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Has Bollywood Lost the Plot? Analyzing the Influence of Item Songs on Rape Culture in India

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HAS BOLLYWOOD LOST THE PLOT? ANALYZING THE INFLUENCE OF ITEM
SONGS ON RAPE CULTURE IN INDIA

By

Donna Susan Mathew

A DISSERTATION

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In Rhetoric, Theory and Culture

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2023

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This dissertation has been approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY in Rhetoric, Theory and Culture.

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For My Parents.

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Abstract

An item song is a provocative musical song and dance sequence that appears in Bollywood films that have little to no connection to the film's plot, performed by an item girl for the male gaze. Contemporary Bollywood item songs have become highly contested social and political texts in the discourse surrounding rape culture in India. This research explores the socio-cultural context of rape culture in India and examines what makes item songs a popular and acceptable form of entertainment in a patriarchal, conservative society where sexualized violence against women is a major cause for concern.

The study also addresses the narrative, visual, and lyrical characteristics of ten of the most popular item songs from 2012 – 2019. Using a hybrid theoretical framework that brings together the male gaze theory, intersectionality, and postfeminism, this study analyzes the ways in which rape culture is manifested in the cinematic techniques and song lyrics. I argue that item songs mirror certain characteristics and tropes that invoke rape culture. I conclude that the songs reveal four main characteristics: glamorization of illicit activities and behavior, sexual objectification of the female body, alcohol abuse, and violence.

The research argues that contemporary item songs are a popular source of sexist imagery and a powerful cultural influencer of sexual violence against women in India. Moreover, this study suggests that item songs desensitize the Indian public and contributes to the normalization of gang rapes in the country. Ultimately, the study emphasizes the need for the Bollywood film industry to introduce more nuanced narratives about female sexuality and reconsider the ongoing stereotyping, objectification, and misogyny of item

songs, and recognize their wide reach and influence on the attitudes and behaviors of Indian people.

1 Introduction

Rape culture in India is a pervasive problem where sexual violence against women is normalized and often overlooked. Men who commit these crimes are usually absolved from punishment by society. Many aspects of public life in India are tainted by rape culture. This includes workplace harassment, moral policing by social and political entities, media portrayals in films and television, and in intimate spaces like bedrooms where female consent is disregarded (*The New York Times*, 2023). I examine a commonly used Bollywood movie promotional material such as the item song to understand the problem of rape culture in India.

An item song (also known as an item number) is a catchy, upbeat, provocative musical song and dance sequence that appears in Bollywood films that have little to no connection to the plot of the film. It is performed by an actress or dancer known as the item girl. Her performance is a spectacle for the male gaze. She is surrounded by gangs of inebriated men hooting, cheering, jeering, whistling, groping, and chasing her while she entertains the audience.

This study draws attention to the absence of what is missing today in Indian society i.e., the lack of adequate and appropriate response towards sexual violence against women and girls. I argue that the lack of ethical and moral outrage towards gang rapes committed against women and girls, especially from lower socio-economic backgrounds, is due to the fact that the item song as a popular cultural production has normalized rape culture in India to the point where item songs and the item girl reflect certain similarities to rape culture that are frequently reported in India. In this dissertation, I suggest that item songs mirror

certain aspects of rape culture, especially gang rapes such as gang culture, victim blaming, slut-shaming, non-consensual behavior, sexual harassment, violence, and lack of accountability on the part of the perpetrators.

The purpose of this study is to draw attention to this cultural creative production against the backdrop of sexual violence that women face, which is made worse by item songs. This is not a question of whether or not the item song elicits seduction and eroticism. It very well may cater to the male gaze. However, the item song also perpetuates and invites violence against women. I argue that item songs desensitize the Indian public to gang rapes and prepare them for the next one. Thus leading to an environment that normalizes and even trivializes gang rapes and sexual violence against women. This study is about a country that grapples with protecting its females. It is about how India as a society is failing to appropriately respond to the rampant cases of gang rapes in recent years.

The National Crime Records Bureau of India data suggests that in 2011 a woman was raped every 20 minutes in India. Ten years later in 2021 even during a global pandemic, a woman was raped every 16 minutes in India. In 2021 over 31,000 rapes were reported, a 20 percent increase from the previous year, and over 2,200 gang rapes were also reported in the country (*The New York Times*, 2023). My study examines the lack of adequate response and the lack of action on the part of people in power to safeguard the rights of women and girls in the country.

I've often wondered why only some cases get the media attention it deserves while others are wholly ignored or forgotten. Why isn't there more outrage among the general Indian public about instances of gang rape? My study most crucially grapples with the question of why women and girls from certain upper-caste communities when assaulted,

invoke moral public outrage and action, while girls from lower-caste communities, when raped, do not experience the same social response from the Indian public, the media, and political institutions.

I believe the answer lies in the fact that we as a society have become apathetic to the plight of the low-class, low-caste people and their struggles. This does not just apply to low-caste women, but also to other vulnerable groups such as farmers, sex workers, the LGBTQ community, religious minorities, and the tribal community in India. Where is the ethics of outrage and action? What India has currently is a tolerance policy when it comes to gang rapes. The constant exposure to explicit sexist content such as item songs have made people tolerant of sexual violence against women. One of the issues with the item song is that it depicts women as objects and body parts rather than fully functioning human beings. A 2018 study by Philippe Bernard, Sarah Gervais & Olivier Klein found that individuals process images of men and women differently in the brain. The study concluded that our brains see men as people and women as body parts. This idea is consistent with the framework of objectification theory, where the female body is sexually objectified within a socio-cultural context (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997).

I believe gang rapes are a revenge fantasy for the perpetrators. It allows for the rapist to carry out his anger and frustration against an ineffective political system, and a regressive patriarchal, conservative society. It provides an outlet for the male to take out his anger on the real-life woman. The real-life woman also happens to be from a lower-caste and lower socio-economic background, much like the item girl. What this tells us is that so long as the victim of gang rape reflects the characteristics of the item girl, there is a window of tolerance for such acts of violence that Indian society will accept. Modernity

and globalization have no doubt empowered Indian women and enabled them to be educated, employed, and earn an income to support themselves but at the same time, the modern empowered Indian women who venture out and take space in the public realm always have to look over her shoulder for the sake of her safety in public.

This study is a critique of the item song genre and how it promotes harmful and stereotypical portrayals of gender dynamics in a patriarchal country that has an entrenched culture of violence against women. By scrutinizing item songs, I am able to study their potential role in perpetuating rape culture in India. Ultimately, this study is an indictment of the Indian state, the Bollywood film industry, and society that has failed its girls. The item song genre has been thoroughly underestimated and not properly analyzed when it comes to its influence on rape culture in India. This genre of song and dance is embedded in a culture that thrives off of female subordination. There is a fine line between fiction and reality. Where does fiction end and reality begin? The item song is the precursor to real-life sexual violence against women in India. Item songs suggest that sexual violence is acceptable yet it is not perceived as a violent act due to the glamorization aspect of Bollywood films. In the next section, I provide the foundational backdrop for my research that led me to consider this topic for my dissertation.

1.1 Background of the Study

In this section, I lay out several high-profile gang rape cases in India over the last ten years that serve as the context for this research. India has a deeply ingrained culture of sexism, misogyny, victim blaming, and institutional complicity that enables sexual

violence against women from different socio-economic backgrounds. The intersectional complexity of caste¹, class, religion, ethnicity, politics, gender, and power dynamics plays a major role when it comes to the pervasive problem of rape in India.

In December 2012, a 23-year-old woman was gang raped in a private bus and left to die on the side of a road in Delhi, India (*Times of India*, 2019). Jyoti Singh or “Nirbhaya” (fearless one - the name given by the media) and her male friend were trying to get home after a late-night movie when Jyoti was attacked and gang raped and her friend badly beaten. Due to the severity of her injuries, she was transferred to a hospital in Singapore where she eventually died of her injuries (*Times of India*, 2019). The gruesome rape caused an uproar in the country, led to widespread protests and public demonstrations, and foregrounded the issue of women’s safety in India. The Nirbhaya rape incident led to the creation of a three-member committee to review laws for sex crimes in India. The new *Anti-Rape Criminal Law (Amendment) Act* 2013, called for stricter punishments for sex crimes and also redefined rape, and even included provisions for the death penalty for repeat rape offenders (*Times of India*, 2019). On March 20, 2020, four out of the six men responsible for the gang rape were sentenced to capital punishment by the Supreme Court

¹ The caste system in India is a type of social stratification that divides Hindus into four rigid hierarchical groups based on their birth, dharma, and karma. It divides people based on their occupation, which also determines their wealth, power, and privileged status in society. The highest caste is the Brahmins (priests and teachers), then comes the Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), then the Vaishyas (farmers, traders, and merchants), and the fourth group consists of the Shudras (laborers). Apart from these four groups, there is an even lower-caste who are known as the Dalits (street cleaners, sweepers) or the outcastes. (BBC, 2019)

of India. One out of the six men died under imprisonment, and another, a juvenile at the time, was released without consequences.

The 2012 Delhi gang rape shed light on the issue of violence against women in the country in a major way. Nearly three years after the incident, the Indian government made the controversial decision to ban *India's Daughter*, a documentary about the 2012 Delhi gang rape, claiming that segments from the film advocate for violence against women. The documentary includes interviews with the rapists. One of the rapists stated, "A girl is far more responsible for rape than a boy... a decent girl won't roam around at night" (*India's Daughter*, 2015). One of the defense lawyers in the case also stated in an interview, "If my daughter or sister engaged in any pre-marital activity and disgraced herself and allowed herself to lose face and character by doing something she shouldn't be doing in front of my entire family, I would put petrol on her and set her on fire" (*India's Daughter*, 2015). These statements illustrate the misogyny, male aggressiveness, and normalization of sexual abuse in Indian society.

The ban on the documentary revealed the government's complicity in failing to protect the rights and safety of women and girls in India. Victims have little confidence in the government to help them seek justice. There is little doubt that the patriarchal mindset seeps into the political system with politicians routinely putting blame on women and going as far as asking why they were out in the first place, indicating that women belong in the kitchen and not outside in the real world. Take for example, the statement made by Ramveer Bhatti of the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), "Such cases tend to occur, and the probability is higher for girls being stalked if they are out at odd hours...Girls should not be seen roaming on roads after a certain hour in the evening" (Frontier India,

2021). Similarly, Congress party member Mullapully Ramachandran said, “If someone said it happened once, it is understood, but she says everyone raped her. A woman with self-respect would end her life if raped or will try to prevent it from happening again” (Frontier India, 2021). These statements by political leaders in India illustrate the mindset that many have about rape victims indicating that these women got what they deserve for daring to step out of the house.

The Indian legal system also does not support victims of rape. The numerous laws in place have not been able to curb the rape problem in India. Patriarchal beliefs about females undermine the legal system’s inability to effectively address rape culture in India. A common tactic used by lawyers during trial is to shame the victim of sexual assault by asking her questions like what she was wearing, who she was with, why she was out at night, and if she is sexually active so as to diminish the woman’s character and represent her as a morally corrupt woman who is used to engaging in sexual activity prior to marriage.

The police are also complicit in their failure to protect women by refusing to record rape crime petitions; victim blaming, and shaming by police officers is a common occurrence. Sometimes women are sexually assaulted by the very same police who are sworn to protect them. Such was the case with Mathura in 1972. Mathura was a tribal girl who was raped while in police custody when she went to file a complaint about being previously sexually violated. This incident would become one of the pioneering cases that would change legislation on the issue of rape and women’s safety in India. I discuss in detail the three landmark rape cases, including the 1972 Mathura case that changed the conversation surrounding rape culture in India in Chapter Three.

There have been several cases of gang rape since the 2012 Nirbhaya incident. In another incident, two Dalit² girls were gang-raped and killed in the rural region of Badaun district in 2014 after going outside their homes at night to relieve themselves due to a lack of toilets inside their homes (Devasundaram & Barn, 2020). Other high-profile gang rapes highlight police and political complicity. For example, in 2017 in Unnao, Uttar Pradesh, Kuldeep Singh Sengar, a BJP Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA), was arrested for kidnapping and raping a young girl and was involved in the torture and murder of the victim's father in custody at the police station when the father sought to register a complaint (*The Times of India*, 2019).

India witnessed yet another horrific incident in January 2018 with the gang rape and murder of 8-year-old Asifa Bano, a Muslim nomadic shepherd girl from Kashmir, by Hindu fascists. The rape took place in the inner shrine of a Hindu temple, with the temple caretaker, four police officers, and a retired government official named Sanji Ram present. She was drugged and raped and tortured for four days by eight men before being strangled to death. Her rapists ensured her death by smashing her head twice with a rock. Her body was later found near a culvert by locals (BBC, 2018). Even after committing such a heinous crime, Hindu nationalist supporters of India's ruling political party - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) defended the perpetrators (Devasundaram, 2018). According to the investigation, one of the men, Sanji Ram, a Hindu fanatic with a deep hatred for Muslims, plotted Asifa's kidnapping, gang rape, and murder. Ram and his co-conspirators intended to terrorize the

² Dalit refers to the outcaste in the Indian caste system. Dalit people were referred to as the untouchable caste in India.

region's Muslim community by committing this heinous crime (Crescent International, 2018). This incident in particular exemplifies the intersectional nature of rape in India. Ram's supporters believe he did the right thing by raping and murdering one of the Muslim community's daughters. This case illustrates how rape is used as a tool to terrorize religious and minority communities.

Likewise, in December 2019, five upper-caste men, including two suspected of rape, set fire to a 23-year-old woman who belonged to a lower-caste community. The victim was on her way to testify against her assailants in court when the incident took place (Reuters, 2019). Unfortunately, the victim succumbed to her injuries and died. Several of these atrocities intersect with socio-political power structures, exacerbating a previously unacknowledged, complex overlapping of religious, class, caste, political, and socio-economic dynamics.

Even after the passing of the *Anti-Rape Bill* into law by the Indian Parliament in 2013, instances of groping, "eve-teasing³," cat-calling, and stalking are brushed off as "boys being boys" (Dutt, 2014). The phrase "eve-teasing" downplays the problem of harassment that women face on a daily basis, suggesting that women are to be blamed for men's actions.

Rape culture in India is not just a problem for the rural poor. It also affects the urban population. A particularly disturbing instance took place in the form of a mass sexual

³ In South Asia, eve-teasing refers to common forms of sexual harassment women face in public spaces. (Baxi, 2001; Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014). These include making unwanted passes, inappropriate gestures, whistling, stalking, staring, pinching, fondling, groping, and rubbing (Dhillon & Bakaya, 2014; Dobash & Dobash, 1998; Fairchild & Rudman, 2008).

assault of women in India's Silicon Valley, Bangalore, during a New Year's Eve party in 2017 (BBC News, 2017). The culprits were primarily wealthy middle class men. (BBC News, 2017). Much like the Nirbhaya incident, the gang rape and murder of a 27-year-old veterinarian Priyanka Reddy on November 27, 2019, in the city of Hyderabad, prompted yet another wave of public outrage, particularly on social media (Mumbai Mirror, 2019). Saloni Chopra, an actor, and #MeToo India campaigner connected Reddy's rape and murder to the Nirbhaya rape case and condemned what she sees as a widespread culture of rape. She expresses her assessment by stating that "no woman wants to be India's daughter" (*The Quint*, 2019). The second aspect that likewise frames the discursive dimensions of rape culture in India came up during the #MeToo movement in 2018. The #MeToo movement exposed a plethora of sexual offenses and misconduct at the highest levels of power, involving a diverse range of powerful politicians, journalists, Bollywood film producers, and actors (Devasundaram & Barn, 2020). This uncovering shed light on the myth that rape is caused by rural poverty and is primarily an issue of the lower-class. The #MeToo movement's revelations highlighted the involvement of powerful stakeholders.

Devasundaram and Barn (2020), state that the religious and political aspects of rape cannot be overlooked. Rape in India, as evidenced by the aforementioned cases, has become a weapon for ethnic and religious retribution and punishment meted out against marginalized peoples and communities. Devasundaram & Barn, (2020) believe that rape and violence against women in India is an enactment of the hegemonic dominant discourse that favors patriarchy. These enactments take place in a variety of settings, including buses, trains, parks, movie theaters, places of worship, inside the home, and most importantly, in

the inner psyche of people's cognitive thought process. High-profile rape cases in India such as these go beyond simply the act of sexual violence meted out against women; it incorporates an intersectional power dynamic of class, caste, religious and economic structures that complicates the issue surrounding rape culture in India.

The Indian government has never addressed the root cause of rape culture in India. The government has turned a blind eye to the intersectional relationship between religion, caste, politics, and power in India and the discursive tapestry in which rape occurs (Devasundaram, 2018). There is a systemic problem of rape culture in India. Institutions such as schools, hospitals, the legal system, the political system, and the media are complicit in upholding rape culture in India. Having grown up in the Indian education system, in hindsight, I can recall several instances of sexism at play within the classroom. These include unwillingness on the part of teachers to teach a comprehensive sex education curriculum, segregating boys and girls within classrooms to inhibit intermingling, imposing uniform skirt length rules for girls, and adhering to strict punishment for girls if they ever veered away from the dress code, shaming boys and girls for engaging in conversations during breaks.

