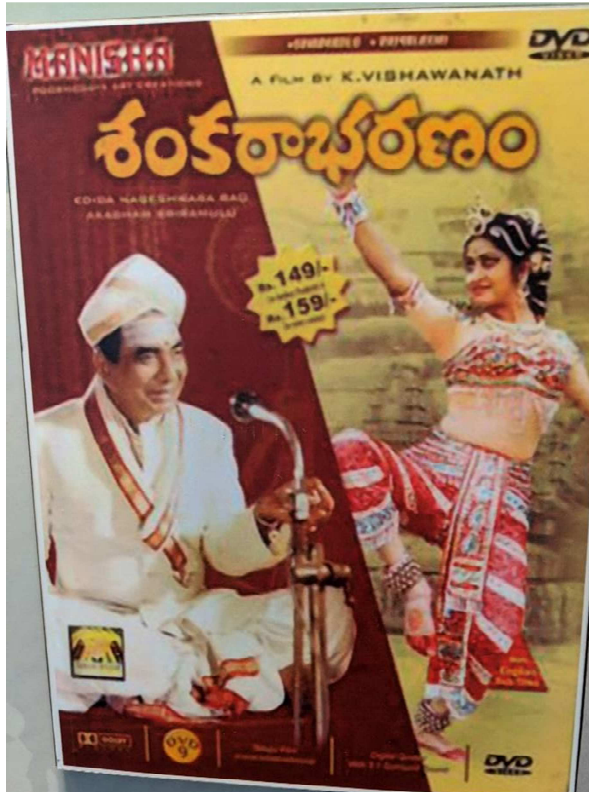


Figure 7: Bollywood posters with the female dancer as the main attraction.



Figure 8: Bollywood posters with the vamp/dancer as the main attraction.

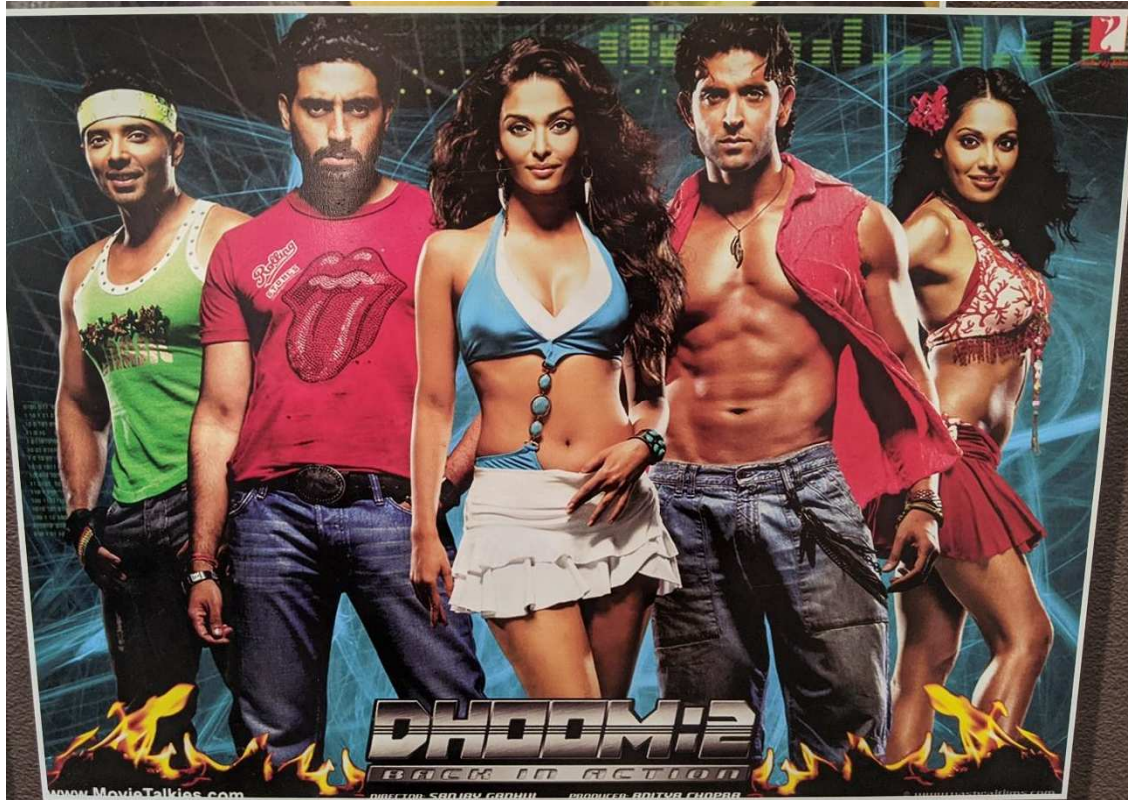


Figure 9: Bollywood posters with the vamp/dancer as the main attraction.

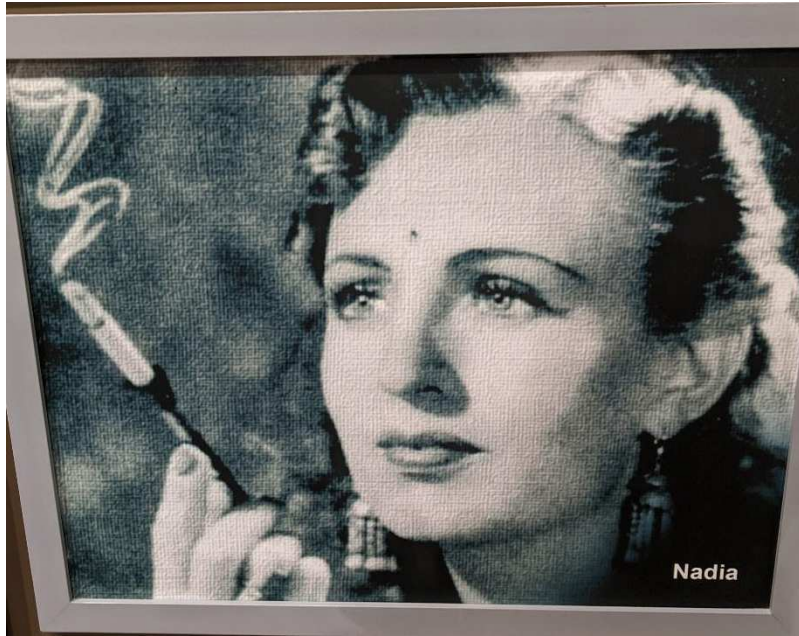


Figure 10: Fearless Nadia. Popular stunt Anglo-Indian woman of early Indian cinema. Her image smoking a cigarette denotes her westernness



Figure 11: The tragic courtesan *Pakeezah* (1972). An ideal of self-destructive femininity.



Figure 12: The famous yesteryear Anglo-Indian vamp Helen. Jerry Pinto's book *The Life and Times of H-Bomb* is based on her magnanimous work in the Bollywood film industry.

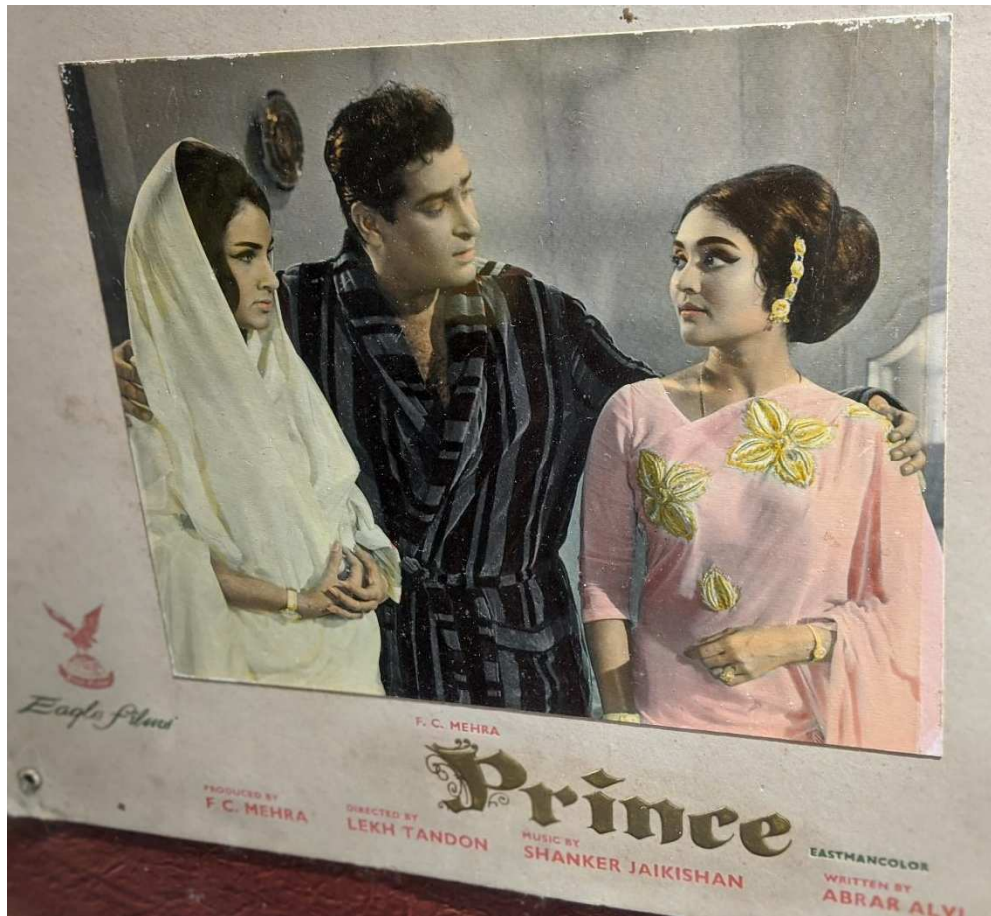


Figure 13: The virgin vs. the vamp. The virginal Madonna here is modestly dressed in white, covering her head and paying respects to patriarchy. Meanwhile, a modernized vamp with a beehive updo and winged eyeliner seems to be seducing him away from the Madonna.

Chapter Two: Beyond Theory- Body Politics of Item Songs in India

In almost everything that has been written about the vamps of Hindi Cinema, there has been a tendency to reduce the figure of the bad girl to a caricature. Her story is seen as the Progress of the Harlot: she fell, she smoked, she drank, she danced, she smuggled, she died. (Jerry Pinto, *Bombay*, and Bollywood chronicler)

In *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam talks about Shadow Feminism, which is rooted in negation, refusal, self-destruction, and masochism. Halberstam's understanding of this form of counterintuitive feminism is interesting when applied to understanding the item girl as an "antiheroine." The anti-social feminism of the item girl may be rooted in destroying the self, and hence, to the irritation of feminists and scholars, be anti-feminist and a queer failure. The negativity associated with the vamp destroys the menace of feminist violence and, "...the promise of transformation, not through a positive production of the image but through a negative destruction of it that nonetheless refuses to relinquish pleasure" (Halberstam 136). The main objective of this study is to understand the item girl as the ideological opposite of the heroine, or the anti-heroine, whose refusal and rejection of patriarchy through her passive participation in its primary structures such as the family, makes her an outsider and an advocate for low culture.

Using a triangulation method that looks at item songs as cultural texts themselves and analyzing the cultural and national contexts in which those texts are produced, and the industry that produces them (including interviews with the producers themselves,) this study creates a space for studying item songs as an important cultural artifact. This chapter specifically focuses on the production of item songs, through their conceptualization to their casting, using crucial empirical research collected from open ended interviews with industry insiders conducted in Mumbai, the epicenter of Bollywood. Industry and market analysis that focus on the creative and economic aspects of item songs is crucial in analyzing the sexual and cultural politics of item songs and how these cultural contexts reflect the national contexts within which they are produced. This chapter

also uses the interviews to define and establish item songs as a crucial category and convention, that goes beyond the conversations on gazing and objectification.

While the vamp is portrayed as sexually deviant and an anti-heroine, the cultural significance of the vamp is crucial in understanding the Bollywood and Indian artistic heritage. Since early Sanskrit plays, the figure of the courtesan as a powerful cultural and moral icon is evident. The importance of the item songs could, in fact, be compared with the function of the chorus of ancient Greek theater given the way it can mirror society's attitudes. While the hero and the heroine of Bollywood are variations of the classic demi-gods who were above their audiences, the item girl, like the ancient Greek chorus, echoes the voice of the masses. The *tawaif* and her talk back to the hero, known as "*hazarjawabi*," where she questions and challenges the hero through the song is an ancient tradition. The *tawaif's* knowledge of poetry and her political commentary through her song makes her an important part of the narrative tradition.

Early plays such as *Mrcchakatika*, later adapted for the narrative of the 1981 film *Utsav*, tells the story of Vasantsena, the wealthy and celebrated courtesan known for her sexual prowess. Vasantsena is a fascinating Indian female character existing long before the Kama Sutra was written, reflecting a period when women had sexual autonomy and prostitutes were worshipped. Rekha, who plays Vasantsena in *Utsav*, seductively teases the audience as she undresses slowly and makes love to Charudutta, a married man. The story is not only progressive for its sexual imagery, but also shows the historical significance of the *tawaif* or the courtesan in Indian narrative history. To understand the vamp's importance to Bollywood, it is crucial to also focus on the behind-the-scenes politics of the item song and talk to dance choreographers, directors, and script writers, who keep inserting and producing item songs in Bollywood films.

