



## Bollywood and Gender: The Male Gaze in Popular Culture

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### Abstract

This article examines the representation of women in Bollywood popular culture through Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze and Raymond Williams's understanding of popular culture. It focuses particularly on the development and function of the "item song" or "item number" as a recurring cinematic form through which the female body is visually and commercially organized for spectatorship. Bollywood occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian popular culture, reaching audiences across linguistic, regional, and social differences. Its songs and dance sequences therefore have cultural significance beyond entertainment. The article argues that the visual conventions of item songs—camera movement, costume, choreography, lyrics, crowd reactions, and narrative placement—can construct women as objects of visual and sexual pleasure and can reproduce patriarchal assumptions about gender. At the same time, the article recognizes that representations of female sexuality and agency are not entirely uniform: some performances articulate self-confidence or choice even while operating within a commercial visual economy. By examining these tensions, the study considers how popular cinema can both reflect and participate in the production of gendered attitudes.

**Keywords:** Bollywood, gender, male gaze, popular culture, Laura Mulvey, item songs, objectification, patriarchy.

### Introduction

Raymond Williams describes culture as a cumulative formation of knowledge, values, beliefs, attitudes, practices, social roles, and hierarchies transmitted and reshaped across generations. Culture is consequently not merely a collection of artistic products; it is also a field in which societies negotiate meanings and identities. Williams's distinction between high culture and popular or mass culture is particularly useful for approaching cinema because popular cultural forms circulate widely and participate in everyday life. Although popular culture has often been dismissed as commercially driven or aesthetically less demanding than elite cultural production, its social influence can be substantial.

India's cultural diversity is accompanied by a number of shared cultural forms that cross regional and linguistic boundaries. Among these, Hindi cinema, commonly referred to as Bollywood, occupies a prominent position. Films, songs, posters, television broadcasts, streaming platforms, and social-media circulation have made Bollywood imagery highly visible in everyday Indian life. Bollywood is consequently more than an entertainment industry: it is an important cultural institution through which ideas concerning romance, family, masculinity, femininity, beauty, sexuality, and social behaviour may be represented and circulated.

Songs and dance sequences are especially significant to mainstream Hindi cinema. The song sequence can interrupt, extend, or comment upon narrative action while

simultaneously functioning as a commercially valuable component of a film. Within this tradition, the "item song" has become a recognizable form. Its elaborate choreography, memorable lyrics, spectacle, celebrity performers, and promotional circulation frequently make it one of the most visible elements associated with a film. This article studies the item song as a site where gender relations are constructed through visual pleasure and spectatorship.

The central theoretical framework is Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze," developed in her influential essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Mulvey argues that mainstream narrative cinema can organize looking through a masculine, heterosexual perspective, positioning the female body as an object of visual pleasure while assigning active narrative agency to male characters. Applied to Bollywood item songs, this framework makes it possible to examine not simply what women wear or how they dance, but how cinematography, editing, choreography, lyrics, spectators within the scene, and promotional imagery combine to determine how the female body is looked at.

### Popular Culture and Bollywood

Popular culture is produced within systems of mass circulation and consumption. Bollywood's reach makes it particularly significant in discussions of representation because cinematic images do not remain confined to the theatre. Film songs circulate through weddings, festivals, college events, television, music platforms, social media, and

public celebrations. Consequently, the gendered imagery of popular cinema can acquire a life beyond the original narrative context.

The commercial character of Bollywood also shapes representation. Songs can contribute to publicity, music sales, audience anticipation, and the visual identity of a film. Within this culture industry, the female performer's body may become part of the commodity offered to audiences. The item number is especially revealing in this regard because it can be narratively detachable while remaining commercially central. Its appeal frequently depends upon spectacle, bodily display, rhythm, and visual emphasis.

The article therefore treats the item song not as an isolated entertainment device but as a cultural practice. Its significance lies in the relationship between the cinematic image and the social attitudes that surround it. When the female body is repeatedly presented as an object for looking, popular culture can normalize a particular relationship between gender and spectatorship.

### **Laura Mulvey and the Male Gaze**

Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" remains a foundational text in feminist film theory. Mulvey draws upon psychoanalytic and feminist perspectives to argue that classical cinema organizes visual pleasure around structures of looking. In the conventional arrangement she identifies, the male figure is associated with action and narrative development, while the female figure is frequently displayed for visual pleasure. The woman can consequently function as spectacle even when she is present as a character within the story.

The concept of the male gaze is not reducible to the presence of an attractive woman on screen. Cinematic form is crucial. Camera positioning, close-ups, slow motion, editing, framing, costume, lighting, and choreography can direct attention towards particular parts of the female body. Such techniques can fragment the woman into visual components and make her body more important than her individuality, interiority, or narrative agency.