Hospitals in India also lack training and professionals equipped to deal with survivors of sexual assault. Lengthy and humiliating court proceedings and delays in the legal system also are a cause for concern for rape victims who often have to relive the psychological trauma during trials. The government has also failed to adequately address the issue of rape culture, as evidenced by the way sexual assault cases are frequently regarded as isolated instances rather than as part of a larger pattern of violence against women in India. The Indian media also plays a major role in creating sensationalism when

it comes to reporting rape cases. The media often report the most gruesome cases of gang rape and those involving upper-caste and upper-class women in their reporting, ignoring the nameless, faceless women from lower-caste communities, making them essentially invisible and deeming undeserving of coverage even in their death.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that there are a number of reasons for rape culture to thrive in India. In my dissertation, I look at one particular cultural apparatus called Bollywood item songs to examine this persisting culture of violence against women. In the next section, I highlight how Bollywood and item songs in particular feature into perpetuating rape culture in India.

1.2 What's Bollywood Got to Do with It?

I think Bollywood movies are pornography. I think that women are objectified. It's all part of this disease, this culture. – Leslee Udwin, Director, *India's Daughter*

The term “Bollywood” was coined by the press in India in the late 1970s (Ganti, 2004). It has now become the globally-recognized name for the Hindi-language film industry based in Mumbai (formerly Bombay) (Mishra, 2001). Hindi is the most widely spoken language in India. However, the constitution of India recognizes twenty-two languages as the official languages of India. Apart from the Hindi film industry or Bollywood as we know it now there are other regional language film industries in India such as the Tamil film industry (Kollywood), the Telugu film industry (Tollywood), the Malayalam film industry (Mollywood) among others (Ganti, 2004). India's film industry is intrinsically tied to its music industry. The songs from Indian films are what constitute the music industry in India. The average length of a Bollywood movie is over two hours,

out of which thirty minutes of the storyline are told through, on average, five to six songs, each lasting anywhere from four to five minutes. Indian film songs are sold by the production house as separate music soundtracks that are played on the radio and television, including channels like MTV India. What is unique about Bollywood is that actors do not sing the songs in movies. Instead, professional singers are hired as playback singers, while actors lip-sync the lyrics and dance in the film's music videos.

As a crucial part of Indian and Bollywood cinema, songs have long been used to move the narrative forward. Usually, songs in Indian films depict emotions, whether love, sorrow, angst, or happiness, etc.; they are also used in celebratory depictions of marriages, religious festivals, togetherness, family reunion, friendship, etc. Since the 1990s, Bollywood filmmakers have also incorporated a particular type of song and dance sequence, distinct from the songs used to carry forward the actual storyline, called the "*item song*" or "*item number*," in which a woman is portrayed as the object of male desire through their clothing, gestures, lyrics, and dance moves. In India the term "item" is synonymous with a "commodity" or an "object," and women in item songs are often referred to as "*item girls*." The term "item" is also a slang word that is used in India to refer to a sexually promiscuous, attractive woman (a tease) who wears revealing clothes and engages in flirtatious behavior with men. An item girl is usually seen as somebody with "loose" moral values and character. The term item song or item number was first attributed to the dancer Malaika Arora's song "*Chaiya Chaiya*" (Walk in the Shade) in the 1998 film *Dil Se* (From the Heart) and actress Shilpa Shetty's performance in the 1999 film *Shool* (Spike) (Brara, 2010).

Item songs enjoy widespread popularity among movie watchers in India due to their sexually provocative visual and lyrical representation and fantasy-like escapism that is detached from the actual storyline of the movie. There is some anecdotal evidence that suggests that the popularity of item songs is enough to ensure the film's success. For example, the film *Tees Maar Khan* (2010) was not a major commercial hit. According to UTV Motion Pictures CEO Siddharth Roy Kapoor, the total cost of the film came to 67 crore Indian rupees which is 8.1 million US dollars. The film only made 75 crore Indian rupees (just over 9 million US dollars) both in domestic and international markets (IndiaGlitz, 2011). The music of the film included the popular item song *Sheila Ki Jawani* (Sheila's Youth) starring actress Katrina Kaif. This song is still considered one of the most popular item songs in Bollywood. The sale of the film's music fetched the producers of the film an additional 30 crore Indian rupees which is approximately 3.6 million US dollars (IndiaGlitz, 2011). Therefore it is safe to assume that item songs are often credited with ensuring the success of the film even if the storyline is weak.

An item song caters to a voyeuristic, heterosexual male gaze. The Geena Davis Institute on Gender Media's 2014 study in collaboration with the UN, India ranked very high when it came to on-screen female sexualization. The study revealed that 35 percent of the women in Bollywood films were shown wearing very little clothing. Male writers outnumber female writers; female writers account for only 12.1 percent of the workforce, a low number, especially in comparison to a nearly 20 percent global average. The study also revealed that the number of female directors in India is 9.1 percent, which is slightly higher than the global average of 7 percent. Despite the industry's overt objectification and sexualization of women, the vast majority of mainstream Bollywood films are certified by

the censor board. However, films such as *Fire* (1996), *Kama Sutra: A Tale of Love* (1997), *Water* (2005), *Angry Indian Goddesses* (2015), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), and *Pink* (2016) that depict women as sexual subjects with desires, fantasies, and the ability to fulfill them enrage both the conservative segments of Indian society, including right-wing Hindu activists and the Indian censor board.

In accordance with this misogynistic double standard, Bollywood utilizes a variety of strategies to preserve and present item songs for the titillation of movie-goers while making sure that the item girl never encroaches on the actual film narrative. These include having a vamp or a dancer perform the item song, or the most common - having the item song performed by either an A-list actress or a newcomer in an unrelated cameo. Most Bollywood films are made to appeal to a family audience, which includes both young children and conservative grandmothers. Bollywood films are essentially like Hallmark channel films. For the longest time, films in Bollywood went without any overt physical display of love or lust. Kissing and love-making scenes were non-existent for much of Bollywood's history. Contemporary Bollywood films are slightly more relaxed when it comes to showcasing on-screen kissing scenes, although it is still not common. The presence of these item songs with their obvious sexual overtones in these "family-oriented movies" necessitates a more critical examination of their function within the film as well as their larger role in Indian culture.

Item songs have recently come under increased public scrutiny for their representation of women on screen and its implications for perpetuating rape culture in India. The constant exposure to item songs has normalized sexist, misogynistic portrayals of women as objects for the male gaze. There is some evidence to suggest that actresses

perform these songs in accordance with their own free will. Malaika Arora, a popular dancer who has performed several item songs states that she does not “feel objectified” when performing item songs: “There will always be a certain amount of male gaze, male attention, that goes without saying, then again, I am capable of making those calls. I don’t regret any of the songs I’ve done” (The Hindu 2018). Yet Shabana Azmi, a veteran Bollywood actress, pointed out during a Federation of Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) event that item songs are not a celebration of female sexuality: “When a girl or a leading lady says it’s alright, ‘I want to celebrate my sensuality,’ I have no problem with that. I think that’s 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” (*Hindustan Times*, 2018). Equally significant, in 2017, one of Bollywood’s biggest directors, Karan Johar, apologized for the item songs in his films, stating that he would not include them in the future: “The moment you put a woman in the center and a thousand men looking at her lustingly, it’s setting the wrong example” (Scroll, 2018). These statements point to how Bollywood cinema and item songs are at the center of contemporary debates about women’s empowerment and independence as well as their objectification.

Much like Shabana Azmi, I wonder how much choice, free will and agency actresses can exhibit in patriarchal power structures with rigid gender dynamics. It is important to note that social factors, the need for financial success, and career pressures influence women’s choices. These actresses are of the impression they have somehow reclaimed their power from the male gaze through these performances as expressions of female sexuality and empowerment under the guise of feminist choice. I would not go as

far as agreeing with them because there are consequences to the choices they make on screen and more often than not those consequences are borne not by the actresses, but by the low-caste, low-class Indian woman. I recognize that rape culture in India is a multi-faceted issue that requires nuance and making blanket statements about the item songs causing rape reduces the complex socio-cultural factors at play; it is for this reason that Chapter Three is focused on these societal factors.

However, the irony of the item song is that the item girl is always surrounded by gangs of unruly, chaotic, drunk, aggressive men in alleyways, bars, or clubs. The item girl is depicted as not being scared or frightened, she does not pretend to protect her modesty, she is enticed by the male attention, which gives her ammunition to add to her provocative performance. She embraces the raw masculine violent sexual energy from the crowd which gives the men permission to exert dominance and sexual violence on a woman (the item girl) that they think is undeserving of dignity. This is what makes the item song a curious entity. Such a scenario in real life would elicit a different response from a woman. The item girl fulfills the fantasy of sexual violence that people like the rapists crave. What these songs portray is that men especially low-caste, low-class men can gang rape a woman without facing any consequences. These songs affirm their masculinity and provide a catharsis for their revenge fantasy. Due to several socio-economic, and political factors, men in India face their own forms of oppression. In the case of gang rapes in India, the unfortunate reality is that male oppression in a conservative, patriarchal society deals with someone else getting hurt and it is usually the low-caste woman who faces the consequences of male oppression.

Despite aesthetic and cultural differences with Hollywood, the Bollywood film industry is as influential and widespread in terms of the narrative, production, and distribution of films and music as its American counterpart. Cultural theorists and critics like Stuart Hall (1989) and bell hooks (1992) agree that, while acting as a medium of entertainment, cinema is simultaneously a medium that reflects, responds to, and helps to shape the changing ideologies of the society that produces it. According to Ayushi (2021), films are the most common form of mass communication and play a key role in shaping opinions, constructing images, and reinforcing dominant cultural values. She states that films also have the ability to change people's mindsets and form new cultural, social, and political values. Due to its wide distribution and huge popularity, Bollywood cinema therefore can be regarded as a significant archive of Indian culture and values.

Ramkisson (2009) states that the value of studying Bollywood has never been more relevant, not only because of the industry's immense growth but also because of its large following and ability to read Indian culture and society. The emphasis has recently shifted from discussing Bollywood as an entertainment industry to its representation of women. Not surprisingly, Bollywood has influenced how Indian people perceive and deal with various aspects of their own lives, including gender and sexual relations (Ganti, 2004). Bollywood, for instance, plays a crucial role in sexual socialization in India, (Jha, 2017), where, generally, anything associated with sex and sexuality is considered taboo. Seervai (2015) in her article in the *Wall Street Journal* notes that the state's abdication of its responsibility to teach young people about sex education has led to a "patchy implementation of sexual education across Indian states only focused on abstinence." According to Jha (2017), Bollywood has the power to convey messages about sex,

sexuality, and gender relations, making it one of the only cultural discourses around desire and leading to the centralization of sexual discourse in India.

Furthermore, Steve Darné (2000) argues that film and film-going are part of the process by which men in India understand notions of love and connection. However, the gender relations depicted in the movies glorify male hegemony and legitimize the mistreatment and oppression of women. This leads to a culture of domination and subordination of Indian women by Indian men. Moreover, as Dwivedi (2017) notes, movies, songs, and advertisements have a great influence on people. Bollywood films are therefore an avenue for the construction of gender and sexuality, teaching impressionable young boys and men as well as girls and women that “eve-teasing” and treating women as objects are acceptable, normative behaviors. These movies are complicit in their inability to recognize that women’s consent is as important as male desire and that women do not fit neatly into the binaries of a vamp or a virgin.

Vamp is a term that is commonly used in Bollywood films to refer to a woman who uses her charms to seduce men. She is a vampire of sorts who (figuratively) sucks the life out of men in the movies. She does not represent the ideal Indian woman. She is the “bad girl,” often mixed up with the wrong crowd. She is depicted as more anglicized than the main female character (the virgin). Her clothes reflect Western sensibilities, while the main female character is often seen donning traditional Indian attire. There is a stark contrast between the vamp and the main female character. Similar to the Madonna-Whore complex first introduced by Sigmund Freud where he states that men view women in binaries of good or bad, as saintly Madonnas or debased prostitutes (Freud, 1905); the vamp in the case of Bollywood films was considered the whore and the traditional female protagonist

represents the “good/virtuous Indian woman.” Bollywood films depicted the vamp as the immoral adventure-seeking seductress who was routinely used as a tool to contrast the sexual modesty of the virtuous traditional Indian heroine in films.

The vamp’s sexual prowess and racial ambiguity stood in stark contrast to the traditional Indian heroine. The vamp was the voyeuristic amusement of the fetishized “foreign” woman come to life who was making a spectacle of herself in twentieth-century item songs. After the vamp performed her erotic number, she was quickly disposed of from the storyline in the form of her death as appropriate punishment for her threatening “Indian culture” with her promiscuity. The vamp would dance at night clubs and dress scantily. This fueled the conservative and misogynistic narrative that short, revealing clothing and expression of sexuality are inherently a reflection of bad character. This trend continues today with item girls dressed in hypersexual clothes leaving very little to the imagination. What is different though is that today’s item girls present themselves in glamorized traditional Indian attire while those of the past stuck to westernized gowns. In my opinion, the Hollywood equivalent of the vamp would be the femme fatale who, much like the vamp, seduces men only to lead them to their destruction.

Camille Paglia’s emphasis on individualism, personal responsibility, and rejection of victimhood in *Vamps and Tramps* (1994) provides an alternative perspective that challenges the dominant cultural attitudes when it comes to gender dynamics in society. She contends that women should embrace their own sexual agency and not fall prey to victimization narratives and traditional conventions set forth by a patriarchal society. When examining item songs and their impact on rape culture in India along with the problem of gender norms, Paglia’s viewpoints offer some insights. For instance, item songs provide a

platform for the expression of male sexual fantasies and desires. Furthermore, the taboo aspect of discussions surrounding consent, sex and sexuality in India creates an unhealthy environment that distorts male erotic imagination and fantasies of female sexuality in dangerous ways. This leads to a situation that reinforces the stereotype that women are seen as submissive and readily available to cater to male desires and not autonomous individuals. Item songs attempt to fulfill something that is missing in Indian films i.e. depictions of female empowerment, female sexuality and liberation. However, I would argue that the type of female sexual liberation they are trying to depict falls flat and does more harm for Indian women in general than good.

Bollywood heroines are more than eager to take on the role of the item girl and enter the domain of what was once considered taboo for a traditional Indian actress who was always relegated to play the “good girl” on screen. The line between item girls and the heroine have blurred significantly. A-list actresses no longer shy away from doing item songs. In fact, they now embrace the role of the item girl thereby, firmly taking part in a sphere that was previously reserved for the newcomers, wannabe actresses, foreigners; the bad girl, the vamp, or the other woman in film narratives. These days every actress, be it established or newcomers, feel the pressure to perform an item song. They are considered the complete package only if they have one or more item songs in their resume.

It is important to know the journey of these songs from first being something of a vamp’s domain to something of present time actresses’ compulsion. The item number in contemporary Bollywood films sees the A-list actress making a cameo in these songs, thereby increasing their mass appeal and popularity. Many Bollywood actresses have argued that it is their decision and choice to participate in item songs and that nobody is

forcing them to play these characters that portray them less than favorably. However, Bollywood actresses, unlike their male counterparts, unfortunately, do have a shelf life. Ageism is a reality in Bollywood, just like in Hollywood, and the younger the actress, the more likely she is to appeal to the male audience and take part in performing an item song. Their status is precarious and is dependent on their sex appeal. I would argue that the inclusion of mainstream actresses has expanded the popularity of the item songs especially among young boys and men in India but also to the global Indian diaspora thanks to the benefits of social media such as YouTube.

Movies don't just have the responsibility to entertain, they also have the responsibility to inform and also reform certain aspects of the society we live in. Paglia regards pop culture as an avenue for open sexual expression and power dynamics. Item songs present a rare opportunity in Indian popular culture to portray female sexuality in flamboyant ways without experiencing the wrath of the conservative segments of Indian society. The songs permit narratives about sexual attraction, flirtation, and seduction. Ultimately, these songs are designed to titillate and appeal to male fantasy rather than to empower women.

One of the issues with the Indian censor board is their interference in deciding what type of content can be viewed by the general public. The rules are as subjective as they are arbitrary. The Indian censor board is notorious for suppressing sexuality on screen within the film's storyline. This repression, however, may inadvertently exacerbate the problematic attitudes concerning gender relations in India. The item song is only a safety valve that exists to release repressed sexual tension in a deeply patriarchal conservative country. What it does, in reality, is promote gender stereotypes and constraints. What

Bollywood needs are portrayals that challenge restrictive gender norms and challenge the status quo rather than perpetuate it.

Borrowing from Paglia's idea of personal responsibility, I would argue that individuals should be able to make their own decisions when it comes to deciding what type of media and popular culture content they can view and not the Indian government or the censor board. I do not wish to oversimplify the issue of rape culture in India by putting the blame on item songs alone. That is not the point of this dissertation. There are a number of systemic factors that women face in Indian society that inhibit them from achieving agency and empowerment. I expand on these socio-cultural factors that contribute to gender inequality in Chapter Three.