The theoretical research covered in the other two chapters focuses on the cinematic representations and narrative subjectivity of the item girl. To understand the item girl as a performer and an artist, it is important to see the creative aspects through the production of the item song. To move the study beyond academic theory, I traveled to Mumbai to interview Bollywood insiders and understand the market analysis which would help unpack the demographic study of its viewers and the makings of the mega hit song. Belonging to a filmy family and my experience as a former First Assistant Director in the Hindi film industry not only helped me navigate the cartographic imaginations of Mumbai, but also the Bollywood set. My experience of working as an AD has shown me how divorced theory can be from the actual workings of a Bollywood set. To understand the dancers and their subjectivity, I applied for a Sturgis scholarship so I could compare their perspectives with the theoretical findings I made using critical feminist reading. The industry analysis from my interviews helped me compare the artistry vs. marketability aspect of item songs, where the creatively leaning insiders saw the item song as an artistic production, whereas the interviewees related to the administrative side of it associated the convention with the marketing aspect of corporatized Bollywood.

This research enabled me to develop a deeper understanding of the nature of the popularity of item songs in India and how their significance to Indian cinema was interpreted by industry insiders on-site in Mumbai. The questions of the interview were open ended and aimed towards generating a dialogue on item songs and the overall representation and gender politics in Bollywood. This chapter explores the interviews I collected for the Sturgis International Fellowship in December 2019- March 2020 in Mumbai, India. The interviews present a discourse on the sexual, cultural, and economic politics of item songs and their dancers through participants

who work in the Bollywood or Hindi film industry. The objective of this research was to further delve into the making of an item song.

My identity and role as a researcher

I migrated to the United States in 2007 as an incredibly young graduate school student and every trip I made back home to India has been monumental in shaping my situational and comparative perspective, as I witness the social transformations and accelerated globalization of Mumbai and Bollywood. A previous trip I took during my wedding, for example, coincided with the 2012 Delhi gang-rape where I witnessed several public protests and discourses around the gender violence in India. I was able to use the discourse and my experience being around the utterances of the locals right after the event, to conduct a media and reaction analysis on politics of negotiating with a public tragedy like the Delhi gang rape. Similarly, this recent trip to India, funded by the Sturgis scholarship that enabled me to compile the data for this chapter, occurred right before the pandemic. It not only affected the progress of my dissertation, but also what was happening in India, which was one of the worst hit countries during the Covid crisis. As a result of the pandemic, the focus of Indian entertainment shifted from Bollywood to Tik-Tok and Reels, which caused a demystification of celebrities who were also locked down like the rest of the world.

This chapter will not only cover some of the research I was able to collect before being able to return to my home (US) and partner before the long-term travel ban was imposed on India. The travel bans for Indians and delays in immigration applications due to the closure of USCIS dictated my pandemic anxiety of being caught between the dual stress of being associated with two of the most stressful countries in the world - USA and India, at the brink of Covid 19. As much as I would have liked to avoid including a commentary on the impact of Covid on my research, it is extremely hard not to reflect on the pandemic related distress which has now completely shifted

the atmosphere of my dissertation as well as the direction of Bollywood. These dual realities have shaped my situational perspectives thus creating a productive tension in understanding the complexities of discourses of identity and globalization. My objective is to understand the gender politics in India through its cinematic representations and process this research through the lens of intersectionality, to help decolonize my own understanding of Western feminist film criticism.

While defining identity as a “weapon of mass destruction,” Shuddhabrata Sengupta examines “the locus of power [...] the enormous hegemonic power of the misogyny, heterosexism, whiteness, and Eurocentrism at the foundations of the world we live in today.” My identity as a nowhere citizen has allowed me to understand the importance of intersectional studies which aims to study women’s representation in Bollywood films by avoiding a non-fetishistic lens. Bollywood films always invoke a very stereotypical response from non-Indian audiences as they reduce the vast and diverse history of its content to “singing and dancing around trees.” The exoticization of Bollywood happens without delving into its rich history and diverse cultural influences, especially in Western academe.

It is therefore crucial to understand the shaping of Bollywood through India’s social transformation, without allegorizing and exoticizing the two, and instead focusing on Bollywood as a cultural soft power to propagate India’s neoliberal economy. Similarly, just as Bollywood has not been taken seriously in World cinema, item songs too have been ignored by scholars and considered wasteful content- wasteful in budget and empty in content, however, it is exerting the brand Bollywood while subverting traditional patriarchy into a queer subculture. While being a powerful celluloid figure and a queer cultural feminist icon in contemporary feminist studies, the

real-life conditions of bar dancers and sex workers remain deplorable ²⁸. Despite the scape-goating of item songs as a means to perpetuate patriarchy and enable toxic masculinity, the vamp has also come to symbolize a sex-positive feminist. As proven in this dissertation, the nature and effect of the item song and item girl can be better understood through academic study. That said, one must also look to the filmmakers for their rationale and interpretation if one is to put these significant Bollywood conventions in commercial and critical context, and therefore interacting with people who are involved in the item song production helped in gaining a local and an insider perspective on the importance of item songs to Bollywood.

My Sturgis research trip proved crucial in confirming conclusions I had already made through my academic study and revealed nuances that I otherwise would not have been able to explore. My discussions with avid consumers, and the women who perform in these artistic productions enabled me, for example, to peel back the layers of the vamp to show that she is not only embedded in ancient Indian mythology but is clearly a figure that needs to be studied in contemporary feminist discourse. I got to discuss the diverse nuances of this song category with its avid and subcultural readers, understand the rich context of this type of a dance performance and its significance to Indian cinema. Additionally, the thrill of navigating the film industry and its folks-- who love the gossip and musings on Bollywood and the Maximum Madness of Mumbai was extremely rewarding in understanding the current identity of Bollywood.

²⁸ As discussed in Chapter 1, real life bar dancers in India are always ostracized and displaced by the agents of repressive and cultural apparatuses in India. The shutting down of dance bars in Mumbai also led to several bar dancers being forced into sex work and trafficking due to a lack of rehabilitation policies for helping women who are rendered vulnerable in the toxic mix of traditional patriarchy and rise of fascist capitalism in India.

Interviewing my subjects under economic distress²⁹ and an oncoming pandemic helped me view Bollywood as not only a large cultural machine, but also an economic and political mechanism³⁰. For instance, the suicide of Bollywood “outsider” actor Sushant Singh Rajput during the pandemic, after battling depression and financial struggles, was used to swing the Bihar election since he was from the region. One cannot ignore the politicization of Sushant’s suicide which redirected the whole discourse on patriarchy since the person held accountable for his suicide was his girlfriend Rhea. The witch-hunt and media trial of Rhea as a vampy seductress, who was accused of drugging Sushant into depression and forced him to end his life, is a familiar false Indian narrative used against women who rebel against patriarchy by branding them as “witches and whores”. Rhea wore a t-shirt which read, “Roses are red, Violets are blue, let’s smash patriarchy, me and you,” to her court trial accusing her of abetting Sushant’s suicide. The Sushant Singh Rajput case which exploded, when his parents' filed charges against his girlfriend accusing her of his murder, that led to her torturous media trial, was aptly characterized by Sangma and Fernandes:

His (Sushant’s) agency and changing priorities are denied, and he always remains the little boy led astray by the calculative big city woman and gold digger. The girlfriend is seen as an illegitimate female companion, vilified, and blamed for anything that goes wrong in the life of the son. It became much easier therefore, to accuse a son’s girlfriend of black magic instead of admitting he could be gravely mentally ill.

The witch hunt of Rhea exemplifies the subjectivity of the illegitimate woman as a vamp and the “outsider” politics of public women who are not “protected by patriarchy” which has suddenly become hyper relevant in this disastrous year for Bollywood, where drug scandals and nepotism has burst its glamorous bubble. A pandemic-related lockdown has stolen the mystique of

²⁹ India has been facing one of the worst economic crises for the last two years due to the Modi administration’s decision for demonetization and tensions with China over the border.

³⁰ See Shahrukh Khan’s son Aryan’s arrest for possession of drugs and the witch-hunt for anti-national behavior in Bollywood under the Modi administration.

celebrities as everyone is locked down and celebrities are often trolled for decadence or not complying with mask mandates. The lockdown has given rise to Tik-Tok, people in the business beyond celebrities, and people like you and me determining, with a global community, the identity of Bollywood entertainment from our homes.

While I have spent the last decade writing about the various aspects of item songs, this research trip immensely helped me gain a fresh perspective on this topic and sharpen my discourse from a production point of view. Interviewing choreographers and dancers themselves, produced a perspective far different from the focus of academic gender studies which tend to problematize item songs. The fact that the dancer is a powerful economic driving force relative to dance, spectacle, and desire has not been emphasized in Western feminist film perspective which too often takes power away from the performer by focusing on limited interpretations of the "male gaze". My visits with the women dancers reminded me of their power and agency. The research interviews provided an in-depth analysis of item songs from a cultural lens aiming to understand sexual and gender politics of women in India using item songs as an artifact.

Having grown up in a family full of actors, I was privileged to have the accessibility and proximity to film industry insiders who were able to expand the discourse beyond my academic research to understand how these reel representations impact the social locations of women in India. Equipped with necessary funds from the Sturgis Fellowship and the benefit of being raised in a family of film actors, I was able to access various people from the film industry through my parents, who are both actors. Interviewing choreographers, dancers, directors, and scriptwriters from Bollywood helped me not only conceptualize an operational definition for "Item Songs" or cabaret-style dance numbers but also their purpose in a Bollywood formula film and compare

this information with my academic findings. However, I had to put my project on a halt in March of 2020 and come back to the US due to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Despite a limited visit cut short, I was able to conduct fifteen interviews and collect over eighteen hours of audio footage along with dozens of photos from the Indian Film Institute. This proved to be ample data for supporting and refining the conclusions I had already made, and further historicize and critically analyze the item songs and prove their significance.

Additionally, my opportunity to directly observe the changing landscape of Bollywood entertainment in pre and post Covid times literally at the moment this transition happened has enabled me to identify how to pursue my continued discourse by recognizing how the pandemic is altering the structure of Bollywood formula films.

Methodology

I reached Mumbai mid- December 2019 when the conversations on Coronavirus were just starting to formulate. The panic of pandemic mixed with an already fumbling economy³¹ in India, really showed distress among most of those who participated in my interviews. Fernandes and Sangma aptly concluded this pandemic year where they stated, “Individuals within are reduced to their commercial selves caught between binaries of profit and loss, risk and crisis management, mergers and acquisitions.” In 2020, it was fascinating to see how these fifteen "pre-lockdown interviews" clearly signal the crumbling socio-economic state of a vulnerable country in the face of an oncoming pandemic. The interviews focused on the politics of the outsider where the item song dancer is a social outsider, in a nepotistic and exclusive industry like Bollywood. Several interviewees were nervous talking about “nepotism” and the “outsider”

³¹ Under Modi’s administration, India has suffered economically because of privatization and harsh policies against the marginalized such as the Islamophobic citizen’s registry, anti-farmer law protests, and demonetization.

but were eventually divulging openly about the rampant abuse and sexual harassment faced by the item song dancers for not having any industry backup. The story of a small-town struggling starlet in Mumbai and their casting couch horror experiences were in abundance in my interviews. Using open-ended questions (questionnaire attached below) helped to understand the gender and sexual politics in India that reflected through the cinematic apparatus. For instance, one of the interviewees, a famous lyricist who has penned the lyrics for item songs broke down the whole pre-production process for me, including the pressures they faced at the hands of several filmmakers who forced them to fit an item song in a film that did not need one. Or the cluster of choreographers I interviewed who all agreed that nepotism in Bollywood overshadows all the casting procedures and that item song dancers are common victims of the casting couch, and they were also one of the biggest whistleblowers of the #MeToo India movement, as has been explored in the chapter on “Cultural Politics of Item Songs.”

For the sake of articulating the data from the in-person interviews, I will approach the research in terms of the six questions that were the basis of conducting the interviews. These questions were carefully crafted to generate a dialogue not only on the stylistic conventions of item songs, but also on the gender and sexual politics shaped by the cinematic representations of item girls in Bollywood. The questions are:

1. What is the main purpose of the item song to a Bollywood film?
2. Who are the main spectators and targeted audience for item songs?
3. How does the item girl contrast the lead heroine in a film's narrative?
4. How do the item songs increase the marketability of a film?
5. What are the technical differences between shooting an item song vs. a regular film song? For e.g. Is there a difference between the principal choreography of an item song

and a romantic Bollywood song? What is the lighting technique used for shooting an item song? How are the backup dancers arranged differently from a non-item song?

6. Can you help identify some recurring themes and tropes of an item song to help develop its conventions and definitions?

Most importantly, the interviews were conducted in Mumbai, which also created an ambience in understanding the mechanisms and the delicate ecosystem between Bollywood and Bombay, and how the socio-political environment affects the city and the film industry. I came to the interviews as a Bombay-ite who had grown up in a film family and the experience of having worked as a First AD (Assistant Director) at Balaji Telefilms, Pvt. Ltd., one of the biggest production houses in Bollywood. My background and expertise noted, conducting interviews, and writing about this aspect of the Bollywood film industry for a Western audience was a challenge. Articulating Bollywood films, songs, and my dissertation topic to my colleagues, (my committee) and my Bollywood film class students is challenging because, while it invokes interest, it is also fetishized, caricatured, and not included in World Cinema as a serious addition. Furthermore, I am expected to provide a very oversimplified understanding of an overly complex and diverse machinery shaped by colonization, casteism, neoliberalism and identity politics for Western audiences and readers. Hence, not only was my research enriching for my dissertation, but also for my soul, because I got to *gupshup*, gossip and discourse with people who are already immersed in the aesthetic conditions and various modes of production of the Hindi film industry (Bollywood).