Mulvey also points to the complicated position of female spectatorship. Women watching images constructed through a masculine visual economy may be encouraged to adopt the same evaluative perspective towards female bodies. Thus, objectification can be reproduced not only by male spectators but through a broader visual culture in which women learn to view themselves and other women through standards established by the gaze.

This theoretical framework is particularly relevant to Bollywood because the industry frequently combines music, dance, glamour, celebrity, and spectacle. Item songs provide a concentrated example of the mechanisms through which the female body can become the centre of visual attention.

### **The Item Song as a Cinematic Form**

The term "item" is significant because it frames the female performer as an attractive spectacle or "object" within popular entertainment. The history of Hindi cinema contains earlier forms of staged female performance, including the *mujra* associated with the *tawaif*, followed by cabaret performances and later contemporary item numbers. The settings and musical styles have changed considerably, but the recurring emphasis on female spectacle remains an important feature of the form.

The item song may be positioned almost anywhere within a film. It can appear in a nightclub, a public gathering, a police

station, a film set, or even an unconventional location such as a moving train. The setting changes, yet the visual structure may remain familiar: a female dancer occupies the centre of the performance while male spectators within the diegesis look, react, dance, crowd around, or attempt to interact with her.

The cinematic camera can become an extension of this looking. Close-ups and moving shots may emphasize the waist, hips, legs, cleavage, or other bodily features. Slow motion can intensify the spectacle, while editing can fragment the dancer's body into a sequence of visually desirable parts. In such instances, the body is not primarily presented as the instrument of an artistic performance; it becomes the object around which the performance is organized.

This does not mean that every woman appearing in an item song is devoid of agency. Contemporary performances sometimes construct the female performer as confident, assertive, economically independent, or sexually self-aware. Nevertheless, agency within the song must be distinguished from the larger representational structure in which the body is commodified for spectatorship. A woman may appear to choose her performance while the cinematic apparatus simultaneously directs the audience to consume her body as spectacle. This tension is central to understanding gender representation in popular cinema.

### **From the *Mujra* to the Contemporary Item Number**

The transformation from the *mujra* to cabaret and then to the contemporary item number demonstrates the changing forms of popular entertainment. Earlier cinematic performances frequently placed the courtesan or dancer within a recognizable social setting. Later films introduced cabaret performances as symbols of modernity, nightlife, glamour, and sexual freedom. Contemporary item numbers have expanded these conventions through larger productions, technological sophistication, celebrity performers, and aggressive promotional circulation.

Despite these changes, the continuity lies in the recurring construction of female performance as spectacle. The female body remains central to the visual economy, while male characters often function as spectators or participants whose reactions help establish the desired erotic atmosphere. The woman may be surrounded by dancers, crowds, or men whose attention confirms her status as an object of desire.

The popular reception of such songs is also important. Their catchy music and choreography encourage imitation and circulation. Once detached from the film, the song may be reproduced at social events and on digital platforms. The original cinematic context can therefore disappear while the gendered performance remains. Popular culture thus becomes a mechanism through which cinematic representations can enter ordinary social practices.

### **Objectification, Lyrics, and the Cinematic Camera**

Objectification occurs when a person is reduced to bodily characteristics or treated primarily as an object for another person's use or pleasure. In item songs, objectification may be produced through the interaction of lyrics, choreography, costume, camera movement, editing, and narrative context.

Lyrics are especially significant because they can describe the woman in terms of desirability, consumption, possession, or availability. The original article identifies examples such as "Munni" and "Sheila," whose songs construct strong female personas while simultaneously using the language of sexual spectacle. The contradiction is revealing. The female

performer may appear powerful and self-confident, yet the performance can continue to position her body as the primary commodity of the song.

The camera intensifies this contradiction. When the face and individuality of the performer receive less attention than selected bodily features, the spectator is encouraged to consume the body rather than encounter a fully developed subject. The dancer's technical skill, musicality, and artistic labour can consequently become secondary to sexualized visual display.

The presence of male spectators within the scene further naturalizes this structure. Crowds of men may cheer, stare, dance, or gesture towards the woman. Their responses become part of the spectacle and can present male desire as normal, expected, and entertaining. When such representations are repeatedly circulated, they may contribute to a cultural environment in which looking at women primarily as bodies is normalized.

### **The “Virgin” and the “Vamp”: Gendered Contradictions**

Another important dimension of Bollywood's gender representation is the distinction between the idealized woman and the sexually expressive woman. The traditional opposition between the “virgin” and the “vamp” creates a framework in which femininity is divided between respectability and sexual availability. The ideal woman is expected to preserve family and social values, while the vamp is permitted to embody desire and transgression, often because the narrative ultimately contains or rejects her.