Songs are an essential component of Bollywood films. Songs are used to convey a number of emotions such as love, romance, happiness, and sadness. I would argue that it is this musical aspect of Bollywood that differentiates it from other international film industries and is also the unique selling point of not just Bollywood but Indian films in general. In India, patriarchy has always played a role in shaping gender roles. The film industry also takes its cues from society. The female is diminished to the love interest of the male protagonist or elevated to a glamorous object. Bollywood films fail to recognize the complex roles that women play in Indian society.

Despite a shift in the roles played by leading ladies in contemporary Bollywood films, of being the modern, empowered, career woman who goes after her dreams, item songs remain an integral aspect of Bollywood films and proceed to objectify women in a degrading way. An item song reflects both a postfeminist sensibility and a patriarchal view of women in which her role is reduced to a temptress and object for male fantasies. These

mixed messages about gender and sexuality that Bollywood offers are explicitly present in item songs. It is postfeminist in the sense that the item girl is allowed to make choices freely while overlooking the structural barriers to gender equality. The presence of the item girl in Bollywood suggests that women in India have attained empowerment and agency that allows them to express their sexuality and sexual desires openly. The item girl in these songs is portrayed as confident, daring, and assertive. These songs promote the idea that sexual liberation of women and empowerment are synonymous. To a first time watcher of Bollywood films, these songs present a rather skewed and distorted idea of Indian culture and gender dynamics in the country.

Women are often the targets of hostile, aggressive, and violent attention from men. This scenario remains true also for the item girl. What happens to the item girl character after her performance is unknown or left to interpretation by the audience. It would not be out of the ordinary to assume that the item girl may be subjected to sexual violence or even a gang rape like scenario after her performance as she is surrounded by gangs of drunk, rowdy, chaotic, and lecherous men.

Bollywood films have given the Indian people unrealistic expectations when it comes to notions of love and romance and beauty standards. Everything from the types of clothes the item girl wears to the dance moves, the invasive camera angles to the dehumanizing lyrics, all seem like the opposite of empowering women. This process turns women into a commodity for the male gaze. The women in item songs are there to earn a living off of their bodies; their customers are primarily men. The woman must satisfy the beauty standards set forth by men. The item girl is essentially shaped by male preferences. It is the complete antithesis of female empowerment. My point is not to victimize the item

girl. In some ways, I believe the item girl is an embodiment of social and cultural transgressions. Here is a woman who openly and freely exercises agency in a non-traditional, non-conformist way in a deeply patriarchal country that normally discourages women from expressing themselves sexually. But it is important to understand that the item girl exists within a narrow patriarchal framework.

The concept of sexual liberation and expression has often been presented by some feminists as a form of freedom for women. For instance, radical feminist Shulamith Firestone in her book *Dialectic of Sex* (1970) asserts that the sexual liberation of women is an essential condition for their freedom. Firestone in talking about reproductive freedom of women states that reproductive rights and access to contraception have enabled women to take control of their bodies and lives. Similarly, Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) states that in order for women to achieve their full potential and escape the limitations imposed by traditional gender roles their sexual liberation is necessary. This notion, however, has also perpetuated women's objectification and diminished their status in society as commodities for the male gaze (Szymanski, Moffitt, & Carr, 2011; Fahs, 2014). This is especially evident in the role of item girls whose bodies and physical appearance are commodified and tailored to meet men's standards and preferences. As a result, these women are constantly pressured to conform to male desires, making their supposed autonomy nothing but an illusion. Each decision the item girl makes when entertaining a large crowd of drunken men is influenced by male desires. Everything she wears, her makeup, and her body is intended to be attractive to men. The item girl is constantly thinking about what men want and what men like. Her own likes and preferences are secondary.

The director made the choice to include the item girl's performance in such a way that entices the male gaze. This ties to the notion of gender performativity, as conceptualized by Judith Butler. Gender, according to Butler, is a social construct that is established and preserved through repetitive acts and performances (Butler, 1988). The item girl's performance is part of a well-scripted and choreographed act that is constructed and rehearsed rather than an authentic expression of the item girl's identity and selfhood. Her performance is influenced by external factors and cultural pressures within a patriarchal framework. At the same time, men's desires are also being shaped. The males follow this script to enact masculinity. Therefore, the performance is a cultural disservice to males and females as it completely disavows other gender constructions.

Item songs and item girls contribute to the normalization and perpetuation of patriarchal attitudes toward women. Item songs reinforce the notion that consent and autonomy for women are secondary to male pleasure. This can lead to a culture that disregards and devalues women's agency, creating an environment conducive to rape culture. Item songs are more than just entertainment; they help shape societal attitudes and perceptions of gender and sexuality in India. Similarly, the act of performing, according to Rebecca Schneider (1997), is not limited to a single moment in time but persists and lingers, shaping subsequent understandings of the performance. Schneider's emphasis on residual performance quality implies that these recurring performances have a continuous effect on cultural and social formations. The item girls' performance becomes part of the collective cultural memory, thus defining societal attitudes and perceptions of gender and sexuality indefinitely.

Moreover, Diana Taylor investigates the link between performance and cultural memory in her book *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (2003). She contends that cultural memory is not only stored in traditional archival records but is also passed on through live performance, “repertoire.” Archives include written documents, images, and other tangible material items that preserve historical information. Archives represent a particular and fixed version of history that is frequently influenced by power dynamics and dominant narratives. Whereas repertoire is dynamic, alive, and constantly evolving. It evolves based on changing circumstances. Taylor’s concepts of the archive and the repertoire can highlight how cultural memory is transmitted and experienced in the context of Bollywood item songs and rape culture. The item songs can be seen as part of the archival material due to it being recorded in the form of the film song narrative and the written lyrics as well as the repertoire. These songs are readily available for viewing on television and YouTube. Furthermore, item songs are also part of the repertoire because they are performative acts that embody and transmit specific cultural values, beliefs, and power structures in society. They aid in the establishment and maintenance of gender norms. The item song as the repertoire has an enormous impact on the cultural memory of India, which in turn helps influence social norms and behaviors. For this reason, in the next section, I trace the evolution and historical significance of Bollywood item songs in each decade starting from the 1950s. I lay out some general observations I made while analyzing the music and movies from the Bollywood film industry during this time period.

1.3 Evolution of Bollywood

In order to understand the item song genre and to comprehend why it is the media juggernaut and cultural influencer it is today in India, it is important to trace the history and roots of songs in Bollywood. Item songs have evolved over the last seven decades with differing elements taking precedence each decade. It is important to note that the term “item song” came about in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Prior to that time period, what we now know as item songs were simply part of the song and dance sequence that is unique to Bollywood films and by extension, Indian cinema, and no distinction was made in the definition of a normal Bollywood song from an item song. In cinema, when we talk about the male gaze we are referring to the Freudian concept of scopophilia, i.e. the love of looking and being looked at in terms of the object rather than subject. Modern technology associated with photography, film, and cinema also changes how, why, and at what people look at.

Compared to the item songs of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s, the item songs of today consist of a mix of musical and instrumental form, style, dance lyrics, and attire that is catering to a very specific middle-class audience, namely young Indian men who are already sexually repressed due to the traditional, patriarchal mindset that persists in India. Songs, especially item songs of the twentieth century, were still catering to a family audience, where parents, children, and grandparents could watch the same song without censorship or embarrassment, whereas today, the presence of an item song with an A-list actress guarantees that enough young Indian men will flock to the theaters and make the movie a box office success even if the film is a critical failure. In this section, I convey my

understanding of Bollywood item songs based on my observation of movies and music from this time period. The purpose of this section is to highlight how Bollywood as an industry evolved and how the item song genre through decades of shifts and changes became what it is today.

1.3.1 The 1950s

The 1950s were characterized as the black-and-white era and songs were shot in static frames, with all of the expressions conveyed by the lead actors through a close-up of their eyes and eyebrows. Shekar identifies the 1950s as the “decade of close-ups” (2018). Close-ups were especially popular in early filmmaking in Bollywood and also in Hollywood. Close-ups are a shot in filmmaking that firmly frames a person or object, according to Bordwell and Thompson (2004). Close-ups frame a person or object and show detail, yet they exclude the larger scene. Zooming in and out of a close-up is a typical technique. A close-up from head to neck is used to provide the spectator with a thorough view of the protagonists’ faces. Close-ups were frequently used as cutaways from a more distant view to illustrate detail, such as the emotions of the characters or some complex action with their hands. Even now, close-ups of characters’ faces are frequent in soap operas in both Indian and Hollywood cinema.

When major characters are introduced, they are often given a close-up shot to emphasize their importance. There was no such thing as high definition in the 1950s in Bollywood cinema like there is today. Bollywood films in the 1950s lacked the financial resources that they enjoy now. Close-ups were employed to save money on the set building

because low-budget films were the norm (Mazumdar, 2007). Bollywood songs introduced new elements that added to the couple's story of love, passion, and romance from close-ups of the face to cut-ins of objects like the moon, a waterfall, flowers, kissing love birds or parrots, and the rustling of leaves (Shekhar, 2018).

According to Anantharaman (2008), Bollywood music in the 50s was inspired by pop and rock and roll numbers from the West. After India gained independence from the British in 1947, Indian filmmakers took on the responsibility to reinvent a "new India" for its citizens. Filmmakers wanted to break away from traditional styles of music and embrace the optimism surrounding Western modernity. For the first time, the Indian masses were exposed to the world of Hollywood cinema. This need to make movies and music for a more cosmopolitan audience led filmmakers to adopt Western sensibilities when it came to Bollywood films of the 50s.

1.3.2 The 1960s

The 1960s brought dance into the cinematic mix. Dancing tunes gained popularity around this time. Filmmakers used dance as a method of visual storytelling to convey emotions like happiness, excitement, love, and celebration (Shekhar, 2018). Dancing had a new significance in this era and dance sequences were strategically inserted into the storyline. This era highlighted the diversity of Indian classical dance styles and music. During this time the courtesan-character gained prominence in movies. Movies like *Mughal-E-Azam* (1960) (*The Emperor of the Mughals*) featured the courtesan vying

for the attention of the powerful male figure through her graceful dance and facial expressions.

According to Dwyer and Patel (2002), the underlying message of Bollywood courtesan films is sadness and loss. The courtesan is an accomplished dancer. She is known for her beauty and talent, yet she can never find true happiness. She is usually depicted as a tortured soul. The courtesan's facial expressions and body movements communicate her emotions and feelings. She lives in the outskirts of the city, is admired by men, despised by wives, mistreated by pimps, and is willing to give up everything for unrequited love (Dwyer & Patel, 2002). The courtesan has been a popular character in the film, and her charms provide the viewers with a wide range of erotic pleasures. She has been displayed as an object of sympathy for the audience, and also a symbol of the male gaze as she dances for their enjoyment. The 1960s was the last decade of courtesan culture in Bollywood movies (Dwyer & Patel, 2002). Courtesans throughout Indian history have been known to be concubines of Maharajas and Mughal Kings in India. The courtesan is not so much as lower-class as she is poorly assigned to a class that is beneath her actual virtues.

1.3.3 The 1970s

The narrative function of item songs was especially important in the 70s. These were not known as item songs at the time. They were more likely “party” songs or cabaret dance numbers (Shekhar, 2018). The songs were used as a means to move the storyline of the film. The songs were embedded within the movie narrative as party songs, celebrations, or as a means for the “vamp” to seduce the hero to stall him from his mission or from

getting the answers that he desperately seeks. Such was the case in the 1978 hit film, *Don*, where the item girl is played by one of the most popular actresses of the 60s and 70s, Helen Ann Richardson Khan, an Anglo-Burmese-Indian who does her best to seduce actor Amitabh Bachchan in a hotel room with her provocative song and dance sequence in what has now become the iconic item song *Yeh Mera Dil Yaar Ka Deewana (My Heart is Crazy for My Lover)*. This era witnessed the rise of the “vamp” in Bollywood movies. The vamp could be classified as the original item girl, though the term did not exist then. While admired as a talented dancer, Khan was frequently denied leading roles because her independence of body and free spirit and her supposed lack of modesty in dress code and body movements in songs were not appreciated by the traditional family-centric patriarchal audience. She was considered too foreign-looking at the time. Dwyer and Patel (2002) explain that one of the criticisms she faced at the time was that she seemed to take too much pleasure in her own body and that she had little control over her desires. These features merged to form the vamp.

The vamp in Bollywood movies is seen as someone who has all the freedom that a typical traditional Indian woman does not have. The vamp is someone who is enthusiastic about dancing, drinking alcohol, and having sexual relations with anyone she desires. The movie *Don* and the song *Yeh Mera Dil Yaar Ka Deewana (My Heart is Crazy for my Lover)* were remade and remixed in 2006 starring Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan and the item song was performed by actress Kareena Kapoor, which made the original movie and the newer version popular among a newer generation of Indians.

This was also the cabaret/disco phase of Bollywood. The songs also took place inside the antagonist’s domain, which added a sense of excitement to the storyline. Shekhar

(2018) states that actresses used their dance and facial expressions to entice the hero. The focus on the female dancer's piercing eyes trying to hypnotize those watching her was a common feature in this decade. Heavy eye makeup was emphasized, and close-up facial shots were highly popular. Much like in the 1950s, actresses often expressed their emotions through their eyes. This era has been called the golden phase of Bollywood by the media not only because of the super hit films it produced but also for its iconic songs that still hold a place in many nightclub and party playlists as well as on TV and radio.

The 70s saw the rise of actors such as Amitabh Bachchan, Dharmendra, Rishi Kapoor, Hema Malini, and Jaya Badhuri who have since attained legendary status in Bollywood. *Sholay* (Embers) released in 1975 remained the longest-running theatrical movie in Indian cinema up until 2001. The song *Mehbooba Mehbooba* (Darling, Darling) from the film was the most popular item song of its time and has since been remixed and remade in 2007. Dwyer and Patel (2002) state that the scenes created in dance clubs in the seventies were not realistic, as there were no such nightclubs in Bombay (currently Mumbai) at the time, and what was shown on screen was an idealization of trends seen on music videos in the West. In the 1970s, the mise-en-scene often had a dance floor surrounded by dating areas, and the dancer would walk in and sing a song while seducing the male patrons with her dance movements and choice of sexy clothing. It was a place where all of society's rules were broken and women dressed in Western attire, drank alcohol, smoked cigarettes, and marijuana, and danced with abandon. These scenarios were present in songs such as *Dum Maro Dum* (*Puff, Take a Puff*) from the 1971 film *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* and in the song *Chura Liya Hai Tumne Jo Dil Ko* (*You've Stolen This Heart*)

from the 1973 film *Yaadon Ki Baaraat (Procession of Memories)*. This on-screen portrayal, in turn, allowed the spectator to indulge in forbidden pleasures.

1.3.4 The 1980s

There is relatively little scholarship on Bollywood during this time period. Much of this decade was filled with political strife in India. A series of significant events took place during this period including the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and later the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's younger son Sanjay Gandhi, the beginning of liberalization policies introduced by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, the formation of India's political rightwing party - Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The 1980s saw a significant shift in the film industry, as well as color television was introduced. Hindi films began to impact regional cinema in other parts of the country. Bollywood movies reached a turning point in the 1980s. After recognizing that mainstream movies needed to focus on storytelling in order to establish themselves on the global stage, the industry started to change. A new genre of cinema called "parallel cinema" emerged during this period that focused on socially relevant issues (Sharma, 2023). During this time, due to the popularity of mainstream Hindi films, the industry started to *Bollywoodize*. This era saw changes in the production, distribution, and screening of popular Hindi films. According to Shekhar (2018), songs in this era were linked to the plotline. They were written and integrated into the story based on the needs of the film. The songs contained passion, desire, betrayal, and love confessions, and each part was shot with its own storyline. In some ways, this was the last decade in which party songs were employed as part of the storyline

narrative rather than as a plot filler or for mere entertainment. The films of the 80s were a mix of action and romance with musical numbers.

1.3.5 The 1990s

I recall this decade quite fondly. In my opinion, the 90s had the best music and movies in Bollywood. Movies like *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (Who Am I to You) (1994), *Dil To Pagal Hai* (The Heart is Crazy) (1997), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (Some Things Happen) (1998), *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (I've Given My Heart Away, Darling) (1999) still hold iconic status among Indians today. The songs from these movies are famous for their romantic lyrics. Lyricists like Gulzar, Sameer Anjaan, and Javid Akhtar also rose to prominence. In the 1990s, the predominant themes of music were romance and longing. Music director A.R. Rahman was essential in popularizing keyboard music during this time.

During the 90s, onscreen romance became more explicit and acceptable. As the actors were placed into closer frames, the cinematography changed as well. Long and medium shots became the standard method for filming a scene. This was also the era of the country's economic liberalization, which resulted in the introduction of multiplex theaters. The 90s was characterized by a string of successful romance movies. This was the era of the three Khans - Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, and Aamir Khan (Bamzai, 2021). This decade led to the birth of these superstars and to date, they rule the box office in Bollywood. Bollywood songs came to play a more significant role in the films and were given a larger percentage of the film's budget, better staging, and more stylish clothes. The performance

of songs from this period onwards contained more stylish and flamboyant costumes worn by the actresses.