Criteria for Participant Selection

One of my interview participants, a renowned script writer beautifully described the conflation of Bombay and Bollywood as a delicate symbiotic relation, where everyone in

Bombay is somehow connected to Bollywood, but they are not charmed by its glamour. The starry-eyed fans outside superstar Shahrukh Khan's mansion or at the gates of Film City, thronging to take photos with celebrities (or white people) are "outsiders," he said. The "outsider vs insider" trope has a long history in India- where the outsiders and outcastes such as migrant workers, Dalits, Muslims, and other oppressed minorities are constantly othered and silenced by the hyper-patriarchal Hindu fascism. This component of Indian nationalism is constantly propagated by Bollywood related witch hunts involving underrepresentation and misrepresentation of the minority "outsiders". The item girl is also considered an outsider because she can assume this highly visible role, despite the disturbing associations connected with it, and have agency and control. Ironically, to understand the mechanisms of these outsider politics it is crucial to include the discourse from the insiders of the film industry. Therefore, to approach item songs from a non-fetishistic or a strictly scholarly gaze, it was important to interview its creators and other agents within the film industry. Based on my network and access, I established a few criteria for my research participants:

a) Major focus was lent to interviewing choreographers, models and dancers who have been creatively involved in creating item songs. Doing so enabled me to understand the artistic perspective of an item song from its creative conception to reception. This framework recognizes the item song as "artistic performance" - something else which was lost from the simplistic dismissal of reducing it to commodification of women and the promotion of rape culture. To accomplish artistry provides agency and this discourse is important in furthering our conversation on body politics which would help define the subjectivity of item girls as vamps. Additionally, the stylistic conventions of item songs

are rich, their dance form and representation are constantly evolving, and this pool of participants will help discourse on the sexual and cultural influence of item songs.

b) Extending my participant pool to other creative heads in Bollywood such as directors, script writers and producers enables a better understanding of the economic and production point of view of the item song in its pre-production and production stages, while considering its "marketability".

c) Through my international student network, I was able to connect with some academic/literary figures who had written extensively about Bollywood and were involved in bringing works such as *Vagina Monologue* (Indian version) to Indian audiences. We were able to converse on the exclusion of women of color from Western feminism that disguises everything under global sisterhood and how this in turn alienates the item girl or the vamp (and subsequently sex workers) from feminist discourse. This enabled me to further build upon additional production sources, along with "fan based" perspectives, to interpret the identity and value of the item girl and item song in conjunction with academic lenses. Additionally, I was able to connect with some hardcore fan fiction writers of Bollywood, who had created a counterculture of film criticism, while working within the industry and were connoisseurs of Bollywood, who are writing and critiquing the item girl as a counter cultural feminist icon. Item songs and their dancers obviously have a cult following in this group of participants and many lent their amazing expertise and hot *gupshup* on sleazy producers exploiting struggling starlets.

d) Finally, and most importantly, I must give the credit to my parents- who were able to connect me with industry veterans, who had worked in the Bombay film industry for many decades and seen its transformation in the corporate Bollywood globalized

industry. My mother not only connected me with some prominent figures in the film industry, but also assisted me in my research by asking important questions which helped generate fantastic discourse and helped my participants feel more comfortable about sharing information. The veterans shared an institutional memory, in her presence, which proved to be invaluable to establishing the credibility of the history in this study.

In the following section, we will approach the research as a narrative with efforts to insert participant responses to understand the step-by-step breakdown of the conceptualization and production of item songs. To keep the participants anonymous, I will describe their background generically so that we can understand their process and involvement in formulating item songs.

Research Analysis

I. What is the main purpose of the item song to a Bollywood Film?

Some of my early interviews were mostly with female participants, which gave me a great head start to discuss women's representation in Bollywood films, especially item songs, with women who had experience working in the Bollywood industry. This type of a non-audience reader response divorced the discourse from the gaze and focused more on the technicalities of film production. For instance, my very first participant was a veteran female filmmaker turned channel head who has directed several shows and films, worked in choosing scripts, and managed a prime channel during the 1990s globalization and satellite TV boom. She quite blatantly described India as a "myopic society," and item songs as a reflection of it. While globalization has catalyzed the conservative society in becoming more liberal by dancing to item songs in weddings and parties, it also depicts restlessness hidden in the society, which is slowly breaking out of the conservative patriarchy that is suffocating the technologized youth. Item songs have successfully percolated to the Indian middle-class families and challenged their

notions of how women are expected to perform chastity and abide by the purity myth, according to the industry veteran. The director sees item songs as a mirror of the society, endorsing for the importance of the item song as invaluable cultural artifact for understanding gender politics in India.

The veteran female filmmaker also gave a fantastic historical context of the early vamps who wore revealing clothes and colored lenses, had short hair, smoked with a cigarette holder and were all westernized (or even foreigners) such as Helen, Nadira and even as early as Anglo-Indian stunt woman Fearless Nadia. The vamp had to seduce the hero in some way, and could not be a Plain Jane, although repeatedly the hero would pick the heroine for her simplicity and Indian-ness. The filmmaker gave the example of Bindu, a popular vamp in early cinema, who had an oomph factor, but was also a vamp with the heart of gold and a shoulder to cry on for the heartbroken hero (especially in 1973 film *Abhimaan*, her most popular role). The audience keeps expecting the hero to stray away from his values and his woman by choosing the vamp, but he never does as he returns to the heroine after their conflict ends. In contemporary times however, the gap between the yesteryear vamp and heroine has started to diminish because the heroine has started to wear revealing clothes and appears more westernized, creating a space for the item girl. While the earlier vamps did item songs as well as provided the romantic conflict and tension, the contemporary item girl is used strictly for the promotional item song. Although storytelling would become easier if the vamp came back where she is not merely an accessory, but the revival of vamp would also eliminate the item girl, predicted the female filmmaker.

Casting agents, unlike the talent and choreographers, are quick to disassociate any art and style with the item song. This fact reflects a fascinating bias based upon the priorities of Bollywood. While creatively leaning industry insiders are seeing the dance performance as art,

the production house treats the item song as marketable commodity where these perspectives can complement, rather than exclude, the other. One casting agent, for example, defined item songs as “the song that takes the audience to the film,” describing it as a “foot tapping number” which provides the festival economy of India with hit songs. The interesting prediction they made about item songs was hinting towards the death of its shameless objectification of women, as more male stars are taking on that additional attention by flaunting their six pack in competition: citing that it is vulgar either way. In contemporary times, the item girl has lost her role as a character in the narrative and reduced to a "guest appearance" or a marketing insert in a film. Contemporary Bollywood cinema, unlike the older films, has cut out all the character actors and become mostly hero centric

To understand the evolution of item songs, one must look at the evolution of Bollywood. Discoursing with older veteran industry insiders provided a fascinating in-depth perspective on this evolutionary process. A veteran poet and lyricist associated with some of the most progressive and artistic cinema historicized this evolutionary process dating back to Sanskrit theater where the female actor was always referred to as the “Ganika” or the one who pleases and performs for her male audience, indicating that the infrastructure of the entertainment industry has always been gendered and patriarchal. Although in several renaissance periods of Sanskrit theater, the Ganika had powerful roles, it mostly always reflected an inequality in gender roles. The Indian film industry is reflective of this same narrative structure, with a mandatory dance performance by the *ganika* or crowd-pleaser, who is always a female. This history and the role of the female performer is rooted in “pleasing men” which has been shaped by the patriarchal mindset of Indian culture and the films in turn perpetuate it. When I asked my interviewees about an item song such as “*Kajra Re*” replacing the top wedding songs from the past, which were

always more family oriented such as the *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (1994) film songs, they said that the normalization of item songs as a formula in Bollywood films is reflective of our society.

Drawing a stark parallel between the older cabaret song from Helen's era and today's item songs- the lyricist talked about the profound messages behind the songs sung by the vamps of the 60s and 70s. The yesteryear cabaret song "*Babujee dheere chalna, pyaar mein zara sambhalna,*" was cited as an example. Its lyrics feature a street smart, poetic fallen woman who knows the harsh realities of life and is not protected (by patriarchy) as is the virginal heroine. She advises the hero and offers him confidence by flaunting her bravery in a male dominated world.

Discussing the witty wisdom and the poetic abilities of the older depictions of *ganika* or the female performer, who challenges the hero in musical banter and takes back the power from the patriarchal hero; the contemporary item girl, however, does neither, besides furthering gender violence and inequality, according to the lyricist. While the lyricist is nostalgic for the artistry of a previous expression, this change in content does reflect social change. He locates the problem in consumerism and "marketability" which has led to a loss of "independence" of the filmmaker and films are churned out for mass production. According to the lyricist, the loss of independence is not only creative but also economic. Where the filmmaker is a slave to the market and the market dictates what stories are told and how they are told. The lyricist declared the item song as an "unsaid norm" of the formula factory filmmaking, dictated by statistics and figures which have proved that an item song brings the audiences to theaters to watch the film. The early film promo included a trailer with a few glimpses of the song and the audience would have to watch the entire film to catch the song and subsequently buy the cassettes and CDs to listen to the soundtracks. However, in contemporary times, the entire video songs are released on TV music channels and YouTube, where the songs become the "jingle" and the primary

promotional tool for the film. There has also been a sharp decline in the duration of the film promotion from 6 weeks to 3 weeks, which has proved to be enough time for the people to repeatedly listen, love and learn a song. Additionally, resurgence of remix songs (remixing older songs with new beats) has proved to be profitable, where the songs that are already in people's psyche and memory are revived with a new flair, new packaging, and a new item girl.

The economics and class politics of item songs were very cleverly explained by my next participant, a young, socialist screenwriter who discussed the *Gujjufication* of the Bollywood, after the election of Narendra Modi who came hails from Gujarat. A dry and conservative state, Gujarat has been affiliated with extreme right-wing politics and Hindutva fanaticism since many years. The state's politics have been major catalysts to the Hindu-Muslim communal riots and religious dogmatism against other oppressed minorities of India. The election of Modi and rise of Gujarati businessman Mukesh Ambani has led to a disintegration of the Indian welfare state, due to the rapid privatization, and a rise of fascism in the country. Prior to Gujjufication, in the 1990s to early 2000s, Punjabis (belonging to Punjab region in India) ruled the industry as evident in the major lyrics of most songs from that era which had Punjabi words like '*makhna*' and '*soniyo*'. Punjabis known for their "*Mast Punjabi*" nature, which is dictated by their jolly and festive character, also are known for their extremely expensive, elite Delhi weddings. These weddings and DJ parties are prime target audiences for driving up the "marketability" aspect of the item song that several of the interviewees discussed. The films also catered to the NRI (Non-Resident of India) and the Punjabi Sardar community of the UK and the US. The audience and the films were concerned with having an enjoyable time, eating, drinking, and partying.

The *Gujjufication* opposed these morals (of Punjabis) and called for a "*sanskarization*" that we discussed in Chapter 1- Sexual Politics of Item songs. This *sanskarization*, according to the

screenwriter, has led to a heavy moral and literal policing of citizens with a rise of propaganda films promoting nationalism and glorifying the state repressive apparatuses such as the police and military in the name of patriotism³². The Gujjufication of the industry and the current socio-political climate of India under the Modi administration vilifies any dissent, especially from Bollywood, due to its cultural and soft power. The economic boom and a promise of “New digital India” by Narendra Modi used cinema as a state apparatus where the films focus on the preservation of Indian culture. Therefore, item songs as a formula in Bollywood provide an escape from the narrative where men can fantasize while their wives are with them and appeal to the NRI and the diaspora audience as well. Or in short, the songs are like a 5-minute window of sleaze in a 2-hour movie of traditions, according to the socialist scriptwriter. Item songs have thus become an escape from this binary and have undergone a change in tonality and become normalized and mainstream in the past six to eight years. As they become more popular, they are no longer only objectifying women, but are also a part of the larger economy such as providing the beats for the party-goes that fuel India’s festival and wedding economies. These beats for the youth are revived and remixed by appealing to millennials (like me, who enjoy the 90’s and 00’s beats being brought back in remix item songs) as well as *zoomers* who are using these beats for pastiche effects on social media trends such as Tik Tok dance videos.

As noted in my earlier discussion relating to sexual and body politics, Item songs are also used to salvage reputations and make a comeback. The screenwriter discussed examples of popular conventional heroines who have performed item songs to feature their physical transformations and replace their images of being fat. The heroines might also perform item

³² Contemporary films such as *Uri* (2019) which glorify the Indian Army and pro Hindu nationalism have recently gained mass popularity as government targeted filmmakers who opposed the anti-Muslim government and Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

songs if they want to get over a bad breakup or salvage their reputation after a string of commercially unsuccessful movies. Lastly, the economics of item songs are also dictated by their affordability as they can be shot in four to five days and the heroines who perform can move on to other projects as item songs are easy money for performers. The songs are also helpful in the marketing of a film and have contributed to the rise of dancing reality shows.

II. How does the item girl contrast the lead heroine in a film's narrative?

In terms of approaching the two dominant female representations in a masala Bollywood film, the virgin, and the vamp: we must understand the body politics (as we explored in Chapter 1- Sexual Politics of Item girl) that dictate the casting, the similarities, the overlap, and the differences between them both. But the main body politics that dictate these differences, especially in contemporary songs, is very crucial to investigate. For this section, I focused on interviewing participants that deal directly with the models and actors such as choreographers and dancers and the talent themselves.

Talking about the economics of Bollywood, I interviewed a backup dancer to understand the treatment the dancers and item girls received in Bollywood. Items girls earn most of their money from dancing at events (award functions and weddings) as well as doing reality TV shows. It was shocking for me to find that the item girl gets paid much less in comparison to other stars although the song production may be big budget. This is true, especially for a new girl or a foreigner where the exchange for a low pay is the promotion of the song, as well as a multi song contract. For example, several participants confirmed that top item girl Nora Fatehi was paid little for her early appearances until she became the in-house star dancer for leading Bollywood production house T-Series. Financial advancement can also result if a song becomes a huge commercial hit, the item girl will earn more money from her succeeding songs if she delivers hit songs. The basic premise

is while starting out, the item girl will either get money or an opportunity, not both. If the item girl has performed in a song and has become a star, then she can hike her pay, but only after her first super hit song. There is usually an agreement with the music label for three or five songs; sometimes the item girl is paid in the bulk (for instance, the first song may become famous while the second may be a flop). Additionally, managers take 30% commission for managing and bringing work for the actresses. In Bollywood, a talent cannot do anything without a management company, and cannot work for any other label/company without the permission of the company with whom she has a contract.