The item number frequently occupies this contradictory space. The female performer may be sexually expressive, visually provocative, and independent, but she is often separated from the central moral order of the narrative. The spectacle can therefore be enjoyed without necessarily challenging the social structure that defines the ideal woman through modesty, chastity, and domesticity.

This division can be understood as a form of containment. The sexually expressive woman becomes an object of fascination, while the narrative may continue to restore the conventional ideal of femininity. Consequently, Bollywood can simultaneously commodify female sexuality and reinforce conservative gender expectations. The contradiction is not incidental; it is one of the mechanisms through which popular cinema negotiates changing attitudes towards women.

### **Agency and the Problem of Interpretation**

A feminist reading of item songs must also acknowledge the complexity of female agency. It would be inadequate to assume that every sexually expressive performance automatically signifies female victimhood. Performers may exercise professional, artistic, economic, and bodily agency. A woman who addresses the spectator directly, controls the choreography, or presents herself as choosing a partner can challenge conventional representations of passive femininity. However, agency and objectification can coexist. A performer may have agency over her professional performance while the cinematic apparatus still frames her body through a predominantly heterosexual male perspective. The question, therefore, is not simply whether a woman appears confident, but how that confidence is represented, circulated, and consumed.

This distinction also prevents the analysis from treating female sexuality itself as inherently problematic. The concern is instead with the unequal structures through which sexuality is represented and consumed. A woman's sexual self-

expression can be empowering in one context and objectifying in another. Close attention to cinematic form and narrative context is therefore necessary rather than a blanket judgment about performance.

### **Bollywood, Gender and the Culture Industry**

The item song illustrates the relationship between popular culture and commercial production. As a component of the culture industry, the song has value because it attracts attention, generates discussion, circulates independently, and contributes to a film's marketability. The female body can consequently become a commercially productive image.

The popularity of item numbers also demonstrates that representation is shaped by audiences as well as producers. Filmmakers respond to established expectations while audiences participate in the circulation and reproduction of the songs. The relationship is reciprocal: popular cinema reflects social attitudes but can also reinforce, exaggerate, or challenge them.

This makes gender representation an important cultural question. If women are repeatedly shown as bodies available for visual consumption, the repetition can contribute to the normalization of objectifying attitudes. At the same time, changing representations of female characters, performers, and spectators demonstrate that popular culture is not static. Bollywood contains competing tendencies—patriarchal conventions, commercial imperatives, feminist interventions, female agency, and changing audience expectations.

### **Representation and Violence: A Cautious Connection**

The original article connects sexualized cinematic representation with broader problems of discrimination and violence against women. Such a connection should be expressed carefully. A film image cannot by itself be treated as a direct or simple cause of an individual act of violence. Gender-based violence has complex social, legal, economic, cultural, and interpersonal causes.

Nevertheless, representations can contribute to the symbolic environment in which gender relations are understood. When stalking, coercion, unwanted touching, harassment, or persistent male pursuit are represented as humorous, romantic, or ultimately successful, the distinction between desire and consent may be weakened. The problem becomes especially significant when the woman's eventual response is represented as a reward for male persistence.

A critical engagement with popular cinema therefore requires attention to consent, agency, and the consequences of representation. The issue is not whether cinema should eliminate sexuality or desire, but whether it can represent desire without normalizing coercion and objectification.

### **Conclusion**

Bollywood is one of the most influential forms of contemporary Indian popular culture, and its representations of gender deserve sustained critical attention. The item song provides a particularly concentrated site for examining the relationship between spectacle, commerce, spectatorship, and the female body. Through the theoretical lens of Laura Mulvey's male gaze, it becomes possible to identify how camera techniques, choreography, lyrics, costume, editing, and the presence of male spectators can organize the woman as an object of visual pleasure.

At the same time, the contemporary item number cannot be interpreted through a single, absolute category. Female performers may demonstrate confidence, professional agency,

and sexual self-expression even within a visual economy shaped by objectification. The critical task is therefore to examine the tension between agency and commodification rather than to erase one in favour of the other.

The continuing popularity of Bollywood songs demonstrates the importance of studying popular culture as a serious cultural formation. Popular cinema participates in the construction of ideas about masculinity and femininity because its images circulate widely and repeatedly. A more critically aware cinematic culture can retain music, dance, glamour, and sexuality while also presenting women as complex subjects rather than merely as bodies designed for consumption. The study of the male gaze consequently remains relevant not only to film criticism but also to wider discussions of gender, spectatorship, popular culture, and social representation.

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