This period saw the Bollywood film industry opening up to private production companies and big studios. The VCR (videocassette recorder) and the emergence of cable networks impacted films and Bollywood songs. Films were being produced in foreign locations such as the UK, Switzerland, Canada, USA that catered to the wealthier Indian diaspora in foreign countries called the Non-Resident Indians (NRIs). The storyline in the movies also displayed a sense of longing by the main characters for their homeland and all things traditional including the food, clothing, religious festivals, and traditional familial values. An example is *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge (The Brave Hearted Will Take the Bride)* or DDLJ, as it is often referred to, which was released in 1995. The movie is set in London with both male and female characters born and raised in the UK and having never visited India. Despite growing up in a Western country, much of the movie emphasizes the beauty of traditional Indian culture with the couple eventually going back to India in the second half of the film. DDLJ is to date the most successful Bollywood movie both at home and abroad. Much of its success is also attributed to its melodic and catchy songs, though none of the songs in the movie can be classified as item songs per se. Ticket sales from abroad made a significant portion of the profits for the movie. The global reach of Bollywood movies thus grew in this decade and this also led to filmmakers pumping in more money to produce more elaborate and glamorous songs.

1.3.6 The 2000s

Bollywood experienced rapid transformation starting from the early 2000s and marked a new era in filmmaking. Several trends highlight the 2000s. In this decade, catchy lyrics and complicated musical notes gained prominence. This era saw many genres and experimentation. Around this time the Bollywood music industry began to reinvent itself. This period also saw Bollywood officially get global industry status as large international corporations like Disney, Sony Pictures, and Fox Studios entered the Indian market. This created a paradigm shift since filmmakers got the much needed financial backing to experiment with new ideas and explore new technology. The movies made in the 2000s were constantly making new box office records and the term “the 100 crore club” was coined in the media referring to the ten million rupees earned when movies like *Ghajini* (2008) and *3 Idiots* (2009) crossed the mark. Such a feat was unheard of in previous decades.

Movies started to get adapted from novels, plays, and short stories such as *Devdas* (2002) and *Parineeta* (The Married Woman) (2005). Short-budget movies like *Bheja Fry* (Brain Fry) (2007), and *Peepli Live* (2010) with less popular star casts received fame and critical acclaim. Romance and love stories were still popular during this decade, however, instead of focusing on romantic relationships, movies started emphasizing character development. Movies like *Wake Up Sid* (2009), *Dil Chahta Hai*, (The Heart Desires It) (2001), and *3 Idiots* (2009) explored the life of urban youth, their relationships, their vulnerability, and their aspirations.

Women's roles in Bollywood films have not changed significantly since the early 2000s. However, rising global influences in the form of Western clothing, consumption of Western consumer brands, the popularity of the English language among the masses, and exposure to Western music and movies have created a new kind of middle class in India where women started to increasingly negotiate their role at home and in the public sphere. The new postfeminist Indian woman was born during this period and was increasingly seen as a threat to traditional Indian culture and values. The 2000s saw an increase in skin show (where actresses were frequently portrayed wearing short, revealing, skimpy clothes), provocative dance moves, and vulgar lyrics.

1.3.7 The 2010s

The 2010s is the decade that overlaps with the song sample that is the focus of my study. As the 2000s entered its second decade, the popularity of item songs exacerbated the discussion surrounding the objectification of the female body. Item songs lost their narrative structure in the 2010s. Instead of using the song as a narrative component in the film to move the plot, actors were merely required to do some type of high-energy dance routine, which was aided by quick editing. As provocative shots and symbolism took hold, romance took a back seat. This era is associated with unrealistic body standards, with actresses exhibiting ample curves on thin frames and actors displaying muscular frames and six-pack abs. The songs enhanced the performers' attractiveness as the camera zoomed in and out of their faces and body to highlight their features (Shekhar, 2018). Close-ups used to be synonymous with the eyes and the timidity that came with a single gaze.

However, close-ups during this period implies the camera zooming in on the item girl's breasts, navel, or hips.

Remixes are another feature of this decade. In Bollywood, there is a rising tendency to revamp and market classic item songs to an ever-increasing and quickly changing youth population. The original has been replaced by a remix using modern technology and instruments, and the music videos are performed by contemporary popular actresses. I believe this recent trend of remixing item songs from the past incorporates Diana Taylor's (2003) concept of archive and repertoire. Item songs from yesteryears are part of the cultural memory of India. The original songs *Ek Do Teen* (One Two Three) (1988), *Chamma Chamma* (Jingling Jingling) (1998), *Dilbar Dilbar* (Beloved Beloved) (1999), and *Laila Main Laila* (I'm Such a Beauty) (1980) still enjoy wide spread popularity in India. Their remixed versions have brought in a new kind of relevance to these old classics. Coincidentally, the remixes of these songs are also part of my sample of item songs that I analyzed for my study in Chapter Four. Remixed versions of item songs have been adapted and reinterpreted to cater to a new generation of Indians. These remixes have been incorporated into contemporary film and media content, thus ensuring their popularity decades after it was first released.

In recent years, there has also been an increase in "period films," such as *Baajrao Mastani* (2015) and *Padmavaat* (2018), which idealize and glorify antiquated, problematic cultural practices and patriarchal notions of the ideal Indian woman. Conversely, diverse films are being produced in Bollywood today with a number of female film directors and producers articulating more complex women-centric storylines. These include people like Deepa Mehta, Zoya Akhtar, Reema Kagti, Rhea Kapoor, and Farah Khan. Since 2010, the

songs have also coincided with the rise of critically and commercially successful Hindi films with female-centric themes encapsulating feminist messages, such as *Queen* (2014), *Piku* (2015), and *Pink* (2016). The latter appears to be fighting patriarchal notions of acceptable femininity, confronting patriarchy head-on by applauding female accomplishment, female sexuality, and agency and autonomy. However, feminist academics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988) consider such popular cultural narratives and texts supporting motifs of individual choice and freedom for young women as intimately linked to new regimes of neo-conservative principles propagated by governments concerning gender parity (Zubair, 2017). Nonetheless, item songs and new film genres with a female-centric perspective may be understood as places or spaces for the enactment of feminism and feminist identities, despite being closely related to the expanding culture of consumerism and capitalism in neoliberal economies.

These new female-centric cultural narratives, if done right, can provide opportunities for women to question traditional gender norms and roles, assert their agency, and openly express their desires and sexuality all the while realizing the potential of neo-liberal capitalism. This allows them to be active participants rather than passive objects who have the power to subvert dominant patriarchal structures by centering women's voices. Item songs, but more importantly female-centric movie narratives, have the capacity to be sites of resistance and empowerment that can promote individual choice and freedom for women in India. The real struggle is the unchecked expansion of consumerism and capitalism and its ability to co-opt feminist ideals while replacing them with a superficial depiction of feminism for profit margins which is what I fear is currently underway within the Bollywood film industry.

In order for there to be any semblance of change it is imperative that consumers educate themselves on the capitalistic tactics used by the industry. This could take shape in the form of critical media engagement, supporting alternative/indie cinema, supporting lesser-known filmmakers and actors who do not belong to large Bollywood studios, supporting more authentic and inclusive feminist narratives, engaging in dialogue and activism about female objectification, demanding ethical filmmaking practices, and encouraging responsible marketing and advertising methods. By raising awareness on these issues, consumers can empower themselves with the knowledge that they need to make informed choices as viewers of Bollywood cinema.

1.4 Traditional yet Modern Indian Woman

Several years ago, I came across a peculiar phrase in Indian matrimonial columns in newspapers and websites: “*traditional yet modern.*” It all pointed to the same thing. Parents of the grooms looking to arrange a marriage for their son expected this one important quality in their future daughters-in-law: she needs to be traditional and modern. Phrases like *Looking for a traditional girl with a modern outlook; someone who embodies both qualities of East and West; fair-skinned, slim, educated, god-fearing, and family-oriented* were other phrases that accompanied this requirement. To me, this came across as an oxymoron and I didn’t quite understand what they meant by this for a long time. In this section, I unpack this notion of the “*traditional yet modern*” woman in Indian society. I refer to this idea in later chapters and its effect on Indian women and its role in India’s rape culture. The postfeminism idea in India is different from what it is in the West.

The idea of the traditional woman in the Indian context is one who is a passive domestic homemaker, who caters to her family, and upholds virtues such as chastity, and religiosity. She is dependent on the men in her family for her financial well-being. The modern Indian woman on the other hand, espouses the trope of a strong independent woman, who has career aspirations, and is autonomous. She is well educated and opinionated. She is free to make her own decisions regarding her body and her future. However, these two concepts are at odds with each other in India. A woman can never truly be a “modern” woman in contemporary India without facing some backlash. The term “modern Indian woman” has a negative connotation associated with it because a “modern” woman is more often than not seen as someone who embraces Western culture and values which stands as a threat to “traditional Indian culture.” Therefore, I argue that the concept of the traditional yet modern woman is a compromise that Indian society has adopted to appease a growing generation of young, empowered, and educated women who wishes to seek liberation from the constraints of a patriarchal conservative society. However, in reality, I believe the traditional yet modern woman trope has increased the mental load and created a double burden of work for Indian women, where they are expected to do everything and be everything for everyone.

Despite the dominance of conservative patriarchal norms, the notion of the traditional yet modern Indian woman is a central theme in articulating misogyny in the Indian context. This trope has infiltrated the larger cultural ethos in recent years, contributing to significant socio-cultural tensions and conflicts. A woman can be “modern” so long as she stays within the boundaries set by patriarchy, i.e. she can be educated, employed, and financially independent, yet she cannot venture out alone and engage in

(sexual and promiscuous) behavior that would dishonor her family and community. Women who dare to do so are at risk for sexual violence, thereby instilling fear in women about frequenting public spaces.

A larger percentage of Indian women are now educated, make up a significant portion of the workforce, and are financially independent. Women also marry later and there has been a drastic shift in gender roles both within and outside the household. Traditionally, middle and upper-class Indian women were not employed, as male family members provided financial assistance (Lau, 2010). Recently, there has been a rise in the number of middle-class Indian women from urban areas entering the workforce (Lau, 2010). Due to issues like poverty, rising living expenses, and the need for additional income to take care of aging parents, more Indian women are entering the labor force; single women as a result, assume the role of the breadwinner in their home (Lau, 2010). This is a significant deviation from patriarchal family structures in which men are the sole breadwinners and women are housewives.

The growing advancement of the “modern” educated Indian women and the threat of their becoming equal players in both the economy and social structure may be hard to accept for young men, especially from the rural heartland who have grown up with traditional gender roles, potentially encouraging them to assert power through other means, namely sexual harassment and rape (Krishnan, 2015). Krishnan states “In India, the current spate of sexism and culture of justifying rape and surveillance on women, is best explained as a means of disciplining women’s labor in a neoliberal capitalist economy, rather than as a mere vestige of a backward culture” (2015: 2). The ideal Indian woman is one who is modest, religious, educated, and compromising, she can look after her parents, her in-laws,

her husband, and her children while simultaneously holding a job and earning an income but also not out earning her husband so as not to emasculate him, all the while also doing all the household labor.

Women face numerous intersecting discriminations based on not just their gender but also based on their class, caste, language, religion and ethnicity. As a consequence, the dimensions of social segregation, gender division, and patriarchy combine to form an intricate network of discrimination and violence affecting women at various stages. (Purkayastha, Subramaniam, Desai, & Bose, 2003). Every woman experiences violence differently. Violence against women combines different aspects of her identity, be it race, class, caste, religion, etc. Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), introduced the concept of intersectionality to argue that the experiences of women of color cannot be understood separately or in silos but needs to be studied in accordance with patterns of sexism, racism, and classism.

In India, the absence of discussion surrounding egalitarian sexual relationships, consent, sex education, and sexuality is especially profound. The state perpetuates an ideology that intrinsically links public morality with the Indian woman's body. This is manifested through censorship of female sexuality in art and media, and statutory provisions like the Indecent Representation of Women Act (1986), According to Jain (2018) laws like these essentially disregard the need for consensual and meaningful representation of female sexuality in India. The ideal Indian woman is expected to protect her virtue by avoiding engaging in sexual relations with men from different castes, classes, religions, and ethnic backgrounds who can undermine the basis of her respectability. India is a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country, but despite all its differences,

one thing that is largely accepted among all communities in India is the idea of the “*good Indian girl*.” Whether she is a Hindu, or a Muslim, or a Sikh, or a Christian, or a Jain, or a Buddhist, her value as an Indian woman rests on her virginity. Families regardless of their religious background want a daughter or a daughter in law who is an educated working professional, who can also take care of the family, and her husband. They want a girl who is worldly wise, cultured, well read, but all within the confines of the freedom granted by a patriarchal social order.

Sexism and misogyny manifest in both official and unofficial policies and practices in Indian society in complex ways. Preference for male children, for example, demonstrates both sexism and misogyny. The overwhelming assumption is that the only legitimate family structure in India is one that is by a heterosexual couple, ignoring the LGBTQ segment of society altogether. Indian society gives precedence to boys, fostering the notion that women are inferior to men. Gender-based violence and harassment have come to be normalized in India. The psychological threat of sexual violence instills fear in the minds of women and young girls. Due to the social stigma surrounding dating and hookup culture as well as entering into pre-marital sexual relations, Indian women are less likely to seek out intimate relationships with men, thus making it challenging for Indian women to find romantic partners with the opposite sex. This creates a scenario for arranged marriages to not just exist but thrive, with parents of adult children taking the initiative to find spouses for their children.

India has one of the lowest divorce rates in the world at 1 percent (Free Press Journal, 2023). However, it is important to note that divorce is considered taboo in Indian society. This may be another reason why couples choose not to divorce, so as to save their

social reputation and not be labeled a “divorcee.” Divorce is especially detrimental for a woman in India. A divorced woman faces the stigma attached to being left by her husband. Another crucial factor to keep in mind is the fact that marital rape is not illegal in India. The underlying belief is that a husband cannot rape his wife. This makes it extremely difficult for Indian women to leave abusive marriages. All these societal pressures make for a complicated social structure where young girls and women find it difficult to navigate India’s patriarchal system.

There is a predominant preference for male children in India to carry on the family lineage and, despite sex-selective abortions being illegal, couples find ways to abort female fetuses. A study by the International Center for Research on Women (2006) stated that the preference for male children in India stems from economic, religious, and social expectations.

There is a common cultural belief in India much like a lot of traditional, conservative patriarchal societies that the son will take care of the parents in their old age rather than the daughter. It is also widely believed that the son will financially support the parents after their retirement. Another reason that girl children are seen as less desirable in India is due to the fact that daughters deplete the family’s financial resources through the dowry system that is still practiced (despite it being illegal) at the time of their marriage. The bride’s parents are expected to gift money, gold, new cars, and new home appliances such as refrigerators and washing machines to the in-laws when they marry off their daughter. This also has an economic component as such gifts also denote how wealthy the family is to gift such lavish items.

As with other patriarchal societies, the expectation is that it is the male children who will carry the family name and bloodline, whereas daughters are married off to another family. In Hindu culture especially, sons perform important religious rites, especially during funerals. The rise in sexual violence against women in India has created the notion that male members of the family are responsible for protecting female family members, especially young unmarried girls from potential harm. Parents frequently raise male children to be dominating and hyper-masculine. Women on the other hand are expected to take care of men and the family.

Within the South Asian community, the honor of the nation and the community lies within the body of the female (Jain, 2018), as demonstrated in films such as *Mother India* (1957) as well as scores of other films since then. The concept of honor in Indian society is firmly rooted in patriarchy that values women's sexual purity and subservience. The ideal Indian woman is one who is virtuous, pious, and modest. Any woman who steers away from this mold of the ideal Indian woman is more often than not met with challenges. Girls in India are taught to look after the needs of the family first. Their own needs and desires are secondary. This creates an environment where women are frequently seen as giving up their dreams for the family. Indian parents teach their sons to embody masculine traits from an early age. They are taught to be brave, domineering, proactive, assertive, and aggressive, which can result in the creation of toxic masculinity in young boys and make them feel a sense of entitlement whereby Indian men believe they have the right to exert control over women. Girls on the other hand are taught to be meek, obedient, passive, and submissive, especially to men resulting in gender imbalance in heterosexual relationships in India.

Coming to Bollywood, the item girl is depicted as a “modern” sexually empowered woman, however in reality many would consider her presence blasphemous to Indian culture yet somehow she exists. Several factors contribute to the item girl’s appeal and prominence in India. The item girl is a symbol of the evolving nature and perceptions concerning women’s sexuality in contemporary India. Apart from the entertainment aspect of her performance, she has become a distinctive part of Bollywood. In my opinion, the item song genre has done more for the globalization of Bollywood than any other aspect of Indian cinema. Globalization refers to “the growing interdependence of the countries, cultures, and populations, brought about by international trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information” (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2018). Globalization and soft power have resulted in the survival and expansion of Bollywood (Schaefer & Karan, 2013). The term soft power was popularized by Joseph Nye to describe other forms of power beyond military or economic (Nye, 2021). He further states that a country exerts its soft power through its political values, foreign policy, and culture (Nye, 2008). Much like the K-Pop industry in South Korea, anime from Japan, telenovelas from South America, and Turkish dramas, Bollywood too has become a cultural soft power tool in the globalized world stage to represent India’s unique culture. And the item girl is a mascot that represents modern India’s globalization.