The dancer also spoke about the trend of non-Indian women- where India's talent gets buried under this foreign fetish as audiences prefer white women and foreign backup dancers to Indian performers. Some popular Bollywood item girls, such as Nora Fatehi and Ellie Avram, are from Middle Eastern countries but have an Indian touch and South Asian features although they all have much lighter skin than average Indians. Several interviews also confirmed that foreign talent is also paid much higher than Indian item girls, denoting obnoxious racism and colorism in the film industry. Additionally, according to the backup dancer, White female dancers get different continental food from the production (from better restaurants) and double the pay of Indian dancers, which is 1-2 lakhs INR (approx. \$ 2,500) per day for main talent. However, foreign item girls are also pressured to compromise and their vulnerability of being outsiders is often exploited. Their immigrant status, as they do not have the baggage of family and Indian traditions, is often translated into demanding more skin show from them. Sometimes, they are poor girls from poor countries with large families (Like yesteryear iconic vamp Helen, who was a Burmese refugee); some will work because of financial demands, however being associated with casting and talent agencies often protects them from exploitation, according to the dancer.

Next, speaking of “audience pullers” or elements that attract the audience to theaters, my research participant, a female fashion model, spoke explicitly about overt sexual representation or crass oversexualized depictions as the newer ingredient of getting audiences interested in films and TV shows. Citing examples of Web and OTT shows (free from the clutches of censor board) such as Balaji’s *Gandi Baat* (Translation: Dirty Talk) and *4 more Shotz* which are not only hyper-sexualized but also feature bold female characters. It is interesting that the model spoke about this misrepresentation, which is not only commodifying feminism, but also as Western feminists do, tends to be exclusionary and upper class and upper caste oriented. While bold female characters tend to oppose hyper patriarchal culture like India’s, it is also furthering the caricature of a liberated woman as the one who is hyper Westernized, tying back to our notion of the Westernized vamp who opposes Indian patriarchy and erases the struggles of intersectional feminist warriors such as Phoolan Devi and Savitribai Phule who belonged to oppressed classes. The model spoke extensively about the phenomenon of highly popular white item girls and backup dancers and assessed that no matter “how much ever Bollywood will try to say that we like dark skinned people, it’s a fucking lie! They want somebody who is fair skinned, has a waist that is like 24 inches, and a rack that is big.” This statement confirmed the existence of rampant colorism in the Bollywood industry that typecasts darker women as "village belles" or members of low income and lower caste groups. Smashing the *bakwaas* on body positivity in Bollywood, the model shared her experiences and struggles in an industry full of nepotism, sexual harassment, and favoritism.

It is interesting to contrast the perspective of the model with that of an extremely popular Bollywood casting agent who scouts for a leading film company known for making gritty, neo noir/realist films popular for dark and raw sexual representations. When I asked him about the

body politics of casting women as item girls, for instance: is there a typical body type that would demarcate the difference between the heroine and the anti-heroine? he was quick to deny that they would ever partake in casting for item songs. However, most of his casting in the past has been for films that disrupt the binary between the good and the bad. Acclaimed in casting for social films, he is known for casting unique female actors that challenge the hegemonic idea of the constructed Indian femininity that is desexualized and powerless. While he confirmed that their approach to casting is based on what the script demands out of a character and how the actor comes closest to embodying that, he also pointed out that there was plenty of politics and bureaucracy associated with casting. Drawing a stark parallel between the casting approaches between social films vs. *masala* Bollywood films, the casting agent gave examples of Anurag Kashyap, Vishal Bharadwaj as social film directors who “don’t give a damn about looks” and focus on the acting as the primary quotient for casting an actor vs. commercial films that demand “pleasing looks for every character” or “*achche chehre*” (translation: people with good faces). Giving a unique example of casting for a script based on a book, he stated that they have to stick to the character description in the book else, the readers will complain. Describing casting as a star-driven process where the star is assigned to a script (because Bollywood films need a star to lead the film, due to the jitters some producers may have or because only a star can guarantee box office success) and the pre-production process only takes off after the “star” has been signed on for the project, unless the script demands fresh faces. Citing competition for screen space due to mass production of Indian films, theaters get only two weeks to evaluate box office success and decide if the film stays on or not. Unlike European cinema, with a singular film industry, Indian films are more expensive in styles, genres and platforms and a higher demand which leads to quantity over quality. As a burgeoning industry, the mass production of Indian films has led to

a vast landscape of films in diverse languages and genres. Hence, item songs + casting known faces is needed to attract the initial crowds and then the merit of the film decides the fate.

III. How do the item songs increase the marketability of a film?

The foot tapping, dance number that fuel several DJ parties in India, a culture that is primarily responsible for the popularity of item songs and hit songs, led me to interview a choreographer turned event manager- who delved into the economics of festivities. Known for facilitating events as well as casting/ booking talent for events- this participant was crucial in unpacking what “the marketability” aspect of entertainment truly meant. In this age of fast popularity with social media influencers and celebrity driven culture, he spoke about the abundance of content especially with InstaReels and Tik-Tok. The casting agent’s perspective on Tik-Tok was that the app's popularity will be short-lived, where Tik-Tok performers with large follower pools on social media are replacing Bollywood celebrities because they are cheaper (and more popular now). But the casting agent states that this is unsustainable since their talent (or the lack thereof) is exposed once they face the camera, as they are not trained. Their perspective that “only the trained actor will survive”, gives us a peek at the exclusivity of categorizing actors as “insiders” vs. “outsiders”. Where star kids are trained and groomed for their big debuts while “outsiders” represent the millions who come to Mumbai each year to try their luck in Bollywood but fail. How is one supposed to get any on-screen training in an industry that is as deeply guarded as Bollywood? Due to the democratized nature of Tik Tok, it has also been associated with low culture or even counterculture, where Bollywood is the hegemonic industry. This dialogue came up in several interviews especially given that Tik Tok is highly politicized right now with Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi banning Tik Tok as a dig

at China, followed by Trump banning Tik-Tok and Zuckerberg launching InstaReels in competition, despite antitrust hearings.

What I observed through this discourse is the difference between the new and the old, where the folks who are newer to the industry seem open to OTT platforms and don't devalue Tik-Tok talent as crass, inauthentic form of visual entertainment. Folks who have been associated with the industry since before its corporatization are quick to dismiss the predicted "death of film" citing that when satellite tv, internet etc. first came, the same was said about films.

IV. What are the technical differences between shooting an item song vs. a regular film song? For e.g. Is there a difference between the principal choreography of an item song and a romantic Bollywood song? What is the lighting technique used for shooting an item song? How are the backup dancers arranged differently from a non-item song?

In understanding the specific conventions of item songs that separate it from other songs, I interviewed two veteran choreographers who have both worked in Bollywood as well as other regional cinemas and have an impressive portfolio of item and non-item songs, some extremely iconic and remade as remixes.

The first choreographer, a younger male established dance director, who has been in the industry for years and has many hit item songs under his belt -- discussed these hit songs as "career makers" citing examples of "*Apsara Aali*" and "*Wajle ki Barah*" as iconic dance songs-- where one hit song can build a career for an item girl and she can continue to milk an income out of it for years-- although she is still fighting to build a parallel career and earn "bread butter" through it. Discussing the terminology "item" itself, the choreographer states that it is a Mumbaiya lingo where in Marathi "*Saaman*" or "*Maal*" in Hindi and translated in English as

“goods” -- has solidified and legitimized the name under “item” song, quite literally a song displaying goods. Talking about the new shows on OTT platforms such Netflix, Amazon Prime, Zee5 etc. the choreographer discusses the scandalous nature of these shows that have sex, nudity, violence, foul language, drugs and alcohol in abundance (Sacred Games, Mirzapur etc.) These shows take it too far, making family audiences uncomfortable and an awkward audience demographic, “item songs” however, play peek a boo and tweak the viewer’s imagination.

Breaking down the process of shooting an item song, the choreographer often gets a lot of creative control outside of just the dance steps, they are sometimes involved in the process of everything from costume and ambience of the song. In contrast to earlier times (90s and 00s), where an item song was inserted as a promotional insert, the contemporary product is more predesigned and professional³³. When the director approaches a choreographer with an audio in a music sitting (in this case an item song), it is enough for the choreographer to visualize the setting and mood of the song. Calling it the “effect” of the song, the choreographer described this visualization as an imagination that allows them to associate color, effects elements such as fire, smoke and water for ambience and costume setting. Next based on the script, and production values a location recce is conducted for the song. Speaking in detail about costume design, the choreographer broke down the process of “canvassing” and color scheme for the song; a typical Bollywood song is high budget and often shot in exotic locales³⁴. When I probed them about being “inspired” or stealing references of pop stars such as JLo, Beyonce, Shakira etc. for item songs- they confirmed that it is a customary practice of cultural exchange (where the West is

³³ See Professionalism as a relic of white capitalism. As Bollywood gets more corporatized, production houses have become more streamlined in terms of budgeting and schedules.

³⁴ A song in a typical Bollywood is often set in a different temporal and spatial continuum and is detached from the narrative. Unlike a Hollywood musical that incorporates dialogue in the song lyrics, a Bollywood song is often poetic and not furthering the narrative through the lyrics.

constantly appropriating Bollywood as well) and is often probed by the art director and filmmakers.

Talking about the setup of the item song, the choreographer talked about the backup dancers as the filler “volume” and the lavish set as the ambience that can often save a lead star who may be a terrible dancer. By setting up the volume of dancers around a star, who are dancing doubly hard in the background and provide the hero with a grand entrance. Next, the editing of the song is crucial in its presentation, as it sometimes transitions between the narrative and back, the audience often missing the seamless transition. The choreographer also spoke about the difference between working in different regional cinemas- where Bhojpuri item songs are more vulgar and crass in exceptionally low budget films, Marathi songs are more modest in costume, but very kinky lyrics and Bollywood is all the above, but in much higher budget. Citing his experience with working with notorious item girl Rakhi Sawant, the filmmaker explained her experiences between Hindi vs. Marathi film industry, where she was constantly having to navigate her cleavage size depending on the region, where 70% of her Marathi song was cut due to harsher censorship in Marathi films.

Talking about the “item girl” as a focus of the item song; where her performance, her body, her expressions are the solo focus of this song. The bad reputation of the item girl as a vamp is also a part of the theatrics, according to the choreographer, which is also reflective of the Indian mentality. Talking about the rise of real-life bar dancers prior to the 2003 ban on these clubs, the choreographer talks about how they are not allowed to reveal their skin too much or even be touched by the customers- however, it is a costly affair to visit these clubs. The cost of flirting with the bar dancers and dating them is a financial disaster, where patrons were spending up to half a million dollars just to spend a night with them. Some of these bar dancers were often

approached by the choreographers to be cast in films back in the 90s and 00s, but they declined to work on screen and worked in these clandestine clubs often without their parents' knowledge. Cashing in on their youth, these item girls work in a highly competitive profession and have a short shelf life of no longer than a decade while living in the extremely expensive city of Mumbai.

My "second choreographer," a veteran who worships dance, invited me to her home which was congested with awards and statues of Lord Nataraj (Lord of dance). She characterized the earliest item songs as being included to entertain, add conflict in a dramatic film and spice up a dry story - which meant it was linked to the narrative. An example is the iconic film *Don's* vampy song "*Ye Mera Dil*" where Helen does an item number to seduce the Don so she can avenge her fiancé's death. She historicized the era between 1980-1990, where there were often 2 heroines in a film, and one would be negative and then become positive. The heroine in this case would be simple and the vamp would be a bit naughty/negative. Heroines would be desexualized, and the vamp was over sexualized. For e.g., if a group of men is being teased and seduced by a dancer in a club, then she is an item girl, according to the choreographer. However, the heroine only focuses on attracting the hero's gaze and only teases the hero. Private performances are for the heroines, but public performances are of the item girls. The item songs are typically placed in the film for entertainment, like a character going to the bar and an item song is being performed in the background. The song is often not even connected to the story and only created as promotional content. Thus, the treatment of an item song is much different- often hiring a different Director of Photography (DOP) and choreographer's team to direct an item song. The lines between the heroine and the item girl are also blurring where certain films have a trend where a heroine must perform an item song for her film in a cameo or end credit songs,

which gave rise to the trend of substituting heroines for item girls. This was seen as more of an opportunity, where heroines would make a comeback or show how their bodies have changed after radical dieting/exercise regimes/post-pregnancy.

When distinguishing the item girl from the heroine, the second choreographer noted that there is an added demand for the physical appearance/body of the item girl to be highly exceptional. Distinguishing the item girl from the heroine, the choreographer added that there is an added physical pressure on the appearance/body of the item girl as it is expected to be great. She diets and exercises and must keep up a social media appearance (dancers like Ellie Avram and Nora Fatehi are social media stars). Her body and chutzpah are the focus as she must seduce the audience, not just dance. Beauty, height, weight, body proportions and dancing skills are necessary all for item songs. The dress and the song must suit the item girl while she oozes lust and expresses with her body. The cinematography for item songs is aimed towards seduction and titillation. According to this choreographer, even if cleavage and thighs will not be directly exposed or focused on an item song it will be essayed through the camera angles and georgette sarees where sarees became the sexiest outfit but often donned by the heroine- where the audience looks at the heroine differently as an Indianized sex appeal. Item girls however stick to fusion dresses and skimpier outfits with higher focus on their bodies. The dancing has become formulaic in item songs and put in for entertainment, and is almost never connected to the story, it's always repurposed, remade, recycled with older formulas in a cost-effective way.