The modernity represented by the item girl is not the same as the modernity represented by the traditional yet modern “good Indian girl.” No family would welcome nor accept a girl like the item girl as a daughter or daughter-in-law. The item girl is an escape from reality. She is “the other.” The item girl is not the type of girl an Indian man

would ever dream of bringing home to meet his parents (even though he may actually dream about her in his sexual fantasies). That is a place reserved for the traditional yet modern Indian girl. The item girl's presence in Indian society is divisive. While some like veteran actress Shabana Azmi find her offensive to Indian culture, others like dancer Malaika Arora see her as an embodiment of artistic freedom and individual choice. The Indian censor board evaluates the item girl's depiction in accordance with standards that give precedence to social norms and cultural sensitivities. It is subjective to determine whether the item girl is acceptable or blasphemous. Different people may understand these rules differently, resulting in differing opinions on whether the item girl is acceptable in Indian culture. An intricate web of elements shapes the item girl phenomenon, reflecting the varied and changing aspects of Indian society's notions about female sexuality and entertainment.

The underlying notion of the traditional yet modern Indian woman is that her participation in the globalized economy should not undermine the significance of the hetero-patriarchal family structure that India is founded upon. The modern Indian woman is an embodiment of multitasking. The ideal modern Indian woman upholds traditional patriarchal values in the ever-changing modern society, she is someone who balances it all. Despite the inherent sexism and sexualization of women, what seems at work here are postfeminist ideas of individual choice as opposed to feminist ideas of women's equality, particularly their legal and reproductive rights. Postfeminist, capitalist notions of female success and individual choice are capitalized by the leading female actors, most of whom would consider these item songs as a regular part of their work and an easy and quick way to earn a substantial amount of money, instead of the long drawn out schedules of films.

The social trope of the traditional yet modern woman has been taken up by the Bollywood film industry as a central theme. Banerji (2013) points out that recent Bollywood heroines are usually portrayed as “empowered” and “modern,” i.e. upper and middle-class women who have access to a cosmopolitan lifestyle, who drink alcohol, smoke, and go clubbing. These women are career-oriented and are not afraid to openly express their sexual needs and desires. Bollywood sells this fantasy of the “modern,” “empowered” cosmopolitan woman to women from all classes and castes. Shrivastava (2016: 2) illustrates that “when actual caste-enfranchised, middle-class women participate or even desire to participate in these activities, they face patriarchal, misogynistic systems of oppression because women’s access to the public sphere threatens the hyper-masculine public order.” The idea of “modern” when it comes to Indian women is a complex and complicated one that can be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand, it represents a progressive outlook when it comes to women’s autonomy and empowerment in a traditionally patriarchal society, and on the other hand, it showcases the barriers “modern” women face on a daily basis such as violence, harassment, and discrimination in public spaces.

Bollywood’s portrayal of the modern empowered woman is both progressive and problematic at the same time. Bollywood interprets the modern woman as one who espouses Western sensibilities and adopts a Western lifestyle. While this narrative challenges the rigid traditionally held beliefs that perpetuate gender inequality in India, it also gives the audience the message that in order for an Indian woman to be truly modern and liberated she needs to look towards the West. This notion negates local traditions and cultures and simply aims to mimic the West which itself is problematic. I imagine that by

marketing this version of the modern Indian woman to its audience, Bollywood is trying to shed its squeaky clean family-oriented film image and even provoke traditionally held patriarchal beliefs in its own glamorous way.

Item songs by their very nature are intended to delight and captivate viewers, especially male viewers. However, by portraying women as sexually promiscuous individuals, they also disrupt traditional patriarchal notions of gender in India. In reality, the average Indian woman is expected to uphold traditional conservative values and not get carried away by globalization and Western influences. Nowhere are these tensions and conflicting norms more strikingly manifested than in the Bollywood film industry and its representations.

1.5 Literature Review

There is a significant body of research on Bollywood as a cinematic genre (e.g. Mishra, 2001; Ganti, 2004; Desai, 2004; Gokulsing & Dissanayake, 1998; Kabir, 2001; Pendakur, 2003; Gehlawat, 2010). Very little academic research exists on the topic of item songs per se; much of the existing research relates to the objectification of female bodies, the male gaze, and the representation of women, these studies do not delve into the ways in which a possible culture of rape and violence against women may influence and be influenced by these songs. With regard to the issue of the male gaze, there are different foci that previous researchers have observed or identified such as the performance, lyrics, visuals, and sound. My research looks at the narrative, visual and lyrical characteristics combined in ten of the most popular item songs from 2012–2019, however, my theoretical

framework varies from the previous studies in such that I make use of a feminist media studies perspective and focus on the male gaze theory, intersectionality, and postfeminism aspect to the study of item songs and their relationship to rape culture in India. Furthermore, I employ the stylistic categories of the narrative, mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound introduced by Bordwell and Thompson to analyze my sample of item songs. Much of the current literature on item songs uses a quantitative approach and lends its focus to the female body. There is a dearth of qualitative research that focuses on item songs and their very specific and intimate relationship to rape culture in the larger socio-cultural context in India.

Scholars like Mishra (2001) and Szurlej (2017) give a thorough background of Bollywood and contextualize the Bollywood film industry as a significant movie powerhouse, highlighting the importance of Bollywood songs and dance sequences. Szurlej (2017) highlights the shift from songs as dream sequences to what is now known as item numbers. She examines how filmmakers overcome censorship rules about sexuality on-screen by introducing erotic and titillating item numbers. Furthermore, Kaur (2011) investigates the emergence of item songs as a significant cultural form in Bollywood films. She investigated contemporary subcultures in major cities as well as small towns in India where smaller-budget films and regional versions of original film songs with provocative lyrics coexist. Kaur was one of the first scholars to make the connection between a film's box office success to the presence of an item song in the film.

Scholars like Sahu and Abbas (2015), Szurlej (2017), Kaur (2011), and Dwivedi (2017) highlight the issue of objectification of the gendered body. Sahu and Abbas (2015) conduct a semiotic analysis of four popular item songs and look at the commodification,

use, and abuse of the female body. Dwivedi (2017) conducts a thematic analysis of patterns of sexual objectification of females in the lyrics of Bollywood rap and item songs from 2010 to 2016. Her research revealed an emphasis on women's body parts, depictions of women as intoxicating substances and food, the use of obscene similes or metaphors, and an appreciation for white skin (Dwivedi, 2017). Similarly, Roy (2020) examines the semiotic content of certain item song lyrics to see how metaphors are applied to objectify women, minimizing them to flirts or seductresses.

Scholars have noted that an essential aspect of the item songs is the reference via costume or lyrics to female body parts. Kapoor (2018) found certain common features indicative of item songs in Hindi films. These include the portrayal of women wearing skimpy clothes, degrading song lyrics, and suggestive dance moves highlighting their certain body parts inappropriately. Like Kapoor, Dwivedi's study also echoed themes such as sexual objectification of women in item songs through the lyrics, emphasis on certain body parts, and comparing the woman's body to intoxicating substances and food. Her study also found evidence of colorism where an appreciation for fair skin was a major finding (2017).

Recent articles by Pallavi Jha (2014) and Isha Jain (2018) focus on individual or small sets of item songs and issues such as the objectification of women, sexualized visual representation, and representation of the female body. Jain studies the cultural paradox associated with censorship and hypersexualized depictions of the female body in item songs. Her research identifies the narrative structures and plot devices used by filmmakers to market these performances without offending either the Indian state apparatus or the conservative Indian audience (2018). Jha (2014) in her study theorizes the popularity of

item songs and poses the question as to why such forms of oppression against women depicted in a movie are not questioned. This is where my study comes in to play. I argue that item songs are a form of violence against women. My research is using the item song as a cultural apparatus to examine the social response of Indian society regarding the issue of rape culture. My study questions the item song genre as a means of perpetuating sexual violence in India and looks at the reason for society's indifference and disregard for sexual violence against women especially when it pertains to women from a low-caste, low-class background.

Scholars including Sahu, Derné, and Jadwin have studied the way in which item songs employ choreographed dances staged for a masculine gaze. In item songs, provocative and sexual dancing moves are typically performed by actresses who are frequently surrounded by a crowd of men in a clichéd portrayal of gender dynamics. Men are portrayed as the target audience or the customers. While women are portrayed as simply products or commodities to be sold. Sahu (2015) draws the conclusion that the item songs aim to make money and gain popularity for the movie by their provocative lyrics and depiction of female bodies on screen. By enabling men to reduce women to objects of their dominating gaze, Derné and Jadwin's (2000) ethnographic research of male moviegoers in India supported Mulvey's (1975) contention that cinema promotes male dominance and power. When it comes to item songs, the controlling gaze represents a power dynamic that arises from the mere act of staring wherein the person looking has the ability to objectify the person being looked at. The item girl is the one being looked at by the men surrounding her including the hero. The body of the item girl is viewed entirely from the perspective of the hero (main male character). What the audience sees is what the hero

chooses to show us. Even though Bollywood tries to portray item girls as having agency who are in control of the narrative calling all the shots, the fact remains that the item girl is depicted in relation to male desire and reinforces the idea that the female body exists for male consumption and male pleasure.

In another study, Derné (2000) stated that Hindi films treat women on screen as an object of the male gaze and the camera's gaze. Women are exposed in provocative dance numbers while being lustfully gazed at by male characters in these films, thereby, encouraging male viewers to follow suit. Aside from that, the pleasure of looking was palpable among Indian male spectators, especially when they mentioned their favorite actresses. The research concluded that the male viewers selected their favorite heroines based on their physical attractiveness and dancing abilities.

Furthermore, Kistle and Lee in their 2010 study discovered that male college undergraduate students who viewed highly sexualized music videos exhibited behaviors consistent with more objectification of women, sexual permissiveness, and stereotyped gender attitudes than those who watched less. The implications of the results of this study could also be extended to Bollywood item songs and their effects on young boys and men in a traditional, morally conservative, patriarchal country like India. The provocatively dressed item girl's body is represented as an object for the male gaze (Susmita, 2015), which Bhandari (2018) states ultimately affects the sexual attitudes of people in society by creating a stereotypical image of women. These scholars argue that the media convinces women to concentrate more on their looks and body rather than their intellectual capabilities.

According to Habib (2017), the performances of women in item songs are meant to be bold and cast in a negative fashion. Habib further states that the item girl is nothing but a decorative object without agency. Raza (2015) describes agency as “the concept of empowerment or the capability of deciding one’s own life without any fear of violence.” In keeping with the theme of agency, Rad (2016) conducted a narrative analysis of the interrelationship of gender, women, and cinema in two Indian films, *Daman* by Kalpana Lajmi and *Mrityudand* by Prakash Jha using a sociological approach. She examined the role of women in Indian society and traced the evolution of Indian cinema, while focusing on the rise of female directors and how that corresponds to the portrayal of women on screen. She connected a woman’s agency with other aspects such as education, decision-making, empowerment and rebellion.

Item songs are historically entrenched in Indian cinema especially Bollywood films and their presence and apparent popularity are due to various socio-cultural factors that are a part and parcel of a patriarchal society with established traditional gender norms. The above studies laid the foundation for my research. My study attempts to expand further the current scholarship on this topic by incorporating a novel and nuanced approach that combines various theoretical concepts. Chapter Two discusses in detail the theoretical framework I adopt for my discussion on item songs and its influence on India’s rape culture.

1.6 Methodology

In my literature review, I analyzed several studies that investigated the item song genre, however as mentioned before, most of these studies make use of a smaller sample size and lend their research to a semiotic, quantitative, or content analysis perspective. My research is of an exploratory orientation. It is an interpretative, hermeneutic study that qualitatively assesses the issues of rape culture in India through the genre of Bollywood item songs. After combing through previous research on item songs as well as analyzing the literature review, I concluded that a hermeneutic approach is a relevant and appropriate way to analyze my study.

The theory and practice of interpretation, which incorporates a justifiable understanding is known as hermeneutic phenomenology. In addition to a theory of understanding through empirical and reflective assessment, it refers to historically varied approaches for interpreting texts, objects, and concepts (Dyer, 2010). Hans-Georg Gadamer criticizes the idea of objective understanding in his analysis of hermeneutics as a philosophical approach to understanding and interpretation. In order to highlight the iterative process of understanding, where the interpreter's beliefs influence the text that is being read, he proposed the hermeneutical circle (Gadamer, 2004). As they engage with the text, interpreters in the hermeneutical circle convey their own preconceived notions and biases.

I investigate the socio-cultural elements that enable India's rape culture in Chapter Three. Employing hermeneutics as a technique of study is beneficial in evaluating the larger historical, social, cultural, and political framework of Indian society because my

research is focused on the Indian context where item songs are an important cultural text and cultural influencer especially when it comes to understanding the discursive elements that promote rape culture in India.

According to van Manen (1997), hermeneutic phenomenology is carried out through empirical (collection of experiences) and reflective (analysis of their meanings) activities; the methods include: description of personal experiences, conversational interviews, and close observation. For the purpose of this study, I rely on my personal experience and views of being an Indian woman who grew up in India and having grown up watching Bollywood films all my life, as well as my own observations about the impact of these media narratives on the lives of women and girls in India to this dissertation. My own distinctive point of view can add to the overall interpretation of this research. However, I also recognize the limitations of this approach. I am conscious of the fact that some of my opinions may be biased and may stem from my own experience and preconceived notions of growing up in India which may influence how I view item songs in general and how the item songs in question are interpreted. Ultimately, my reasoning for choosing hermeneutics as an approach stems from the fact that it allows for an in-depth qualitative assessment of the subject matter. The qualitative richness that this approach provides enables a comprehensive understanding of the complex and intricate web of dynamics that encompasses India's rape culture. The goal of this study is not to generate definitive conclusions but rather an in-depth interpretation and discussion of this phenomenon of item songs and its role as a significant cultural influencer when it comes to promoting sexist imagery and perpetuating rape culture in India.

2 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework for my examination of recent item songs and their relationship to rape culture in India. This framework is broadly rooted in the male gaze theory, intersectionality, and postfeminism. Due to Bollywood's similarities with Hollywood in terms of the visual representation of women, Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" and her critique of classical Hollywood cinema provides a theoretical touchstone for my analysis of the representation of the item girl. As my study pertains to recent popular iterations of the genre of Bollywood item songs and their relationship to current rape culture and sexual violence against women in India, intersectionality and postfeminism are vital to uncovering the hidden ideologies of film representations that might initially seem "natural" but are fundamentally oppressive to women. The male gaze theory also allows for the examination of gendered power dynamics within the item song genre and an understanding of the underlying patriarchal structure that allows for the objectification of women in Indian media.

Intersectionality as defined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) is the interconnection of social categories such as race, gender, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. Intersectionality as a concept foregrounds the ways in which multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage can compound, creating particular configurations of oppression in groups and individuals. From an intersectional perspective, oppression cannot be attributed to only one aspect of identity, e.g. gender; each form of oppression is dependent on and shapes the other. The social class of the item girl is a big factor when it comes to understanding the perpetuation of stereotypes in these songs. Social categories and oppression as viewed

through the lens of intersectionality play a major role in my analysis of item songs and their relationship to rape culture in India.

Postfeminism is a set of characteristics of contemporary media texts informed by multiple ideas and practices linked to neoliberalism. According to Rosalind Gill, postfeminism is a “sensibility,” comprised of a number of interrelated themes, including “the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; an emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and self-discipline; a focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment; the dominance of makeover paradigm, resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference, a marked sexualization of culture, and emphasis on consumerism and the commodification of difference.” (Gill, 2007: 149). Postfeminism encourages women to concentrate on their personal selves and consumer capabilities as a means of self-expression and agency, diverting their attention away from unequal social structures that violate their equality.

Postfeminism fundamentally tends to favor the individual instead of structural, societal, and collective inequalities. (Goldman et al, 1991). Postfeminism as a concept helps with how item songs can be studied within a larger cultural context. It sheds light on how item songs can be advertised to the audience, especially young women as a symbol of female empowerment and sexual liberation while at the same time still reinforcing harmful gender stereotypes. Item songs promote the idea that sexual liberation is equal to female empowerment. However the reality is that item songs are not an anthem for womanhood and girl power in India rather it is a product for conspicuous consumption for the male gaze, and a means for increasing the profit margins of the film. In this study, I point out the contradictions of postfeminism in the context of item songs in India. In the following

sections, I further explicate the male gaze theory, intersectionality, and postfeminism in order to demonstrate their relevance and importance to my analysis of the Bollywood item song and rape culture in India.

2.1 The Male Gaze Theory

Art critic John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* (1972) is credited for laying the groundwork for the development of the theory of the gaze in visual theory. Berger observed that in European art from the Renaissance period onwards, "men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger, 1972: 49), emphasizing that women were depicted as being "aware of being seen by a spectator." Berger claims that paintings of female nudes from the seventeenth century onwards represented the woman's subordination to the owner of the artwork. Women continue to be depicted differently from males because the ideal viewer was always believed to be male and the representation of the woman was created to satisfy the male viewer. There is a power imbalance in the display of item songs in Bollywood cinema. The item girl performs for the satisfaction of the male spectator; she does not wield any significant power either in the larger narrative of the film or in those few minutes she appears on the screen. I expand on this idea further in my analysis of item songs in Chapter Four.

Mulvey's article "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" (1975) gave the term "gaze" new meaning in film studies. Mulvey's work is based on Freudian psychoanalysis as taken up by French theorist Jacques Lacan (2007) in his theory of identity formation. Lacan's mirror stage marks the start of an infant's development of self-awareness. The

newborn recognizes itself as a loose collection of body parts until it sees its image in the mirror and recognizes itself as a whole individual for the first time. The child, who cannot manage their own body, finds pleasure from their influence over the other person in the mirror. While the child connects with its reflection in the mirror, it is simultaneously distanced from it. The child develops a sense of rivalry with the mirror image. This rivalry continues until adulthood. This is because the child perceives the image to be a distorted reflection of their true self. This connection served as the starting point for psychoanalytic film theorists Christian Metz (1982) and Jean-Louis Baudry (1974). The movie screen, according to them, is the mirror through which the spectator can identify himself as an omnipotent ego. The primary affiliation of the viewer with the camera gives the spectator a sense of power even though the spectator is merely a passive observer.

It appears that nothing can evade the total visibility that the camera creates. The spectator's seeming omnipotence is guaranteed by their own avoidance of being seen. Like God, the audience in a dark theater sees everything yet stays essentially hidden. The darkness of the movie theater allows the male audience to look without shame. Mulvey observed that the male gaze projects its fantasy upon the female figure that is both idealized and immobilized. Mulvey (1975) further states that the gendered gaze of classic Hollywood cinema determines who sees and who is seen, with the gaze serving as the conduit for male power. Mulvey advocates for the annihilation of pleasure as a radical weapon in reaction to this gendered system of looking and paved the way for the development of a new film language. She advocated for the overthrow of Hollywood's voyeuristic scopophilia regime in favor of radical feminist counter-cinema. She contends that Hollywood films were "cut to the measure of male desire" and structured around the male gaze. Furthermore, bell

hooks' (1992) notion of the oppositional gaze allows for challenging the limiting representation of marginalized communities, especially women of color, and rejects dominant narratives in favor of alternative/counter cinema. This enables more empowering on-screen representations, whereby the oppressed group is able to reclaim their agency.

Often in popular usage, the “male gaze” refers to a sequence in which the camera sexualizes a woman. It helps to enforce the idea that women are there to be looked at and not look back. It is part of this division between the genders, telling men that women are the “other.” And part of a damaging lesson for women, telling them that they are empty inside and that their value and worth lie in their external beauty. The male gaze is problematic because it evokes a sexualized approach to looking that emboldens men while it objectifies women. A woman is seen as an “object” of heterosexual male desire. Her emotions, thoughts, and desires come second. Filmmakers frequently use complex storylines and feminist narratives to avoid depicting female characters solely as sexual objects. Nonetheless, the male gaze is pervasive. The presence of item songs in Bollywood films gives a particular place for the male gaze even in movies featuring complex female characters and feminist narratives.

Mulvey asserts that the pleasure we get from cinema is because the camera's gaze conceals the conditions of filmmaking, allowing us to adopt the camera's gaze as our own. Mulvey states that the realistic conventions of classic Hollywood cinema make the camera's and male characters' objectification of female characters appear to be a true representation of reality. These practices and techniques make human-constructed phenomena such as misogyny, and sexist treatment of female characters on screen appear natural and accurate reflections of society. Women's bodies are commonly regarded as

sexualized objects. Mulvey claims that many classic Hollywood films showcase women as individual body parts rather than as whole human beings. Fragmentation or literally—through camera position and editing, for example, “cutting up” women on screen and objectifying them is, she argues, central to the aesthetic of classic Hollywood cinema. Similarly, studies by Susan McClary (1991) and Catherine Clement (1988), demonstrated how artworks degraded, dehumanized, and killed female and feminized compositional features. They depicted how the treatment of these features worked to produce pleasurable aesthetic experiences for the audience.

The gaze can be both violent and unsettling. Consider a situation where the woman is made to feel uneasy because a man is leering at her. When he begins to make her feel uncomfortable, his gaze creates a hostile environment for her. Mulvey argues that the pleasure in looking is divided between male and female, here the male gaze is active while the female gaze is passive. The male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure. As a result of their traditional exhibitionist role, women are looked at for their strong visual and erotic impact which connotes “to-be-looked-at-ness” (Mulvey, 1975). Mulvey’s work on the male gaze invites discussions about the power relations inherent in the realist narrative mode of classical Hollywood cinema exposing the sexual politics at the core of what had previously been considered “neutral” cinematic techniques. Mulvey critiques classical Hollywood cinema from the 1930s through the 1970s when most directors, producers, cinematographers, editors, and script writers were men. The contemporary Bollywood film industry is to a large extent a male-dominated industry. It is far more likely that a Bollywood actress is dressed in elaborate costumes and paraded across the screen for the audience to gaze at as opposed to a male actor. The way in which the item girl is depicted

on screen— everything from her provocative, brightly sequined costumes, her makeup, and her movement—targets the male gaze.

Rape is only one symptom of a much larger issue in a male-dominated society (Cahill, 2001). The act of rape is about power, control, violence, humiliation, and oppression. Rape has been used as a tool in fiction for centuries. Take, for example, the romance genre in literature. Romance novels are one of the most popular genres that cater to the female gaze. The popularity of author Julia Quinn’s *Bridgerton* series in recent times is a testament to the fact that these stories are written from a female point of view to a largely female audience. “Liberation” of the female character served as a central plot in several eighteenth-century gothic romances. In these tales, a male authority figure— usually a parent, uncle, or priest—held the female characters captive. She often endures physical and emotional abuse from them. Her fight for autonomy and emancipation from the restrictive limitations placed upon her serves as the primary theme of the novel. The novelist, Ann Radcliffe is one of the period’s most prominent writers of gothic romance who expertly wove these liberation storylines into her books. Radcliffe’s plots offered an explanation of the “magic” that often distinguishes romance from comedy, where the plot also often concludes with a social union in the form of a wedding.

Likewise, the contemporary romance genre consists of an offshoot genre called “dark romance,” which consists of dedicated tropes called “dubious consent” or “consent-non-consent.” These terms refer to a particular situation within the storyline where the main female character (who is almost always a virgin) is “raped” by the main male character yet somehow it is still not considered “rape” because the girl never explicitly said “no”, yet the scenes leading up to the act makes it clear that the girl was either stalked, kidnapped,

manipulated, coerced, threatened or all of the above into “consenting” to the sexual act with the main male character. This is a common strategy used by many romance authors. For example, revered historical romance author Judith McNaught in her book *Whitney, My Love* (1985) follows this exact formula, as does contemporary romance author L.J Shen in her book *the Kiss Thief* (2019), and mafia romance author Cora Reilly in her popular book *Twisted Pride* (2019). There are countless other authors who have discovered the appeal of categorizing “rape as romance” in tropes disguised as “enemies to lovers” and sell this taboo fantasy to their female readers.

Bollywood has also adopted this blueprint in some of its movie narratives. For example, the 1996 film *Raja Ki Aayegi Baraat* (The King’s Entourage Will Arrive) starring actress Rani Mukerji who played a school teacher followed a plotline where Mukerji’s character was raped in public in front of her students by the main male character - Raj. The rape was his way of exacting revenge on her for slapping him at his friend’s wedding, which she tried to disrupt with her female friend who claimed to be in love with the groom who was marrying someone else after already being intimate with the female friend. In one particularly disturbing scene, Rani’s character Mala walks home completely naked in the rain after being raped by Raj. What is even more disturbing is that she is being accompanied by her students as she does her “walk of shame.” Her rapist was arrested but due to his privileged status and wealth, the judge during the trial ordered him to marry the girl he raped within twenty-four hours in order to “restore her dignity” in society. Mala was forced to marry her rapist. Eventually, the storyline ends with Mala and Raj falling in love with each other after months of hating one another and even after a failed murder attempt by Raj toward his new wife.

When it comes to Bollywood item songs, the female viewer does not simply gaze at the item girl, she identifies with the actress in her role as the item girl. In such a situation, the female viewer, much like the item girl, wants nothing more than to be gazed at by men at that moment. I would argue that item songs provide female audiences a way to live vicariously in their taboo fantasies through the actress performing the song similar to how rape storylines in romance novels provide an escapist fantasy for the female reader.

The gaze is primarily concerned with the relationship between pleasure and images, which can take various forms. In psychoanalysis and Mulvey's formulation, scopophilia refers to the pleasure of looking, whereas "exhibitionism" is the pleasure of being looked at. They both acknowledge the pleasure that can be derived from looking as a result of their mutual relationship. The pleasure of looking while not being seen is known as voyeurism, and it has a negative connotation and even a sadistic role. Mulvey's work is centered on the camera and the conditions of film viewing as voyeurism mechanisms. Men are most likely to engage in voyeurism and scopophilia, sometimes in public spaces such as strip clubs, privately with pornographic films and magazines, and covertly as peeping toms. Voyeuristic activities are often restricted to specific areas and to adult consumers; in some cases, voyeurism is also considered a crime. When it comes to item songs, it is always the male spectators within the songs that carry out voyeuristic tendencies. They are participating in the act of looking at the item girl as she performs for them.

Exhibitionism, or displaying one's body to be seen, is practiced by both males and females, and is frequently, but not always, associated with sexual arousal. According to Grosz (1992), exhibitionism has become associated with femininity, while voyeurism has become associated with masculinity. In the context of my research on item songs and rape

culture, I use Mulvey's term exhibitionism to characterize structures of cinematic representation of women, as well as a more literal term to refer to those occasions when a woman seeks to make an impression in public through her beauty and glamor. It is critical for the item girl to be able to shine in the item song's social world. Her success is determined by how others react to her. The item girl's profession requires her to rely on her beauty and body to sustain her livelihood and achieve economic success. Most item girls are portrayed as working as prostitutes, bar dancers, and strippers. She functions as a fulfillment of male fantasy and desire in a conservative patriarchal society. While item girls appear to have complete control over their sexuality and bodies, in the context of Indian society, men are threatened by women displaying themselves openly, and so they rush to subdue this phenomenon of the morally corrupt (unmarried, sexually active) woman through practices that support rape culture such as sexual objectification, sexual exploitation, harassment, victim blaming, slut-shaming, teasing, molestation, groping, and so on.

Item songs, unlike other Bollywood songs, have the tendency to break the fourth wall. The item girls in many instances look directly at the camera when mouthing lyrics and dancing, inviting the audience to gaze back at her. In item songs, the male character is the relay for the look of the audience. The item girl makes overt sexual gestures such as winking, biting her lip, licking her lips, wagging her fingertips to indicate to the man to follow her, stripping off layers of clothes, etc. to entice both the on-screen and off-screen audience. The act of looking by the audience is facilitated by the heterosexual male character. Editing techniques produce extended sequences where we do not see the male character. Most of the time the male character appears for a matter of a few seconds where

we see him watching the item girl's performance and then the camera quickly cuts back to the item girl. These conventional techniques produce a series of seamless images that encourage the audience to forget that the male character even exists, with the result that our relationship with the screen seems more direct, almost as if we bypass the screen. These aesthetics are characteristic of Bollywood cinema, especially in item songs and the way in which the item girls are depicted on screen as literal objects for male consumption.

Item girls are the embodiment of Mulvey's idea of the patriarchal objectification of women by the predominantly male spectatorship. Importance is given to the item girl's individual body parts as opposed to her as a whole being. The item song genre also makes use of lyrics that portray women as an "item" comparing them to food, animals, and objects; these are characterizations I discuss further in Chapter Four. Following Mulvey's manifesto on male visual pleasure in Hollywood films, other visual theorists and critics have applied, revised, and challenged the notion of the dominant male gaze in different ways and in different visual media.

Lutz and Collins (1991) proposed that the photographic image incorporates different types of gazes, including the photographer's gaze, the magazine's gaze, and the Western gaze. Lutz and Collins observed that those who are perceived as weak, such as women, children, the destitute, people of color, tribal people, and the technologically disadvantaged are more inclined to face the camera, while those in power are shown to look away (Lutz & Collins 1991). They argue that a deconstruction of the intersection of gazes in the photographs they observed of the Melanesian "Other" revealed the context of imperialism that enveloped and reinforced the dominant discourses of power.

Mulvey's analysis has also been used by various Indian feminist film critics to theorize the gaze in Indian cinema. Lalitha Gopalan follows Mulvey's argument stating that the female body has always been the key focus of Bollywood and that women in Indian films are stereotyped as objects who obey all the rules and regulations of a patriarchal society. Gopalan further asserts that the narrative structure appeals to male audiences by portraying men as active and women as passive participants. (Gopalan, 1997). Indian feminist theorists, Vandana Shiva (1989) and Gandhi & Shah (1992) have argued that objectifying women strengthens the male ego and that the media reinforces male dominance by portraying women as objects. According to Gandhi and Shah (1992), Bollywood films and beauty contests like Miss India diminish a woman's sense of identity and intellect by highlighting only their physical attractiveness. The camera in contemporary films not only focuses on the man's perspective during erotic scenes but also on the female perspective. Today we see female actresses also challenge notions of sexism displayed in Hollywood and it is no different in Bollywood with more and more actresses making their voices heard and demanding better characterization, plot, and storytelling. There is still a long way to go before there can be structural changes in the way women are represented on screen in Indian cinema and how women are treated in Indian society.

2.2 Intersectionality

The term intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in *Mapping the Margins* (1991). Crenshaw states that individuals, their backgrounds, and their experiences are not homogenous and are shaped by social categories such as race, class,

ethnicity, gender, sexuality, age, and religion. She notes that violence and discrimination against women occur in different social contexts; while all women face some form of oppression, not all women are oppressed equally or similarly. She gives the example that able-bodied women are not oppressed by ableism, and white women are not oppressed by racism. Crenshaw demonstrates how the lived experiences of women of color who are victims of violence vary drastically from those of white women because women of color face racial biases and discrimination and thus face forms of oppression in addition to violence (Crenshaw, 1991). According to Crenshaw, an intersectional approach is essential for understanding how oppression works and how gender must be discussed in conjunction with other factors such as race and socio-economic status. Crenshaw asserts that different types of oppression must be grasped as layered and overlapping in all circumstances. Crenshaw emphasizes that intersectionality is a way of looking at the relationships between oppressive systems and institutions. I believe recognizing these linkages can ultimately lead to a more productive discussion about oppression, empowerment, and agency of the item girl and the traditional yet modern Indian woman.

Like Crenshaw, feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins (2000) analyzes factors of intersectionality such as gender, race, class, and sexuality that determine how social disparities are taken into consideration. Collins is principally concerned with the relationships between empowerment, self-definition, and knowledge for black women as individuals, especially how intersectional identities create different kinds of lived experiences and social realities, including how women experience and handle their oppression differently (Samuels & Ross-Sheriff, 2008). Collins contends that black women are uniquely situated because they are at the intersection of two extremely powerful and

prevalent oppressive systems: race and gender. According to Collins, intersectionality operates within a matrix of domination. Furthermore, Collins' approach deconstructs the relationships between knowledge, empowerment, and power, and creates conceptual space for identifying new connections within the domination matrix.

Intersectionality is a key dimension of the analytic framework for my analysis of item songs. Although intersectional feminism developed in the context of African American women's oppression, its premises, concepts, and insights are relevant to countries of the Global South like India on multiple levels. Women in India face structural marginalization on fronts other than gender, thanks to oppressive social structures like the caste system, untouchability, religious doctrine, class status, language, ethnicity, etc. Purkayastha et al. (2003) emphasize the interaction of gender, class, and regional elements as crucial to understanding the conditions of Indian women. The disparity is influenced by differences in cultural, environmental, and religious backgrounds. These factors affect how each woman responds to such inequalities. In Indian society, women are classified (as wives and mothers) and regarded as inferior domestic partners per conventional social standards and attitudes (Nambisan, 2005). Haq (2013) states that daughters are instructed to obey the male figures in their lives—their fathers, then their spouses, and finally their sons if they become widows.

Even though most feminist scholars in India recognize the inherent power structures, their critique is primarily from an upper-caste, upper-class, Western, and in many cases English-educated feminist perspective. Nonetheless, scholars like Sunaina Arya have begun to open up this perspective by focusing on Dalit women, to re-explore the entire feminist narrative in India from a caste-based standpoint. Fundamentally,

feminism from the Global South has allowed the position of women to be seen from a narrow point of view. Feminist narratives in India have begun to take into consideration socio-cultural elements such as religion and caste.

When we look at item songs, there are several intersectional elements on display. First, the item girl, even without any context, is understood to come from a lower socio-economic status due to her profession as a prostitute, stripper, bar dancer, etc. Ironically, most item girls in Bollywood films are foreign nationals and the ones who are Indian tend to have extremely light skin tones, bringing the issues of nationality, colorism, racism, and ethnicity into the mix. Taking these often-contradictory elements into account, my dissertation aims to add to the research on intersectional feminism in the Global South through the study of the genre of Bollywood item songs.