This veteran female choreographer also spoke at length about the struggles of a dancer in Mumbai. The dancer community is a hard working one and must face much harsher competition as dancers have a short shelf life of 6-7 years and differing pay scales, where it takes a lot of struggles for a dancer to become a choreographer and eventually a director. Stories such as Farah

Khan Kunder and Remo Dsouza are rare exceptions. Subsequently, item girls too are more hardworking than heroines because of stiff competition in the field and higher standards of body and dance are expected from them. Additionally, a lot of foreigners' face racism problems in films and television serials are often unable to organize due to diversity in ethnicities and are often underrepresented by Mumbai film unions such as CINTA.

V. Can you help identify some recurring themes and tropes of an item song to help develop its conventions and definitions?

“If she is not a part of the film’s narrative, then she is an item girl” -- Choreographer

To help develop an operational definition for item songs, it was important to ask all the participants about the purpose of the song as well as the stylistic conventions that set the item song apart from other musical numbers in a Bollywood film. Among many categories, there is the love song(s) displaying the courtship between the main leads, the sad song during the conflict in the narrative, the introductory credit song (includes the title of the film as dominant lyrics and the happy climax song). The item song is the only one that does not often tie into the narrative at all. While all the songs may take place into a different temporal and spatial place from the narrative, they technically symbolize progress in the narrative. For e.g., the love song denotes the peak of the romantic narrative between the hero and the heroine and denotes a completion of their courtship moving onwards to a full-fledged romantic relationship. The item song is, however, confusing to non-Bollywood watchers due to its “guest appearance” nature, where its bizarre presence makes complete sense to Bollywood fans who have accepted this additional glamour in their viewing consciousness.

The younger generation choreographers are more accepting of item songs, and their work portfolios are boosted when they have experience working on hit songs. To many

choreographers, a hit item song under their belt, one that gets performed at weddings, parties, and award functions, is a straight shot to success. Films such as *ABCD 1 & 2*, inspired by *Step Up to the Streets* series, are dance films, where the narrative is driven by and made for poppy dance beats with popularized choreography whose dance steps are picked up by everyone and reperformed on avenues such as Tik Tok. Item song dancers such as Nora Fatehi, according to several participants are in fact paid very less for their film appearances but make much more from reperforming those songs on different platforms such as award functions, dance reality shows and even simply by gracing ribbon cutting ceremonies. One of the younger choreographers gave the example of *Batla House*, a film that gained immense popularity because of Nora Fatehi's dance number "*Saaki Saaki*"- known for its catchy beats and spectacular choreography. Distinguishing between the old item songs vs. the new- the choreographer highlights the difference in treatment- where the newer hits are more popping and treated stylishly and aesthetically, rather than mindless objectification.

The HIT Song

The decline in this crass objectification, according to the choreographer, is because of an overall shift in people's sensibilities and the discourse on women's rights in India. Bigger A-list stars such as Ranbir Kapoor and Shahrukh Khan are opting for popular dance songs to replace item songs. Songs that feature both the leads in visually spectacular sets and cinematography are replacing the imagery of an item song- where a single item girl is dancing in throngs of men who are all groping and harassing her. A "good, hit, peppy" song with evolved choreography has replaced the 90s terrible cinema, according to the choreographer, because films too are evolving- they are more "content driven" films. The definition too, for item songs has evolved with the changing cinema and a need for audiences to have a massive selection of content to watch. With

Amazon Prime, Netflix, YouTube, and local platforms in India such as SonyLiv, ZEE5, HotStar etc. the market too has gotten more competitive. Earlier item songs had suggestive lyrics, tacky and skimpy clothing to denote the garishness of item girls, a man's fantasy, justified by the producers as a need to attract "single- screen rural audiences." However, now it is more performance oriented and reflects a better style and glamorous treatment. Stylistic conventions of the newer item songs interestingly showed a trend of remix/remake songs. Popular songs from the 90s and early 00s are revamped as peppy dance hits with an electronic beat. This trend according to the choreographer speaks for a lack of creativity and a trend perpetuated by the production company T-Series, which has ruled the music and film production for so long that they have rights to all the Bollywood music from the last 4 decades.

Elaborating further on these changing trends in Bollywood films and subsequently item songs- I got to converse with a veteran actor who has worked in theater, films, television and involved with the feminist play *Vagina Monologues* (Indian edition). Their understanding of the item girl as the "other woman" could be understood through two trends. First, in the last three to four years, heroines would do an item song in films to boost the marketability of films. These songs have transitioned towards the bold side where actresses believed that we are actresses, and we are now ready to come down to a level where people can fantasize about us through item songs. These kinds of item songs were also a great comeback vehicle, would break the typical mold of morally upright heroines, and helped to boost the songs at award functions and weddings. The early Items girls were outsiders and foreigners, often without any family or film connections. The contemporary heroines who now go for audition, are handled more professionally, according to the feminist actor. Scenes such as nudity, kissing, and sexual depiction are far more normalized in current Bollywood films and handled more "aesthetically."

Nowadays, young girls are ready to do everything; they all come from good families and can-do explicit sex scenes, queer romance scenes, and other scenes related to sex and sexuality with a much more open mind (there is no need for white women, despite their wild popularity in Bollywood). Girls from good families who are not in need of work (for money but pursue it for glamor and fame) are normalizing item numbers and being item girls, to the point that it is not sexy enough. Sometimes sexuality is performed like a checklist and item songs are a mandatory dance number that is not authentically performed.

Non-Indian Item Girls

Despite its popularity, most popular item girls such as Nora Fatehi, Sunny Leone, Ellie Avram, Katrina Kaif etc. are in fact non- Indians with European features and bodies (some Indian features but still distinctly white. This according to the feminist actor is the second trend in the Hindi film industry its - obsession with White skin where White backup dancers of item songs are cast regularly as they can wear even scantier clothes (possibly because they are used to wearing less clothes if they do ballet or go swimming at the beach stated the actor). There are many self-imposed restrictions on Indian heroines/item girls however such as, no scanty dresses or boyfriends/families might come on set and disrupt their work. A white woman is an immigrant in India, and she will do whatever she is expected to or demanded of her as that is her mode of survival. India has good dancers, but foreigners pick up the dance steps more quickly and do not have inhibitions. Often, the foreign girls perform the song as a dance as they don't understand the words/meanings of the songs. This whole setup is very convenient for choreographers and producers to exploit foreign girls, according to the actor justifying the body politics of item song dancers. The next chapter explores the cultural importance of item girls who emerged as key

whistleblowers in the #MeToo India movement and expands on the exploitation of item song dancers in the Hindi film industry.

Chapter Three: Cultural Politics of Item Songs in India

I have strong views on item numbers because they are not part of the narrative, and they have been put in a film for the only purpose of titillation and nothing else. When a girl or a leading lady says [, sic] ‘It’s all right, I want to celebrate my sensuality,’ I have no problem with that. I think that is wonderful. But under the pretense of ‘celebrating your sensuality,’ what you are doing is surrendering to the male gaze and objectifying yourselves because the business of cinema is of images. People are shown fragmented bits of a woman’s body, heaving bosom, swinging navel, and shaking hip. (Azmi)

Over a decade of interest and research in the various genres of Bollywood cinemas and the various versions of its histories has produced within me a sort of conflict and possessiveness towards the topic. The conflict arises from the confusion and dilemma of explaining a complex film industry to audiences who tend to oversimplify its structure and culture. For example, not every Bollywood film is a musical; and not every musical is escapist fare. Self-assessment of this chagrin has led me to believe that this possessiveness stems from an endless need to protect Bollywood from being exoticized and dismissed as a fantastical and spectacular artifact, a meaningless film industry in comparison to its western counterpart. When considering the dismissal of Bollywood, Tejaswini Ganti compares its hegemonic relationship to Hollywood and proposes that the framework to understanding Bollywood needs to “denaturalize and de-westernize conventional understandings of mainstream film production and dislodge Hollywood from its default position.” (Ganti, 176) This hegemonic discourse is important not only to understand how Bollywood films are crafted but also to investigate the finer nuances of how Western genre studies can sometimes be a deterrent to unpacking Bollywood “musicals.”

While it is important to understand artifacts coming from the “third world” or postcolonial cinema in relation to the Empire, in this chapter I will attempt to develop and

analyze item songs using as much organic research from South Asian scholars as possible. I especially wish to explore the cultural and affective politics of item songs and item girls relative to the discourse of women's rights movements in India. This analysis is particularly important given the lack of research related to this subject. My study includes a close analysis of key films, interviews with producers in the industry and several other forms of discourses that have shaped the cinematic representations of the item girl. The cultural impact of item girls specifically to the landscape of India is a crucial topic of engagement as India currently deals with a rise of conservative ideologies with the 2014 election of the nationalist right-wing political party BJP. The election of the hyper conservative political power BJP and their leader Narendra Modi has not only affected the women's rights and the marginalization of vulnerable communities in India, but also bled into overall stiction of film censorship, which we will explore in the next chapter that deals with the legal and economic politics of the item songs.

The main aim of this chapter will be to understand the cultural contributions of item songs and their infamous item girls in relation to the dialogues that are shaping the conversations on gender politics in India, especially after the 2012 Delhi gang-rape. This chapter will explore several nuances that have collectively acted as catalysts to bringing the women's rights movement in focus, and the item song/girl as the important constituent that blurs the oversimplified explanations that pin all the blame of gendered crimes on the representation of the dancing girls in Bollywood alone. First, I will look at the cultural shifts in Indian media towards female performers, especially in the light of the #Metoo movement that designated the language of empathy to approach conversations of sexual harassment. Historicizing how some of those very victims had been blamed in the past, the shift in media and public reception is important to denote how the democratization of previously academically guarded ideologies like Feminism

and Marxism came to the forefront and helped shape the discourses of sexual harassment in India. The following section will attempt to demystify hegemonic discourses on representations of women in celluloid that tend to claim that women are objectified on screen for the male gaze. While mostly true, the item song also breaks the conventions of gender expectations when it places the power in the hands of the female performer. The power of male gazing is displaced when the object in focus is male, borrowing stylistic and representational elements from their female counterparts. And finally, the chapter will attempt to understand the cultural impact of item girl icons like Sunny Leone, who are slowly but surely destigmatizing the dancing women of Bollywood and influencing cinematic representations where item girls are agents of their own narratives.

The Cultural Politics of Item Songs and their Item Girls

The two notable events that have shaped the discourses on women's rights movement in contemporary times is the 2012 Delhi gang rape of medical student Jyoti Singh and the ripples of the #MeToo movement that gained traction in India. While the Nirbhaya gangrape had legal ramifications that resulted in policy change, the #MeToo India movement has a cultural impact which has begun to change the way Bollywood treats its women, especially the representation of item girls. The #MeToo movement in India had two bifurcations, one was a more organic discourse sparked by Raya Sarkar's "List" that named all the upper caste faculty sexual abusers, and its impact on Indian academia. Whereas the second wave was focused on sexual abuse, harassment, and casting couch scandals in Bollywood. The year 2018 shook India with Sarkar's list and #MeToo which started with ex Miss India turned Bollywood actor Tanushee Dutta recounting the horrors she faced working with National Film Award Winner Nana Patekar.

In the explosive 2018 interview with Zoom TV, Dutta resurfaced with her accusations of harassment against Patekar on the sets of the 2009 film *Horn 'OK' Pleassss* saying, “Everyone knows about Nana Patekar that he has always been disrespectful towards women. People in the industry know that he has beaten actresses, [sic] he has molested them. His behavior with women has always been crude but no publication has printed anything about it.” Dutta’s grievances against Patekar and Bollywood at large echoed the bigger conversations and protestations against India’s culture of victim blaming and discrediting women in the face of powerful men who are their abusers. Dutta’s claims in 2009 were dismissed which prompted her to take a decade long hiatus at the peak of her career after she was bullied and harassed by political goons who came to Patekar’s defense. Additionally, Patekar’s humanitarian efforts in emancipating drought affected Indian farmers, who are vulnerable to farmer suicides due to disenfranchisement of local businesses in neoliberal economies, rendered him indestructible in the face of Dutta’s accusations. Dutta claimed:

Everyone has gossiped about this but have never spoken. People with this kind of character speak like this against the kind of character that I have because they say she does glamorous roles so must be glamorous and all. Behind the back, they are so dirty. When you are in the industry you hear so many stories about these actors. But these things never take surface because they are PR packaged very well. They will give some money to some poor farmers. How much they do and how much they don't, no one knows. But all this is just for show. (Dutta)

While Dutta had acted on these claims in 2009 by going to the police, her sensational 2018 Zoom interview came as a response to the #MeToo movement that gained momentum in Hollywood after civil rights activist Tarana Burke began to use “me too” to raise awareness about sexual violence and harassment.