2.3 Postfeminism

In the 1990s, the term postfeminism became popular as a way of making sense of paradoxes and contradictions in media representations of women. Postfeminism emerged as “a set of practices and ideas after feminism’s work was considered done” (Tasker & Negra, 2007). Postfeminism is a response to feminism; postfeminism does not negate feminism but co-opts it: “Postfeminist culture works in part to include, assume, or naturalize features of feminism; crucially, it also strives to commodify feminism through the idea of a woman as empowered consumer” (Tasker and Negra, 2007: 2). Postfeminism challenges media representations of women and gender commodification, focusing on legal, political, and educational discourses (Gill, 2007). Rosalind Gill (2007) defines

postfeminism as a contradictory sensibility characterized by elements such as an emphasis on femininity as a bodily property; it represents the growing imperative for women to sexually self-objectify; women's growing consumption of fashion and beauty products; and women's actions as a marker of their empowerment and agency.

Postfeminism legitimizes women's individualism and lauds their "freedom" from patriarchy and feminism. Postfeminism is facilitated by a neo-liberal capitalism in which girls and women embrace and adopt principles such as entrepreneurialism, and individualism. Postfeminism, therefore, embraces neoliberal capitalism and marks its departure from collectivism to individual subjectivity.

Representations of postfeminism can be found in popular culture. Postfeminism has been portrayed in the media as a type of feminism that embraces rather than rejects popular culture. Postfeminism, according to Angela McRobbie (2004), provides the sense that equality has been achieved. McRobbie saw postfeminism in feminist cultural products, such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City*, which featured powerful, sexually free female protagonists. Many of these works also include women who control their appearance as a kind of self-management, whether through diet, exercise, or, most notably, makeover sequences. The female characters' continual monitoring and self-policing reflect the forced performance of heterosexuality, hyper-femininity, and critical gaze that women and girls have to experience. One of the most noticeable aspects of postfeminist media culture is a fixation with the female body. The female body in a patriarchal society is something that is under surveillance and continuously monitored and seen as something to be disciplined. Both genders inspect and scrutinize female bodies. This is most visible in the preoccupation with celebrity culture, which is focused entirely on female bodies.

The item song displays a type of commodity feminism which is a part of celebrity and consumer culture. Commodity feminism refers to the incorporation of a postfeminist ideology into consumer culture where women are encouraged to express themselves and demonstrate their autonomy by participating in consumer culture. As defined by Gill, “commodity feminism refers to the way feminist ideas and icons are appropriated for commercial purposes, emptied of their political significance and offered back to the public in a commodified form — usually in advertising” (Gill, 2008: 432).

Postfeminism also discusses the repercussion of women stepping out of the house, something feminists fought for, and the burden it brought upon women. The issue of safety and the threat of rape for women entering public spaces is all too common in the Indian context. The movement also challenged economic and workplace equality, claiming that it had forced women to juggle the roles of wife, mother, and that of a career woman. This concept is similar to the notion of the traditional yet modern woman that I introduced in Chapter One. The growing financial independence of Indian women due to modern-day capitalism and globalization has enabled Indian women to become active participants in the consumer economy by spending their hard-earned money on consumer products marketed to them and especially to their bodies that would enhance their beauty such as hair and makeup products, clothing, skincare, and jewelry.

Education and professional status have allowed Indian women to venture out and participate in the commodity market. The class and caste structure and its applicability to postfeminism in terms of the economic status of women in India is still very prevalent. Not all Indian women are in complete control of their finances, let alone their own destinies. Even the “modern independent Indian woman” is still answerable to her elders and family

members. A low-class, low-caste migrant worker who moves to the urban city in search of job opportunities from her rural village is still dutiful to her husband's family and to her natal home, while an upper-class, upper-caste, English-speaking, educated Indian woman may have more say over her life, finances, and independence than her rural counterpart. The traditional but modern Indian woman is not a monolith. She comes from all over the country, she belongs to all caste, class, language, religious, ethnic, and racial groups. What is undeniable is the link between these intersectional categories to the idea of postfeminism in the Indian context.

Gill contends that one of the most important debates about postfeminism is its relationship to race, class, sexuality, disability, and citizenship. (Gill, 2007). The primary subject of postfeminism scholarship has been white, middle-class Western women (Tasker and Negra, 2007); neoliberal capitalist circumstances under which postfeminism emerged privileges whiteness and the middle class as the ideal subjects. Additionally, the normative subject of postfeminism is also young, heterosexual, able-bodied, thin, and conventionally attractive (McRobbie, 2009; Butler, 2013). Although postfeminism has been postulated as an American or European sensibility, it is not limited to the West. Postfeminist practices, ideologies, and media representations, as Dosekun (2015) argues, travel transnationally through transnational media. Mohanty (1988) argued that the West has long portrayed itself as a place of "progress" and "modernity" for women, particularly women from the Global South, where Western actors were depicted as saviors of "other" women. Such narratives depict women from the Global South as a monolith, who are oppressed victims of patriarchal ideologies (Koffman et al, 2013). Postfeminism in the West often fails to recognize the enormous socio-economic inequality in the Global

South—for instance in India, according to a 2017 Oxfam report, the top 10% of the Indian population holds 77% of the national wealth.

Radhika Parameswaran (2004) in her research demonstrates the “complex and contradictory ways in which hegemonic constructions of class, nation, and gender structure the politics of feminine empowerment” (2004). The issue that Parameswaran is concerned about is how Indian media portrays Indian beauty pageant winners such as Priyanka Chopra and Aishwarya Rai, both of whom won the Miss World contest in 2000 and 1994, respectively. She considers the beauty queens to be “role models” of a new neoliberal, consumer-driven and empowered Indian femininity. The classed dynamic is important to my work because I analyze the representation of women in item songs, and the issue of rape culture from an intersectional lens, and the role of class invariably makes its presence known as most of the item girls are portrayed as belonging to a lower-class strata but played by “modern”, empowered upper-caste, upper or middle-class actresses. Moreover, discussions about the religion, class, and caste of rape victims and perpetrators are a common practice within Indian media as a means to victim blame, justify or make sense of the heinous act.

Postfeminist representations celebrate sexuality and convey that women can be more empowered, free to choose, and be liberated. It is interesting to note that item songs were initially performed by lesser-known actresses or dancers as a way to gain visibility in the film industry. The success of an item song meant the popularity of the said actress or dancer and more opportunities for them to be cast in other films. Today mainstream actresses have joined the trend of performing in item songs because that is what is expected of an A-list actress. In some ways, they achieve a new level of stardom and gain more

fandom by performing as an item girl. Their songs are played all over social media channels such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok, as well as on more traditional media such as radio and television.

Edwards (2012) is of the opinion that advertising images of women reinforce women's subordination by hegemonic socio-cultural forces, which lay out specific social and sexual roles for women while reinforcing the idea that women have no other access to power other than through their sexual identity. Therefore, women's ability to succeed in a variety of areas be it their career, romantic relationships, familial relationships, or finances is advertised as heavily reliant on their capacity to present themselves as attractive and irresistible to men. Edwards further illustrates that several aspects of women's lives are still dictated by male-dominated media and popular culture, including their looks, behavioral patterns, and their social value.

Power and hegemonic structures, according to postcolonial feminists of color (Spivak, 1988; Narayan, 1997), exist not only within social institutions but also within dominant cultural narratives. Item songs in Bollywood cinema in the postfeminist era of popular culture, overemphasize the female body and sexualize women as "commodities" to sell to the consumer. Item songs are symptomatic of a major shift in Indian cinema, which now has a global audience and following. Postfeminism as a concept is important to my study as it concerns itself with the issue of media representation of women. Postfeminism is also useful in highlighting the link between media and culture. Rad (2016) states that the representation of women in the media is a cause for concern because stereotypical portrayals and a lack of female insight can reinforce gender inequalities in society. Therefore, films are an important tool that has the power to spread notions of

traditional gender roles. It is particularly productive in my analysis of item songs and their objectification of the female body.

bell hooks (1992) argues that in Hollywood cinema, the gaze was aimed at the White woman, while the Black woman was simply a supporting figure. The Black woman is not the object of desire or eroticism but they were ignored by the male gaze, they were still able to derive some kind of power over their agency. In the case of the item song, there is a contradiction in the way the oppositional gaze is carried out. There is no question that colorism is a huge issue in India. India, like many postcolonial countries, suffers from a colonial hangover when it comes to colorism, where fair/light/white skin is the standard of beauty, so much so that skin-lightening products have a huge market among the general Indian population, especially young people. The very same Bollywood actresses who perform item songs have also at some point in their career endorsed skin-lightening creams such as *Fair and Lovely*, *Ponds*, and *Garnier*. Actress Priyanka Chopra over the years has expressed regret and also apologized for promoting a particular brand of skin-lightening cream in India.

The actresses playing the role of the item girls are almost always light skinned or at the very least possess a light medium complexion with Eurocentric or Caucasian features. They also belong to the upper-class and upper-caste community in real life. However, the item girl represents a symbol of prostitution; the item girl is a sex worker. Sex work in India is associated with low-caste, low-class women who coincidentally are also not *lily-white* complexioned like the Bollywood actresses who portray them on screen. Though the dark-skinned Indian woman is not represented on screen in her physical form, she is still represented through her social class as a sex worker. Even though the dark-

skinned Indian woman is not the object of desire in the item song, in reality, she experiences the most violence because low-class and low-caste women are more vulnerable to rape culture than the light-skinned upper-caste, upper-class Indian women.

Item songs are promoted as the epitome of female sexual empowerment in India. It gives young women from all caste and class backgrounds the impression that they too can be just like the item girl and express their sexuality and desires in the guise of female independence, agency and choice. I argue that the idea of postfeminism espoused by item songs are a distorted one. The reality of the situation in India is that postfeminism as a concept does not work because the patriarchal traditions of India are too deeply entrenched and any woman who breaks away from conventional traditional norms are met with backlash and violence. This is the reason I believe that rather than a postfeminist notion, the traditional yet modern woman ideology has taken shape in India as it allows the “modern” Indian woman to still stay rooted in her culture and traditions, while enjoying the benefits of modernity such as gaining education, establishing a career, and earning an income to become financially independent.

2.4 Conclusion

My theoretical framework makes an effort to engage with the issue of the representation of women in item songs and its relationship to rape culture in India in a meaningful way. Studying media such as item songs through the lens of the male gaze theory, intersectionality, and postfeminism provides a rich narrative and outcome to my research. By making use of this hybrid theoretical framework my study provides a more

nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the socio-cultural factors that perpetuate rape culture in India and how it manifests in the cinematic techniques and song lyrics.

After exploring the contributions of other feminist media scholars in Chapter One and the present chapter, it becomes clear that an interdisciplinary, hybrid approach such as mine to studying India's rape culture through the medium of item songs will offer a unique perspective that varies from previous studies done on this topic and will provide for an in-depth discussion on issues of rape culture, gender norms, conflicting moralities and representation of women in popular culture in Bollywood and its larger implications for Indian women.

Item songs are without a doubt one of the most popular genres of music in India and are part of popular culture in India. They dominate streaming on television channels such as MTV, India, Zoom channel, and on the radio. The debate surrounding item numbers on the one hand emphasizes the objectification endured by the item girls. But on the other hand, the actresses participating in the item songs do it of their own free will thereby catapulting them to superstardom while yielding huge economic success not just for the producers of the film but also for the actresses themselves. The item girl even though are portrayed as women from lower economic backgrounds partaking in occupations like strippers and prostitutes and are consistently objectified in each and every scene in these songs, they somehow seemingly wield more power and agency than the average Indian woman who cannot dare or dream of acting out in a similar fashion without being met with patriarchal resistance.

As discussed in Chapter One, this phenomenon of the empowered traditional yet modern Indian woman is a curious but contradictory concept that is a lived reality by

women in modern India. By linking these theories, my study attempts to fill the current gap in the literature regarding item songs as cultural influencers and artifacts that have the power to shape attitudes that allow rape culture to thrive in India. Additionally, my research also allows for a discourse on the advancement of a more nuanced approach to women's representation on screen in Bollywood films.

3 Socio-Cultural Context of Rape Culture in India

“Men are afraid that women will laugh at them. Women are afraid that men will kill them.” – Margaret Atwood

Rape culture refers to an environment where certain beliefs about women’s sexuality, behaviors, and values support and normalize sexually aggressive behavior and violence by men (Banet-Weiser & Miltner, 2016; Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 1993; Harding, 2015; Phillips, 2016). Similarly, Field states that “rape culture exists in a society or environment in which common social beliefs, attitudes, and morals normalize sexual violence, encourage people to associate sex with violence, and violence is accepted, justified, and not strongly challenged by society” (Field, 2004: 174). The term “rape culture” was first used by second-wave feminists in the 1970s to challenge sexism and expose its pervasive character, which encourages violence towards women (Gavey, 2019). Section 375 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) defines rape as “sexual intercourse with a woman against her will, without her consent, by coercion, misrepresentation or fraud or at a time when she has been intoxicated or duped or is of unsound mental health and in any case if she is under 18 years of age⁴.” Consent in the IPC is the “clear, voluntary communication that the woman gives for a certain sexual act.” The IPC makes exceptions to marital rape as it is not considered a crime as long as the woman is above the age of 18.

Furthermore, the Indian Parliament in 2013 added the Nirbhaya Act to Section 375. The new law includes acts such as penetration of the penis into the vagina, urethra, anus, mouth, or any object or any part of the body to any extent into the woman’s body parts

⁴ Indian Penal Code (1860). Section 375.

leading to sexual assault. This removed uncertainty from previous laws. It also called for stricter punishment in those rare cases like the Nirbhaya gang rape.

Rape culture is reaffirmed by a number of factors such as sexist and misogynistic language, sexual objectification of female bodies, and trivialization of sexual violence, leading to a culture that disregards the rights and safety of females. Rape culture also aids in the creation of rape myths that foster an environment that downplays or outright denies the seriousness of sexual violence against women (Gavey, 2019; Kilimnik & Humphreys, 2018; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2018). This takes shape in the form of denying or justifying male sexual aggression towards women. Some common rape myths include: women lie about being raped, women are asking for it and they invite rape (by going out alone, wearing short, revealing clothes, traveling alone at night), or women can't be raped against their will, and when a woman says no she doesn't actually mean no. Such rape myths are deeply rooted in the patriarchal system of society, which leads to the superior positioning of men and the stigmatization and marginalization of women, who have been sexually assaulted.

Rape culture unnecessarily puts pressure on women and places the burden of safety on women. Due to victim blaming, women and girls are conditioned to believe that it is their responsibility to avoid getting sexually assaulted by being vigilant and through self-surveillance. As a result, women may avoid wearing certain clothes that may be considered daring or revealing, avoid going out at night, and stop themselves from consuming alcohol in public spaces such as bars and night clubs due to fear of sexual violence.

Radha Kumar (2003) states that rape is one of the most committed crimes against women in India. The recent 2021 report by the National Crime Records Bureau of India

corresponds with this notion and revealed that rape is the fourth most committed crime against women in India. It should be noted that rape and sexual assault is still a taboo topic in India and the rape victim often experiences shame. The fear of social ostracization is a motivating factor for victims and their family members for choosing not to register with the police. Another valid reason for not filing a police complaint is the fear of retaliation from the perpetrators. Under reporting of rape cases is therefore a major problem in India, the actual number of cases are likely to be much higher than the official numbers.

Women and girls are constantly on high alert when venturing out alone into the streets. In India, domestic violence is a culturally accepted practice and marital rape is still common and is yet to be deemed illegal. If a non-earning Indian woman is at a greater risk of abuse and sexual violence within the household, a working woman is also at risk of experiencing the brutal effects of rape culture including misogyny and sexism at the workplace; stalking; eve-teasing; being groped in public transportation like buses, trains, and metros; being subjected to acid attacks by jilted stalkers/lovers whose advances are not reciprocated; kidnapping; physical and verbal abuse; and, the threat of rape and murder.

Feminist scholar Susan Brownmiller (1975: 15) argues that “rape is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation where men keep women in a state of fear.” Power is established through rape and is magnified in communities where women are seen as “gatekeepers of honor.” In this socio-cultural context, if women are violated, the entire community is violated. There is no doubt that rape culture allows rape to flourish. Rape culture does not constitute any one particular action or attitude; rather, it is a spectrum of behaviors including catcalling, victim blaming, slut-shaming, non-consensual behaviors such as stalking and groping, stigmatization of the victim, ineffective laws that do not

appropriately punish perpetrators of rape and sexual assault, and lack of safety measures and resources for victims. All of these elements manifest in socio-cultural events, in the legal system, and in media representation of women. Rape culture includes sexist and misogynistic jokes, and certain depictions in television shows, movies, music, advertising, legal language, and the laws that make violence against women appear normal.