The important trajectory here is to discuss the status of Dutta’s claims from 2009-2018. While her 2018 interview was a vital catalyst to the #Metoo movement, her initial claims in 2009

where she declared that: “Everyone knew, said nothing”, were met with a mellower reaction and eventually the scandal died down without much hoopla (Dutta). What caused this change in approaching the whistleblowers of Bollywood, who are mostly women and outsiders, in bringing focus to the dynasty politics and systematic oppression in Bollywood? The credibility of these whistleblowers is the first element to be questioned. The assemblages of the entire harassment scandal, when taken apart and viewed separately, discredit and blame the victim. In Dutta’s case, Patekar harassed her on set when she was performing an item song. As a result of this, an item girl’s boundaries of consent become porous. Bernadette Barton focuses on these blurry boundaries and the rampant sexual harassment faced by exotic dancers. Barton’s analysis on the stickiness of consent in exotic dancing is applicable to this research, and to the politics of how an item girl is treated on set. Barton states that one of the most aggressive rape myths in exotic dancing is that arousing a man without allowing him to satisfy his lust, would result in dangerous consequences. (Barton, 573)

Dismissing one of the biggest gender myths, where men have a monopoly over aggression, Anne Fausto-Sterling’s magnum research rubbishes the “universal trait” that men have an uncontrollable sexual desire and when mixed with their testosterone driven aggression, leads to rape. (Fausto-Sterling, 190) Additionally, Fausto-Sterling also dismantles the sexual differences and sexual divisions of labor as cultural and not universal, and no one gender has a right over sexual violence and jealousy (Fausto-Sterling, 196) In that case, Dutta’s performance on the sets of her item song or her previous work as an item girl made her a “soft target” to Patekar as insinuated by the moral policing media is questionable. While Dutta’s positionality as an item girl made her an “easy” victim, it is also her status as an outsider that did not garner her any support from the media when she came out with her accusations in 2009. “Outsiders” or

actors from non-*filmi* backgrounds are constantly gaslighted by the media because they don't nearly possess as much social capital as Bollywood insiders do. Bollywood whose foundation and relationships are molded by nepotism, in which every star-kid is guaranteed a big budget debut and several chances to revive their dying careers. Hence, performers like Dutta from non-*filmi* backgrounds are heavily ostracized if they are whistleblowers on Bollywood's unfair and oppressive culture.

Item Girls as Outsiders and Whistleblowers

Barton uses Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* to understand this "othering" of the female exotic dancer, questioning the notion of consent and self-objectification. (Beauvoir, 585) The act of othering under neoliberal globalized Bollywood occurs even among the community of item dancers, as they compete against each other in the hierarchy of status, class, and respect. For instance, when Dutta was outcast from the film for blowing the horn on Patekar, she was replaced by the sleazy and brash item girl Rakhi Sawant, to which Dutta mocked the filmmaker saying they could have at least replaced her with someone better than Sawant (Chauhan). The othering of Rakhi Sawant has been a public hobby as she's never been taken seriously by the media even when she herself was sexually assaulted (on camera) not too long ago. Sawant's tryst with Indian media's gaslighting after she sensationalized the news by publicly pressing charges against bad boy singer Mika Singh is an interesting conjecture to analyze because of the public and media reactions to her claims at the time. Sawant's very public testimony became parodic as her English accent was mocked by the media and the whole debacle was thoroughly enjoyed by audiences. Mika Singh released a song in retaliation about why he forcibly kissed her, which also topped the charts. The song was meant to be funny, reenacting the whole episode in a satirical way. Mika got to take ownership of the story by mockingly representing it: she turns up in a sexy

red bodycon to his birthday and he forcibly grabs her face and harshly smooches her. In reality, the whole thing was caught on camera and circulated amongst news channels; the crassness and sexual abuse was evident in those images, and yet her “vernacular”³⁵ accent is what stayed in the public memory, not the sexual harassment.

While this would have been a fantastic opportunity for coalitional feminism among the item girls Dutta and Sawant, who both faced sexual harassment in Bollywood, Dutta chose to classify herself as a non-item girl when compared to Sawant. It is important to note, furthermore, that such instances of celebrities obtaining shifting views about sexual harassment should not be understood as personified direct accusations towards these actresses. Instead, this discussion highlights the shape-shifting dynamics of coalitional politics. For example, when Mika Singh was recently arrested in Abu Dhabi for sending lewd images to a 17-year-old minor Brazilian model, Sawant uploaded a video on her Instagram, crying for Mika’s return; Sawant’s Instagram has close to 600k followers due to her over dramatic antics.

Dutta’s interview opened the floodgates to the #MeToo movement in India and Bollywood specifically. The response to this movement in India employed a different vehicle than usual, the internet became a key player to weigh in the support of other celebrities whose sentiments mostly resonated with Dutta’s. This was fascinating because the typically apolitical Bollywood fraternity was fiercely taking a stand in support of Dutta, as actors like Priyanka Chopra, Farhan Akhtar and filmmaker Hansal Mehta tweeted in support of Dutta, employing a language of empathy in support of the survivors. Following this, several influential and unsuspecting names emerged in Bollywood #MeToo such as Vikas Bahl (filmmaker of the famous feminist film *Queen*), Alok Nath (popular actor playing roles of the traditional Indian

³⁵ Vernacular or Vernac is a commonly used slur in India against people who can’t speak proper English. Knowing fluent English is a symbol of upper-class status.

father), and Sajid Khan (veteran filmmaker and Bollywood insider). All the names mentioned above faced media backlash and consequences because of their names coming up in the #MeToo movement. This shift in media and public opinion is important to dismantle because it was hugely influential in changing the gaze towards the subaltern, feminized victim. The victims in this case, such as Dutta and Sawant, were formerly always treated as whistleblowers and outsiders who were exposing the dark side of the film industry and were severely punished by being cast out of it.

The othering and casting out of item girls by media outlets, film fraternity, and audiences is not something exclusively faced by Dutta, but a commonly occurring phenomenon in Bollywood. Mallika Sherawat, Bollywood's notorious item girl and "serial kisser"³⁶ blew the whistle on Bollywood (and India) in 2013 when she told Variety magazine at Cannes, "I made a conscious decision to divide my time between Los Angeles and India. So, when I enjoy the social freedom in America and go back to India, which is so regressive for women, it is depressing. As an independent woman, it's really depressing." Sherawat received a lot of opposition and flak from the media and Bollywood colleagues such as Priyanka Chopra who called her callous for "misrepresenting India." However, the globalization and the corporatization of Bollywood has blurred the nationalist lines where Bollywood actors are no longer seen as allegories for the nation as Frederic Jameson once proposed³⁷. Due to globalization and the neo liberalization of Bollywood, actors such as Priyanka Chopra, Deepika Padukone etc. are frequently collaborating with Hollywood artists and productions. Additionally, Hollywood productions such as Walt Disney, Sony and Fox Star Studios are continually

³⁶ Sherawat rose to popularity after kissing 17 times on-screen in her debut film *Khwaahish*, following which, most of Sherawat's roles were sleazy, although she was a decent performer and dancer.

³⁷ See Fredric Jameson's discussions on the national allegory

producing Bollywood films, bringing the corporatized culture with them. Corporate, or in this case, celebrity feminism is being shaped by the #MeToo movement in Bollywood, opening a dialogue for other gendered oppressive practices such as pay inequality and female objectification for Bollywood profit.

The shift in the media is reflective of the cultural impact of #MeToo. While popular Indian media networks like *The Times of India* now themselves describes India as an unsafe place for women after the Thomas Reuters Foundation declared India as the most dangerous country for women, in the past they harassed Sherawat for her “India is regressive towards women” statement. A popular, widely read English newspaper Times of India thrashed Sherawat by stating that Sherawat “clearly got carried away at Cannes” when she decided to “wash her dirty linen in public,” implying that Sherawat was pleasing the white interviewers by portraying India as inferior. *The Times of India* further said that her honorary Los Angeles citizenship had gotten to her head and that she should move to LA where “...perhaps she finds the dating scene preferable to Mumbai's. That's her prerogative.” (Jalan) After that controversy, Sherawat only appeared in 3 more films and her film career flopped. In the contemporary times of #MeToo, however, Sherawat is given the space to tell the media and readers about her own experiences with sexual harassment where she declared that she was left traumatized.

As discourses on feminism and women’s rights in India evolve, the dialogue in media has shifted too, which often tended to blame item songs for the culture of objectification of women leading to a rise in gendered violence. Prior conversations tended to blame representations of women and especially the oversexualized item girls for the gender inequality in India, without diagnosing the systemic patriarchy that has seeped into the moral fiber of Indian culture. Oversimplification of patriarchal crimes and scapegoating item girls, pornography and

Westernization of India is a usual form of epistemic violence that ends up conflating all the item song scenarios and depictions into one broad category. Additionally, the recent rise of Western media in India such as Huffington Post India is bringing with it a brand of bubblegum feminism that reiterates and breaks down Bollywood films in the categories of films made for the classes vs. masses, and tends to dismiss commercial cinema, placing superiority on indie and Hollywood films, often targeting item songs for bringing down the value of films.

True connoisseurs and fans, however, love Bollywood formula films and can differentiate between situational item songs. Popular Bollywood bloggers and fans such as *dontcallitbollywood* confirm this characterization by pointing out that there are several types of situational item songs, some are parodic, spoofing male desire; while some declare the power of the dancer over her audience, and then there are others where the female flaunts her desire by taking ownership of her sexuality. These are important to delineate as conversations tend to oversimplify item songs as a cheap Bollywood tactic directed towards the male gaze that singularly objectifies female dancers.

Male Item Songs

The cultural impact of item songs extends spectatorship when the subject that's being gazed upon changes from the female object to the male "item". In Farah Khan's 2014 film *Happy New Year*, Deepika Padukone plays the role of Mohini - a bar dancing item girl who choreographs a bunch of underdogs attempting to win a dance competition and loot a businessperson, simultaneously. Padukone's entry in the film is marked by an item song "Lovely" where she gyrates in a bikini top and sarong, flaunting her chiseled abs and deep cleavage to an all-male audience in a pole dance bar. However, throughout the film she is shown lusting after Shahrukh Khan's abs, mentally undressing him, setting things on fire whenever she

locks eyes with him. The whole male gaze theory is totally getting disrupted here. Padukone's gaze is not a single instance where heroines or females are gazing at the male hero, but a trend as chiseled abdominal muscles and pecks have become a norm for Bollywood heroes. Super fit dancers like Tiger Shroff and Hritik Roshan with hot bodies are now the focus of songs with the heroine in the background. While there have been several examples of role-reversal for comic or dramatic reasons in past films, this type of erotic male objectification is performative and not exaggerated for masquerading gendered norms. The parallelism between the female objectification of item songs on male representations, however, are only cinematic, not to be confused with any kind of equality on the gender oppression front. The two distinct shared elements focus on the hypersexualized body of the performer and the dancing skills.

Male dancing is an anomaly, with little research on male dancing in comparison to discourses on female dancing as a part of performative gendered labor. Male dancers have always been stigmatized as “effeminate, homosexual male-dancer stereotype” where dancing has always been associated with femininity. (Mennesson, 190) Research among male ballet dancers reflected a need among the male dancer community to display machismo and to hyper masculinize their dance performances; whereas feminine male dancers faced a lot of gay stigmas and were often outcast for not conforming. (Haltom and Worthen, 761) The feminization of the male dancer is evident via his body in the recent trend of male item songs. Their sculpted tan chests almost appear like mammaries, peeking through their body-hugging shirts like a cleavage. The feminized male is often the sole focus of the songs, as the heroine blends with the background, and the camera gazes at the heroes and their grace, their dance moves, and their well-defined bodies. In the song “*Shut up and Bounce*” from *Dostana* (2008), a film where two male friends pretend to be gay lovers to score a swanky condominium that only rents to couples,

John Abraham pulls down his tiny trunks to bare his curvy booty to the audience: so many innuendos. Besides the cheeky ass baring scene, a large chunk of the film fetishes John Abraham, sometimes even more than the film's heroine, Priyanka Chopra.

The beauty myth in Bollywood extends to the male counterparts too as there definitely is a race for achieving a certain body type that immortalizes the most bankable male actors on screen in their Greek-God like avatars. Before Salman Khan's "*Oh Oh Jaane Jaana*" from *Pyar Kiya toh Darna Kya* (1998), the notable Bollywood macho stars like Dharmendra, Vinod Khanna, Kabir Bedi, Jackie Shroff, Sunny Deol were known for their physiques but not objectified in a similar fashion. The emphasis of those films was on their brute strength, deep husky voices and their fighting prowess and not on their dancing skills or well-defined bodies. The recent evolution of Bollywood's male item song resembles the male in the Hollywood's musical which Cohan describes as confusing. Referencing Steve Neale's work on the film *Chariots of Men* (1981) which explores the complexities of masculinity and the male body, Cohan centers the blurriness of spectatorship and objectification particularly in Hollywood musicals. Cohan explores the complexity of musicals where although the male protagonist is the agent of the narrative, the musical number breaks him away from the power so he can dance and become the object of the erotic gaze. Cohan points out that this reversal is antithetical. Only the male is feminized, while the female is never masculinized. In all these examples, the male is borrowing the connotation of being-looked-at-ness from the female but is not trading any power or agency within the narrative with her (Cohan). Similarly, in Bollywood, the objectification of the male dancer only takes place in the temporal and spatial landscapes of the song and the fight scenes. Several actors like Shahrukh Khan for example, go on a strict fitness regime only to go all out for the song, and remain fully clothed for the rest of the film.

Just as male objectification has been a part of Hollywood musicals, Bollywood too has had its tryst with shirtless objectification of men portraying their chiseled and oiled bodies. It began in 1998 from *Pyar Kiya Toh Darna Kya* with Salman Khan dancing shirtless grooving to beats and being teased and cheered by young girls. That song even depicted bouncers having to keep the girls off the stage trying to get to Salman. This objectification intensified over the years especially in Hindi films. Although the male characters in question are the central macho characters in the plot, they are feminized just for the song. In *Ram-Leela* (2013), Ranveer Singh turned the spectacle up a notch by not only being bare-chested but also donning kohl-lined eyes, flat ironed long tresses and a floral underwear peeping from his tight fitted jeans. The song in question (“*Tattad Tattad*”) even goes to the extent of showing women fainting when Ranveer looks at them, poses, and smiles. They cheer him on and go on a mad picture-clicking spree admiring his pelvic thrusts and dance moves.

Shirtless men dominated the modeling and advertising world while donning minimal clothing in underwear or deodorant and cologne advertisements. In the 90s, there was an explosion of Hindi pop videos on television media. One very memorable song was “*k*” by Alisha Chinai, which had her depicted as a queen and her subjects were parading men from all over the world trying to woo her as her suitor. Milind Soman appears from a box bare-chested in a Kamasutra sculpture-like ensemble, marking the introduction of male objectification in India. There were multiple pop songs and advertisements that highlighted bare chested male models like Milind Soman, Dino Morea, Arjun Rampal and John Abraham, among others. However, Bollywood movies’ main draw is the star cast. The hero’s star power is the most crucial factor in driving the audiences to the theaters in the first week of the film’s release, along with the mega hit item song. Both subjects are the star attraction in the film and are responsible for the

economics of a film's release and both their bodies are cosmeticized, sculpted, and sexualized for the audiences. In the next chapter, I will look at the star and celebrity culture of globalized Bollywood that symbiotically influences the business of a film.

With every passing year, the bar is raised in the Bollywood hero's appearance and body aesthetics given the rise of celebrity culture. Complex dance moves and increasingly fitter bodies has become the norm for Bollywood heroes, where every big star is expected to come with abs. One wonders if this is the reversal of the gaze or if this representation is directed toward all audiences. When most of the movie focuses on the machismo of the central male character, and only fetishizes the female, the sudden erotic feminization of the male character only in the song adds to the ambiguity. The consumer of Bollywood cinema is very accustomed to female objectification and is now getting accustomed towards male objectification as well, normalizing objectification in general.

While male objectification does not yield any social outcomes, this type of female objectification, gender discrimination and sexual violence against women depicted in Bollywood cinema is detrimental to the Indian society and could add to misogynistic rampant norms. However, to scapegoat item girls as being the sole generator in the rise of rapes, can be equally harmful. These types of dog whistle gender politics are not reflective of any cultural change and are only furthering gender oppression. The common notion that an item girl is merely an ornament of the film, whose contributions add no appeal to it, is problematic and needs intervention. Instead, an oppositional reading of the item girl needs to place agency on her and understand her contributions as a cultural icon.

The Bashful and Bold Item Girl

The 1960 Indian epic saga *Mughal-e-Azam* ends with Anarkali, the courtesan, voluntarily giving up her life to rescue Prince Salim's, who is her eternal love. She is sentenced to be entombed alive, buried in the walls for her love and for the sake of tragedy. The memory of Anarkali being buried behind walls as the bricks are slowly cemented, is a scene etched in public memory- a fate, accepted by both, the audience and Anarkali. Cut to 2012, where popular item girl Malaika Arora plays a sexy version of Anarkali and dances in a skimpy cleavage baring, backless dress in a dance number in *Housefull 2* (2012), the lyrics to her songs:

Arey chhod-chhad ke apne Salim ki gali, Anarkali disco chali
Ek sitangar ne mujhko ,Deewaron mein chunnwaya aa..
Mere dil ki dhadkan pe, Laakh pehre lagwaaya aa aa..
Mujhko pyaari azaadi, Qaid mein ab nahi rehna
Zulm zaalim wahesi ka nahi sehna, Ab na mujhko hai sehna
Mujhko hip-hop sikha de, Beat ko top karaa de
Thoda sa trance baja de, Mujhko ik chance dila de...

(Translation: Leaving Salim behind, Anarkali is now going to the disco! A heartless man tried to bury me beyond the walls and punished me for love with all my heart. But my freedom is dear to me, so I am breaking the shackles and refuse to bear any more. So, teach me some hip-hop, top my beat, play some trance, and give me a chance!)

The changing representations of female dancers is neatly explained by Nijhawan, a dancer herself, through Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory, where the modern-day dancer reverses the gaze by removing her own passivity from it, and in fact deriving pleasure from it. In using the classic courtesan as a contrast to the contemporary item girl, she draws on Rekha's *Umrao Jaan* (1981) in comparison to Aishwarya's "Kajra Re" (2005), and writes:

While Rekha in *Umrao Jaan* is clear in her willingness to satisfy male longings, Ash (as she is popularly referred to by the Indian media) is more interested in quenching her own. In this song her eyes are assertive rather than compliant, but not aggressive or manipulative, another recent trend in Bollywood women, allowing female sexuality and

desire to separate from automatic allusions of exploitation. A dancer's eyes are particularly important in Indian dancing. While the courtesan's eyes were traditionally poignant, the vamp's desperate or manipulative, the wife's a transparent mirror of her true heart; new genres of dancing women have eyes that can be honest, direct, and alluring all at the same time. (Nijhawan, 107)

The new woman that Nijhawan refers to is not something that has emerged out of a void but is in fact a product of the changing face of Bollywood itself. The globalized Bollywood has shaped the new woman/the vamp/the item girl which in turn has been shaped by the economic liberalization policies of the 1990s and the coming of satellite television. Before we diagnose the changing representations of women, a special mention needs to be made to the term Bollywood itself, for it represents the 'westernization,' globalization, and the 'glocalization' of the Hindi film industry.

As a former colonized country, India will always look at its identity in relation to the metropolis. The metropolis, however, has shifted from the British Raj to the United States of America. Majumdar writes that this correlation between Hollywood and Bollywood dates to the early Indian cinema where Indian stars inherited Hollywood epithets such as "the Indian Mary Pickford" or the "Indian Charlie Chaplin"³⁸. The relation extends beyond epithets, Indian filmmakers and stars share a love-hate relationship with Hollywood: some are inspired by it while others detest the comparison. Ever since Hollywood's "material presence" in Hindi film in the form of production houses and cross-cultural collaborations, especially since the 2000s, the relationship now displays a hybridized postcolonial and neoliberal dynamic (Ganti). And since Ganti's book, more developments can be mapped as Bollywood film stars, especially actresses, have become a staple in Hollywood action films. Deepika Padukone recently shared the screen

³⁸ The Indian superstar of 1950s, Raj Kapoor was most famously known as "the Indian Tramp" or the "Indian Charlie Chaplin". One can even find a "the Clark Gable of the Indian film industry" on Wikipedia. However, he preferred "The Greatest Showman of Indian Cinema" an epithet that is still retained.

with Vin Diesel in *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* (2017) and Priyanka Chopra, who has become a Jimmy Fallon and Hollywood regular with big roles in *The Matrix Resurrections* (2021) and *Baywatch* (2017).

Ganti contends that although the terminology hints towards being borrowed from and imitating Hollywood, that is far from the case. Bollywood has the same strength and global appeal and dominance as its Western contemporaries:

-ollywood has become a very generative and productive morpheme to refer to other centers of media production- such as “Nollywood” for the Nigerian film industry-that index their aspirations for global popularity. The wide use of the term Bollywood by Indian media professionals represents an assertion of sovereignty and cultural autonomy in the media landscape. Global circulation is not the determining factor, however, in the Hindi film industry’s transformation into Bollywood, as Hindi films have had a global market for decades. Since the 1950s, Hindi cinema, along with its stars and music, has been popular in sites as diverse as Nigeria, Greece, Egypt, Indonesia, and the former Soviet Union, but these histories of consumption and circulation precede the coinage and concept of Bollywood. (Ganti, 15)

Like the -hollywoodization of the Hindi film industry in this globalized era, the representations within these films are changing too to fit the contemporary landscape. In her work chronicling ‘Bollywood Babes,’ Purna Chowdhury historicizes the changing face of female sexuality and marks the 1990s as the era that blurred the ‘dichotomy’ of chaste versus unchaste between the representations of female characters in Bollywood. She attributes this change to, “a transformation that fits in with the changing attitudes of a significant section of the audience, who are women in their late teens and twenties, completely immersed in the culture of jeans and spaghetti straps and reinterpreting physical exposure as enabling, rather than commodifying.” (Chowdhury, 53)

The demographic of consumers post liberalization has shifted and muddied the lines between the chaste virginal heroine vs. the unchaste vamp or as Chowdhury points out that, “the cultural markers of the traditional Westernized Vamp (cigarette smoking, asset-flaunting, and leg

spreading) are now quite often shifted to the heroine, whose claim to purity (translated earlier in terms of no premarital sex') is quite often suspect. This shift from the pure Indian femininity merging with a boisterous western identity created a new woman who, according to Chowdhury, has more agency in owning her body and the scopophilic gaze with a jouissance.

To study the changing representations of the new item girl and to understand agency and how this identity challenges marginalization, restoration, and commodification of women, separately, in Bollywood films, we need to unpack two facets of the representations of the cinematic new woman: the dancer and the vamp. Do these two facets merge more openly rather than connotatively, in comparison to their older depictions? How do these representations use the same artifacts and overarching themes to own the gaze, sexuality and deride notions of shame and honor? And when we refer to the new woman in conjunction to the changed, hybridized, and modernized courtesan, we must look at the 'item girl' who stands in the place of the courtesan of 1950s and 1960s and the cabaret dancers of the 1970s and 1980s but is bolder and more empowered. It is almost impossible to separate the 'item girl' from the 'item song' given that the lyrics, the costumes, the mise-en-scene, the countless men dancing and drooling over her, all focus towards the objectification of her body.

The item song's role in a Bollywood film could be defined as an important investment, as it guarantees the return. Quite simply, it is a dance number, laden with hypersexualized imagery, mostly of women dancers in skimpy clothes dancing around and for a group of men, implied to be simply for male viewing pleasures. The item song typically has two roles in the film:

- a. Either it is used as a site of conflict, where the titillation typically ends with a high action- packed fight sequence between the hero and the villain, for the hero has busted into the illegal space where drugs are dealt, and unchaste women dance for men.

b. Or the item girl becomes an ally, different from a love interest to the hero and pleases and teases him playfully and exits the narrative as soon as the song ends. The item girl is not competing with the heroine for the hero's love and attention outside the boundaries of the songs.

The 'perfect body' or the 'beauty myth' plague the item girls, and now the main hero as well, as they have both entered the nexus of the gaze directed towards the performer's body.³⁹ (Munsi) Kaur provides some additional dimensions on the role of the "item" girl in films to demystify the character. Although the "item" girl shares the musical space with the main hero, she almost never interacts with him outside of the song sequence. Kaur also comments on the 'body' of the "item" girl, stands corrected, modified, cosmeticized, and tattooed and she is further commodified. Her reel and real personas blend as she expected to be bold and fiery outside of the filmic space as well (Kaur). For instance, the popular item girl Rakhi Sawant once exclaimed in an interview, "What god doesn't give you, the doctor can" (Shrestova). That statement came to be associated with Sawant's audacious charm. While it can be argued that the "item" girl has almost come to resemble the caricature of her former self with cosmetic surgeries and breast implants, she also stands more empowered and progressive since she is not expected to submit to the purity myth. She has stepped outside the filmic space and performs at functions, award nights and weddings, just like her cinematic alter ego. She is bold and has transformed from the tragic courtesan that was always rejected in the film by the hero to the bold dancer who is aware of her status and does not harness any notions of trespassing the virginal space and having a happily ever after with the hero. She knows she is expected to entertain, and she does just that. Take Nora Fatehi's guest appearance in *Stree* (2018), where she gyrates to the catchy

³⁹ It is very common and almost a requirement for Indian heroes to have six pack abs and do topless fight sequences in Bollywood films.

item song “Kamariya” but is not a part of the film’s narrative. After dancing for exactly 3 minutes, she is escorted by her bodyguards who tell her the time is up. Nora tells the guys dancing around her that the time she is paid for is up and turns off her sexuality, gets down to business, and takes her money and leaves. Now that she has been compensated for her labor, unlike her contemporary, the heroine, she is “outside” the shackles of marital slavery and after her dance sequences is not required to perform any labor anymore.

Given this empowerment of the item girl as a feminist and queer icon, we can see some historical resemblance in the celebration of the early courtesan as a respected performer with the contemporary item girl who is lauded for her dance and attracting audiences to theaters. Recognizing the rise of the item girl as cultural icon is essential to understanding her important cultural contributions, and one cannot talk about the significance of Bollywood item songs without acknowledging the role of Sunny Leone in their evolution.

The Item Girl, and the Brand- Sunny Leone

Leone was the “most googled person in India 2015” and deserves a special space in the cultural conversations and contributions of the item girl and songs to the gender inequality in India. In TV anchor and journalist Christiane Amanpour’s Netflix show *Sex and Love* around the global cities of the world, Amanpour features a special episode on India’s capital city Delhi, also where the infamous Delhi gang-rape took place, to talk about consent and patriarchy and how it shapes women’s rights in India. Amanpour interviewed former playmate turned Porn star for Vivid Entertainment turned top item girl, Sunny Leone to understand how sexuality shapes the Indian culture. Amanpour attempts to understand Leone as a “westernized Indian woman who makes no apologies for her past” in unpacking the impact of Bollywood and western style public intimacy and the wide acceptance of Leone in a social landscape that dismisses everything Leone

is associated with. Known for her eloquent and down to earth honest interviews, Leone brilliantly talks about Bollywood films as the vehicle, in India, that replaces all the other mediums as perhaps being the most effective medium to bring about social change due to its huge fan following. From being an ambassador for using condoms and practicing safe sex, to anti-smoking PSAs to adopting a girl child, Leone proposes that when Bollywood stars talk about stigmatized topics such as using condoms for casual non-monogamous sex, these things become normalized.

However, things have not always been sunny for Ms. Leone. Her cringe-worthy interview with Bhupendra Chaubey is a testament to how women performing intimate labor publicly are targeted by conservative ideologies. Blaming sex workers and adult entertainers for patriarchal and gendered crimes is not only misplaced but also oppressive to vulnerable and marginalized communities. Chaubey's humiliating questions to Sunny ranged from guilting her to confess regret about her pornographic past to outing her as someone who has pimped their body and sexuality into forwarding their career. Further dismissing Sunny for lowering the fine art of cinema, Chaubey asks her if she considers herself an artist or just an item girl? Leone exclaimed that the 'item girl tag' is just something that exists in India and nowhere else, clearly looking visibly upset throughout the interview. However, Leone shone through the interview stating that she is a real person with feelings and carried herself with poise through Chaubey's constant attempts to dehumanize her. YouTube comments to the infamous interview ring in Leone's favor, Twitterati including several other renowned veteran Bollywood stars expressed embarrassment at Chaubey's backward mentality and came to Leone's aid. Bollywood superstar Aamir Khan lauded Leone's interview and expressed desire to work with her, in retort to Chaubey's question of whether any respectable star would be willing to work with a Porn star.

Sunny Leone's 2016 documentary *Mostly Sunny* is a stellar artifact for understanding how item songs and item girls are a soft target for displacing blame and perpetuating rape myths. *Mostly Sunny* is fascinating for more than documenting the history of a popular item girl. Rather, it shows how her career as an adult film star, often managed by her co-star and husband who accompanies his wife and adopted child everywhere, goes beyond the stereotypical narrative of this type of performer. Born in Canada and raised in the United States by troubled, alcoholic, Indian immigrant parents- *Mostly Sunny* peeks into the life of Karenjit Kaur or Karen, the woman behind the brand Sunny. The documentary allows Sunny to tell her own story, rather than letting the media control her narrative, featuring her childhood homes and relatives. It also features a range of interviews on the "Sunny" phenomenon in India, and when former Indian Police Service Officer Kiran Bedi is asked to comment on her popularity, a very disgusted Bedi calls Sunny an animal and blames pornography for triggering rapists. Tracing back to Amanpour's segment on *Sex and Love* in India, when asked, the two young local girls responded that pornography has in fact been liberating for women in India since sexual education is dismal. Citing that the internet can sometimes be a haven for women in India to find liberation through erotica, the two young women Naomi and Rukun tell Amanpour that female subjugation is in the moral fiber of the society and is reiterated through the education, upbringing, and societal values. The whole trajectory of Leone's career portrayed by the Indian medium is also reflective of the same attitude. Marketing strategist Suhel Seth remarkably explains brand Sunny as the "unavailable Porn star" because there are two things Sunny Leone reiterates in all of her media interactions: she always talks of her past work without shame, and she always talks about her present life as a wife and a mother where Seth states that she's very intelligently "built for

herself social acceptance through marriage.” Cut to the next scene of the documentary, Sunny’s husband Daniel Weber exclaims that Karen is his wife while Sunny is a brand.

Sunny’s documentary is riveting and compassionate and offers an inclusive perspective not only behind the scenes of the business of Bollywood but also expresses the front of India’s false hypocritical cultural expectations. The documentary features the voices of other backup dancers who, like Sunny, face the stigma and are also frequently asked to “compromise” and sleep with the producers. The bigotry of the society is evident through the culture of blaming the victim and the medium rather than its consumers and producers, especially in labor politics of the sex industry.

Sunny Leone’s emerging status as the poised, and intelligent cultural icon is responsible for creating an enormous impact which is trickling down in cinematic representations as well. While item songs are still widely circulated, they are starting to be more subversive and resilient in their context, often parodying themselves and their formulaic imaginations. Besides analyzing the usual guest appearance video songs in films, special focus needs to be directed towards cinematic plots where the item girl has a role in the narrative outside the song. These films featuring the public dancing woman as an opposition to traditional patriarchy often places the public woman as a feisty opponent with progressive politics against feudal notions of gendered division of labor. An emerging icon of feminism in a film industry that is fearful of the F word, the item girl needs to be inspected as a killjoy. To analyze the item girl, whose exploitation is rooted in performing intimate labor to spark joy in men, it is fascinating when she not only refuses to spark joy but murders it instead.

The item girl who used to be a passive subject of the gaze, unaware that she was being gazed at; has taken control of the gaze and made it intentional. The stylistic elements of an item

song, especially in how the item girl is packaged, and how she chooses to package herself project focus on the intentionality and ownership of the sexuality. Take Katrina Kaif in ‘*Sheila ki Jawani*’ (Translation: Sheila’s youthful figure) which is an excellent example of these intentional politics of provocation. Katrina lazes around in satin sheets as men surround her for attention and yet she pays no heed, she dances in front of large mirrors (and gazes at herself) as the men peer at her from behind the props, she pushes the hero away and tells him, “I’m too sexy for you, *main tere haath na aani*” (Translation: I am out of your reach because I am too sexy for you). Most importantly the various English lyrics that are inserted in the song illustrate this provocation “I know you want it, but you never gonna get it,” and “*Kisi aur ki mujhko zaroorat kya main to khud se pyaar jataaun*” (Translation: Why do I need someone when I can make love to myself?) The item song and the item girl have taken the gaze and twisted it around; while making an intentional use of the gaze, sometimes parodying male desire, they have repurposed its meaning.

The interesting dialect about item songs under the crackdown of moral policing and right-wing conservative groups, is the growing popularity and increasing consumption of it. A simple supply and demand argument could make the cut for why there is an economy thriving on the exploitation of women in a heavily patriarchal and gender oppressive country like India; but what is fascinating is that women in Bollywood have become more rebellious, and the boundaries between the raunchy item girl and the virginal Bollywood heroines are getting blurred as the typical A-list Bollywood heroine is now very commonly making guest appearances and doing item songs in big budget films. The deliberative hyper sexualization of item songs is shaping the narratives of Bollywood films too. *The Dirty Picture* is an example of how Bollywood sweetheart Vidya Balan completely revamped her look and attitude when she

played yesteryear item girl Silk Smita. The film shaped Balan's career and personality as the previously subdued Balan has now become more vivacious and vocal of women's sexuality after the film. In an interview for a popular chat show, Balan was all about the sex talk, "Women like it, want it, need it as much as men do." (Koffee with Karan, 2014) Balan's most recent film *Begum Jaan*, setup in British India, portrays her as a brothel madam, who, along with other prostitutes, rebels against oppressive feudal, colonial, and patriarchal laws that marginalize women like her. Changing narratives and representations of Bollywood could not be clearer with films like *Begum Jaan* becoming more popularized.

While the origins of item girls are rooted in the courtesan traditions from the feudal and noble lifestyles, the globalized item girl stands slightly separated. The women who were in the *nautch* traditions were often kidnapped or born in brothels and inherited their occupations, whereas item girls are highly skilled dancers and actresses who dance because it is a highly profitable and popular trend to have item songs in Bollywood films. The scapegoating of item girls is generated by high culture attempting to attack and control low culture, often accusing it of corrupting tradition and where the upper caste and elite use moral manipulations to target item girls for the growing sexual violence, without diagnosing the policies and religious dogma that dictate gender oppressive crimes. The rise of Sunny Leone and the emergence of item girls as feminist icons and whistleblowers of sexual harassment in Bollywood has proven that popular assumptions about the correlation of rape culture to item songs should not be so overtly simplistic.

Conclusion

While no Bollywood study can be complete if it fails to recognize two of the most visible and unique conventions of the Bollywood film, the popular "item song" and "item girl," have been

routinely dismissed, when not completely ignored, by scholars and critics. The item song and item girl are also direct descendants of performance art and narrative uniquely Indian from time immemorial. Despite the popularity, commercial value, and cultural heritage of the item song and item girl, scholars have failed to acknowledge these Bollywood conventions much less recognized their value in serious academic study.

Besides being important current commercial commodities, the “item song” and “item girl” have evolved from the cinematic tradition of the “celluloid cabaret song” and, before that, the “theatrical courtesan,” which have characterized female identity, cultural narrative, and unique forms of Indian performance art for millennia. Recent criticism of the item girl stems from discourse which blamed hypersexualized representation in current item songs for the infamous 2021 Delhi gang rape. Besides ignoring the actual social and cultural factors that contributed to the Delhi tragedy, this censorious interpretation failed to recognize the cultural and artistic heritage of the item song and its current function in Indian society. The demand and growing popularity for item songs has led to the hybridization of the heroine as well as the hero, both of whom now double as the “item,” competing to be served up to the audience. Clearly, the item song and item girl need to be recognized for their narrative, social, cultural, and commercial significance in studies of the Bollywood film.

Additionally, the rise of new media culture such as TikTok and InstaReels has led to the audience re-enacting and re-performing the item songs, a reflection of the importance of the blockbuster item songs in driving the economy of dance and desire in India. Recognition that the item girl and item song are now conventions in popular media other than just Bollywood emphasizes the need to define and better understand current and historical depictions of Indian women in film as heritage. When a popular Bollywood convention such as the item song is expected to be analyzed through a positive/negative lens of representation, it fails if we do not study the subjectivity of the item girl through a polysemic lens. To move the study beyond academic

theory, I traveled to Mumbai to interview Bollywood insiders and understand the market analysis which would help unpack the demographic study of its viewers and the makings of the mega hit song. Belonging to a filmy family and my experience as a former First Assistant Director in the Hindi film industry not only helped me navigate the cartographic imaginations of Mumbai, but also the Bollywood set. The industry analysis from my interviews helped me compare the artistry vs. marketability aspect of item songs, where the creatively leaning insiders saw the item song as an artistic production, whereas the interviewees related to the administrative side of it associated the convention with the marketing aspect of corporatized Bollywood.

This is a continuing project given the generous amount of research I was able to collect on my research trip to India. My initial intention was to visit Mumbai to compile data that would confirm and supplement the conclusions of my academic study of the item song and item girl. While I was aiming to collect some utterances on item songs, these interviews produced in-depth perspectives on how the vamp reflects the patriarchal and feudal insecurities in India. These interviews also corroborated that my research through the years has correctly identified that the item song is important both as artefact and mirror in its representation of socio-political, cultural, and material conditions experienced by women in India. The division of women into “pure” and “impure,” as perpetuated by Bollywood, enables patriarchy, and controls and punishes women when they decide to live outside the confines of patriarchal bargains. The sexual harassment faced by item girls in Bollywood and the marginalization of sex workers in India reflects this attitude that punishes women for not adhering to patriarchy. The interviews helped me further my understanding of the item girl as an important part of the Bollywood narratives. Although she is divorced from these stories, she redefines the viewing experience by adding a break from the cinematic and narrative tensions in the Bollywood in which she appears. The item girl’s

contribution to the dancing and costume is also one that is hybrid and cross cultural as she drives the economy of dance and desire in Bollywood films.

The mass production of Bollywood films in the past two decades is especially seeing a rise of formula films, and item songs are the most popular ingredient of this formula. Therefore, no study of Bollywood would be complete without studying the role of the item song in its success. The popularity of item girls like Sunny Leone and Nora Fatehi proves that item songs fuel the need for hit songs in the economy of weddings and festivals in India, where the item girl is emerging as the powerful dancer. While item songs have been ignored by scholars internationally and considered an inconsequential song category, empty in content despite Bollywood's success, this important cultural convention does, among other things, exert a brand while subverting traditional patriarchy into a queer subculture. Several of my interviewees spoke extensively about the item song as the “audience puller” that brings audiences to the theaters. This shows the economic and cultural importance of a big hit song for Bollywood films and how important the dancer is in inventing the hook step that keeps the audience familiarized with the film. The item song has become the new “jingle” that has replaced the film trailer and is the true marketing gimmick that draws the audience to the theaters and sometimes decides the box office success of the songs. Despite this, the item song continues to be neglected as a serious addition to the film and the item girl gets sidelined from being viewed as an important part of Hindi film history.

Additionally, the rise of social media has also given rise to democratic discourses on casteism, colorism and sexism in Bollywood, where people are problematizing narratives and icons, we grew up celebrating. Canceling nepotism and sexism in Bollywood, especially seems to be a dominant discourse, where the hegemonic reading of scapegoating the item girl for gender stereotyping and crimes seems to be fading. Among these non- hegemonic discourses are emerging

narratives that show stories of different women that break the binaries of virgin and vamp. Stories of powerful women in shows such as *Bombay Begums* (2020) show women managing patriarchy in corporate, sex work, and familial units in India. The social transformations in India through globalization has led to a rise of feminized labor, which in turn is, influencing the representation of women in Indian cinema. These counter cultural stories of unconventional women are also blurring the lines between the heroine and the anti-heroine, where the vamp is emerging as feminist icon. The popularity of item girls like Sunny Leone and Nora Fatehi proves that item songs fuel the need for hit songs in the economy of weddings and festivals in India, where the item girl is emerging as the powerful dancer.

To me, the item girl is someone who seizes the means of production by demanding compensation for her intimate labor and controls the gaze by having power over how she is consumed. The traditional patriarchy demands a desexualized heroine, who must bargain her liberties for patriarchal protections to be owned by the hero and must do so by marrying him. The unmarried, unprotected, and public woman like the vamp is free from these shackles of patriarchy and marriage. As traditional arranged marriages and hetero patriarchy crumbles in the face of Tinder and “options” provided by social media, so does the constructed idea of Indian femininity and purity which seems out of place in the world today.

Through the course of this research, and my graduate school journey, I have spent a large part of my study dedicated to the study of item girls and women’s sexuality in India. I was able to witness a social transformation with the arrival of online dating, where women get to exercise some control over consent and selection of their partners: something that was quite foreign to Indians (especially women) and through these changes, the item girl and her fierce sexuality became empowering instead of shameful. A persistent figure in the face of traditional patriarchy

and an outsider in a country dictated by nepotism, these interviews truly helped me locate the powerful intersectional feminist who challenges caste, gender, patriarchy, and privilege in India.

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