The timing of this study is apt and relevant to the current state of sexual violence experienced by Indian women. For instance take the latest case of gang rape in India. On May 4, 2023, two tribal women from the Christian community in the northeastern state of Manipur were paraded naked by dozens of Hindu men due to recent ethnic and communal violence in the region between the two religious communities. The video of the women being groped and assaulted has since gone viral across all social media platforms and has gained major international media attention. This has caused Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to make the following statement “What has happened to the daughters of Manipur can never be forgiven. The incident is shameful for the country, the guilty will not be spared” (Sky News, 2023). The Manipur incident is a prime example of how the country is responding to the gang rape epidemic and sexual violence against women in real-time. The delayed response from the Prime Minister and the concerned authorities in the state of Manipur exemplifies the lack of urgency and ethical outrage when it comes to instances of gang rape for women from lower-caste and minority communities. It took the police 72 days to arrest one of the culprits responsible for the incident while others remain scot free. (Sky News, 2023). According to news reports, the women were found in the forest by the police after they took cover from a violent mob carrying weapons who came to destroy and burn their village. However “a mob seized them a mile short of the police

station. The father of a 20-year-old woman was killed and three women were made to strip at gunpoint before being led around naked. The youngest woman was raped in front of them and her brother was killed when he tried to protect her” (Sky News, 2023).

Media coverage of rapes in India is also filled with sensationalism. According to feminist writer and documentary filmmaker Paromita Vohra, rape cases that get sensationalized in the media in India have certain elements in common. She states that these are cases that are usually violent where the victim dies or the cases are very graphic in nature. Certain cases gain more attention than others due to the intersectional and complex nature of Indian society. The intricate web of religion, caste, gender, class, and ethnicity affects power dynamics whereby patriarchy manifests itself in different ways. These power dynamics determine what is newsworthy and which cases deserve public attention. Narratives of lower-caste men raping upper-caste women get promoted more in the media more often than not, which contributes to the idea that low-caste men pose a threat to “good” Indian women. The above case of the tribal women from Manipur gained traction in India not because of the efforts of the Indian media but because of the global reach of social media. The video of the women being assaulted online provided enough ammunition for the foreign media to take notice of the incident and report on it. The subsequent response from Indian authorities is simply a weak and lackluster response to save face from the international shame caused by this event.

Similarly, in the case of the Nirbhaya incident, the conception of a victim like Jyothi Singh who was raped by low-caste men, serves as a reminder of the caste and class dynamic in India when it comes to media and public scrutiny. There is no doubt that rape is inherently about power. The power imbalance between men and women in India is further

skewed when the act of rape involves a high-caste man and a low-caste woman, as was the case in the Hathras gang rape case of 2020. Four upper-caste men targeted and gang raped a 19 year old Dalit woman in the Hathras district in the state of Uttar Pradesh, because of her caste. She ultimately died of her injuries. The victim was cremated the same night of her death with reports indicating that the police pressured the victim's family to perform her final ceremonies in order to destroy evidence of the rape. In the court verdict, three of the accused were acquitted and only one person was convicted (Times of India, 2023). The constant presence of rape culture reinforces stereotypical gender norms and undermines attempts at social change. The rape culture in India is exemplified by police apathy and in some cases complicity in the face of sexual assaults and in the continued targeting of female victims rather than male perpetrators. Ten Dalit women are raped every day according to the National Crime Records Bureau data, yet most crimes against the Dalit community are not reported. Even those rare cases that end up being reported usually have low conviction rates as indicated by the previous example.

Given the above background about rape culture in India, I answer my first research question (RQ1): What is the socio-cultural context for the growing rape culture in India with respect to conflicting moralities and gender norms? In the remainder of this chapter, I examine the environment and the conditions in which rape culture is allowed to persist, despite the many efforts to curb the rape epidemic. This chapter identifies the socio-cultural developments impacting rape culture in India. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to delve deeper into the complex factors that come together to create a broad context for contemporary rape culture and to take a closer look at the effects of these factors on the issues of women's safety in the country.

Three landmark cases shaped the public discourse and legal system in India when it came to the issue of rape and rape culture. These include the 1972 Mathura rape case of a low-caste tribal girl who was raped under police custody. This was the first instance of rape in India that captured the public imagination. The judge presiding over the case stated that the encounter had been a “peaceful affair” (*Tukaram v the state of Maharashtra* (1979), 2 SSC, 143) as medical evidence could not prove resistance or injuries from the part of the victim and therefore rape could not be established since Mathura was already sexually active when the alleged rape occurred. This issue raised concerns about police brutality against low-caste and working communities and introduced laws against custodial rape (Gangoli et al, 2020). This event sparked anti-rape protests all over the country for the first time.

The second case that brought significant change to the Indian legal system was the Bhanwari rape case of 1992. The woman in question Bhanwari Devi, a low-caste government social worker was raped by two men from an upper-caste community in Rajasthan, while Devi’s husband was made to watch the assault. In this instance, rape was used as punishment and retaliation against Devi and her husband for reporting child marriage within their community to the authorities (Gangoli et al, 2020). The police took the side of the upper-caste men over Devi and failed to collect relevant evidence. The judgment in the case was that upper-caste men would not degrade themselves by committing such an act with a low-caste woman. This case highlighted caste power dynamics and discrimination in the legal system in India (Gangoli et al, 2020). The feminist movement that followed led to the enactment of several legal and regulatory policies on the issue of workplace sexual harassment.

The third landmark case that rocked the foundation of Indian society was the Nirbhaya gang rape case of 2012. This case had the most impact on society and the legal system in India. Protests went beyond the streets and into the digital sphere through social media channels like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, where citizens expressed their frustration with rape culture in India. The incident led to the introduction of the Anti-Rape Criminal Law Amendment in 2013 which called for stricter punishments for sex crimes, redefined rape, and even included provisions for the death penalty for repeat rape offenders and for those sex crimes that are considered the most extreme and brutal such as the Nirbhaya gang rape (Times of India, 2019). This case also led to debates on news channels about Bollywood and the item song genre's role in perpetuating a culture of sexism and misogyny leading to attitudes that support rape culture.

The power that Bollywood has on the social imagination of the public is incalculable. Item songs are a major source of sexist imagery in India. Normalization of item songs can make women more susceptible to abuse and prejudice. Understanding the function of media and popular culture, especially item songs, is essential to understanding the intricate interplay of culture, media, and gender dynamics since sexual violence continues to be a serious problem in India. The enormous impact that Bollywood has on the cultural consciousness of the Indian population, particularly in relation to attitudes and behaviors surrounding rape culture, can be analyzed through the lens of Nicholas Mirzoeff's (1999) concept of visibility and visual culture. The difference between "seeing" and "visualizing" made by Mirzoeff emphasizes the more significant nature of the latter in which people actively interact with visual representations, thereby creating meaning, and decoding these images. He states that visualizing or envisioning something is more

impactful than seeing something. Bollywood is an influential cultural force in India that uses sexist imagery and objectifies women. The item song genre allows for this active process of visualization. Therefore, frequent exposure to these songs and images creates harmful gender stereotypes.

In a society where patriarchy thrives, the item girl and the way in which she conducts her life is in stark contrast to the average Indian woman who is discouraged to act in a manner that compromises her modesty and brings shame to her family and her community. While the changes in the legal system are welcome and long overdue, the fact remains that for someone like the item girl, these laws are unnecessary because the prevailing belief is that the item girl has perceived immunity from the shackles of a conservative patriarchal society, whereas that is not the case for most women in India. The item girl is an illusion, she is the figment of the sexual repression experienced by young people in a society that lacks adequate representation of female sexuality, sex education, and notions of consent. She embodies the trope of the modern empowered Indian woman who does not fear rape culture.

The item girl cancels the criminality of rape culture within these songs. Her depiction as a sexual liberated and empowered woman who join in on the “gang rape” like fantasies is a way of her compensating for what would otherwise be considered sexual assault. By showing her willingness and active participation in these gang rape like scenarios, she is aiming to reclaim her power. I argue that this is a delusional narrative from the point of view of the item girl and the actresses who portray them. The item girl is only a product of sexual liberation of women from a misogynistic society that represses female sexuality. The fact that a character like the item girl exists in India and does not

raise questions itself is suspicious. I wonder how a vision of such a character who goes against the values of “Indian culture” can be accepted by society as an embodiment of the sexually empowered and liberated woman? What the item girl represents is compliance. She is a cooperative agent of male sexual fantasy and desire. She feeds into the raw masculine aggression by not posing a challenge to them by fighting back against the “gang rape.”

The item girl presents a contradiction in the traditional conservative value system in the Indian milieu. Her presence as a cultural icon is both a welcome change and a threat. In the context of the film, the item girl does not pose any real threat to the plot or to the heroine who upholds “Indian values.” She is a commercial enterprise, a spectacle for consumer culture. However, the item girl with all her freedoms is a threat to the safety of the Indian woman because she invokes the tropes that support rape culture. She promotes promiscuity, slut shaming, victim blaming, gang culture, non-consensual behavior, sexual harassment, and violence. Unlike the item girl, the average Indian woman cannot escape harm from the consequences of rape culture despite all the advancements in the legal and political sphere. One way or another, it is lower-caste, lower-class, ethnic and religious minority women who suffer the consequences of such media representations.

3.1 Cinematic Illusion and Reality

In this section, I elaborate on the concept of the item girl being an illusion. The item girl represents a cultural crisis in the moral fabric of India for women. Shy of actual pornography, the item girl is the highest of fantasies the Bollywood film industry can

muster. It supports the age old adage that “sex sells.” Since 2015 pornography has been restricted and banned in India and the government has cracked down on hundreds of pornographic websites. The decision to ban pornography came from the problematic issue of circulation of child pornography, as well as pornographic content displaying violence against women (Law Trend, 2021). Though pornography is commonly associated with explicit sexual content, popular cultural productions such as item songs also have elements that are reminiscent of pornography. Item songs are a major source of sexist and sexualized imagery and violent lyrics. Bollywood has essentially blurred the lines between popular culture and pornography by incorporating sexualized content to its viewers in the guise of entertainment. The item girls are essentially packaged and promoted as sexual objects for male pleasure. Add to this the fact that the item girl almost always plays the role of a sex worker or a stripper in the songs makes it clear that the item girl in no uncertain terms can be deemed a “whore” or a “slut.”

The irony of the item girl being a “slut” is that she is being played by upper-caste, upper-class, light-skinned actresses who cosplay lower-caste, lower-class women in India. The upper-class woman, in this case - the actress, through the conduit of the item song, gets to participate in the fantasy of being a “slut.” She willingly participates in the ultimate taboo fantasy of being part of a gang rape scenario in these songs. Bollywood sells this fantasy of the item girl to its viewers. Though the item girl blurs the line between consent and non-consent, it is important to note that the actresses playing the role of the item girl are in no real danger unlike the millions of Indian women living their lives in a patriarchal conservative society. The actress, once she hangs up her item girl costumes and the facade slips away, is swiftly surrounded by her team of assistants and bodyguards outside the

confines of the studio and back to her privileged life. The item girl character allows the upper-class woman to explore her sexuality within the safety of the studio. In this false reality, she is allowed (in fact encouraged) to do all the things she never could openly and unabashedly in a conservative country. Although the possibility of an upper-class, upper-caste woman being gang raped in India is extremely low, the reality is that the illusion presented by these actresses has real life ramifications on Indian woman, but especially those women belonging to the lower socio-economic background.

Bollywood creates an unrealistic fantasy of light skinned upper-caste, upper-class and sometimes even foreign white women as sex workers who are surrounded by gangs of lower-class, lower-caste men who essentially “rape her” or rather the girl asks, begs, pleads, teases and seduces the lower-caste men to categorically violate her body. This is the crux of every item song in existence. The lower-caste men who view this fantasy leave the theater and go in search of a lower-caste girl to fulfill their fantasies. This is what the lawyer who represented the rapist from the 2012 Nirbhaya case eluded to when he said that the perpetrators were caught up in a film fantasy where they thought they could get away with anything without facing any consequences.

Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1984) concept of the carnivalesque provides some insight in this area. Much like the fun and liberating nature associated with carnival celebrations, item songs also incorporate a number of carnivalesque elements like laughter, satire, parody, grotesque imagery, and the flouting of social norms. By portraying light-skinned upper-caste women as sex workers surrounded by lower-class, lower-caste men in these performances, existing societal norms and power structures are subverted. The prevailing social order is threatened by this inversion of expected roles and hierarchies. Additionally,

the item songs make use of crude and provocative imagery of women's bodies being sexually objectified and exploited for the male gaze. The aesthetic aligns with the carnivalesque's tendency to stray from social norms. Furthermore, the lines between social classes and castes are muddled by the item songs' momentary suspension of social rules. Therefore, these performances place a strain on women from middle and lower social classes, illuminating the gap between fantasy and reality.

The actress who plays the item girl and the lower-caste woman in India have two very different realities. Item songs and Bollywood actresses invariably impose a massive burden on middle and lower-class women in India. This burden translates to Indian women being nothing like item girls. A sexually promiscuous woman is a threat to Indian society because she rejects the traditional belief that a woman's honor rests within her sexual purity (Jain, 2018). No self-respecting Indian woman would tarnish her image by associating herself with harlots and tramps. Even if she wanted to, society would not allow her. There is always the invisible threat of rape that jostles even the most daring of rule breakers into submission.

The reality is, item songs are popular partly due to the actresses who participate in them. Bollywood actresses are renowned for their beauty. Many are beauty pageant winners and former models. Bollywood is also the poster child for nepotism. The most famous film families rule the industry with an iron fist making it difficult for outsiders to break into the industry. The sad truth is these "nepo-babies" sell tickets. When Kareena Kapoor, the granddaughter of legendary actor Raj Kapoor does an item song, it brings the crowd to the theaters. Kareena has done numerous item songs portraying the role of a sex worker including the very popular item song *Fevicol Se (With Fevicol)* (2012) which I

analyze in Chapter Four. She is not just Bollywood royalty but is quite literally married to her fellow superstar actor husband Saif Ali Khan who also happens to be the current *Nawab* (a Muslim nobleman) of the formerly princely state of Pataudi in northern India. Kareena is literally a Princess by marriage and yet she has danced to some of the raunchiest and most controversial item songs in recent times. Kareena, unlike the vast majority of Indian women, is never at risk. Kareena's case exemplifies the scenario of an upper-caste, upper-class, light skinned, woman toying with transgressive modes of behavior in these songs. Yet this type of behavior would be shunned and met with violence and abuse had it been done by a regular Indian girl. The fact of the matter is that actresses are immune to the consequences of their actions on screen; the brunt of it will fall on lower-caste and lower-class women.

I've never come across an item-girl-like character in other cultures. It is my understanding that the item song genre and item girl are uniquely Indian. Although recently, countries like Bangladesh and Pakistan have started to emulate the Indian formula in their movies. Madonna in her *Material Girl* era is the closest Hollywood equivalent of the item girl but even that is not an exact replica of the Bollywood item girl. People like Madonna, Marilyn Monroe, and Lady Gaga embody certain traits that make them ideal candidates for the title of Hollywood's item girls.

Bollywood promotes the idea that class and caste barriers do not exist when it comes to item songs and it is possible for lower-caste men to "gang rape" an upper-caste woman without facing any consequences. This is the illusion Bollywood sells to its viewers. Such a situation in reality would cause an uproar in Indian society if it ever were to happen. I have yet to see a Hollywood movie with the same or similar storyline where a

white upper-class woman is gang raped by a group of White lower-class men or a group of Black men. This leads me to conclude that the West has no equivalent to the item girl.

3.2 Moral Policing in India

Moral policing in India is a common phenomenon. It takes place in all manners of public life such as in parks, movie theaters, public benches, metros, and buses. Moral policing is often carried out by vigilante organizations or groups that act to impose moral codes in society. Some Indian laws and actions taken by the Indian police are also regarded as moral policing. Thus, moral policing might be defined as “the act of imposing one’s own set of moral values on others” (Chothe, 2019: 377). Chothe (2019) contends that moral policing is sometimes founded on principles of religious belief, cultural customs, and even laws, rules, and regulations. Most moral policing is aimed at creating a “good” society in which pure cultural and religious traditions are not tainted by outside influences (Chothe, 2019: 377). Moral policing can be aimed towards an individual, a couple, or even a group of individuals if they are deemed to be engaging in “improper” behavior by the vigilante group or people who take the law into their own hands in the name of safeguarding Indian culture, values, and societal standards. Moral policing is a contentious concept, with advocates claiming that it protects “Indian culture” and adolescents from being corrupted by Western culture.

Furthermore, Chothe states that moral policing in India has devolved into a system in which violent mobs or the police abuse their power and endanger society by forcing people to be punished and disciplined even when they have not violated any laws. Moral

policing operations have grown in India over the last several decades and have become the norm. Victims or witnesses of moral policing are unable to report it to the police since the police are frequently helpless when it comes to vigilante organizations sponsored by politicians for political benefit. Moral policing may have serious consequences for victims and those who are apprehended. Victims are emotionally and physically humiliated, publicly shamed, lynched, have their homes burned down, and some are even murdered. Moral policing permits individuals to do illegal acts in a society where there is prejudice based on religion, caste, language, and ethnicity.

It is not uncommon for young unmarried couples in India to get harassed when they are seen together. This can occur when a couple is walking down the street holding hands, hugging, or kissing in public. Numerous videos have circulated on social media and have appeared on news channels showing the police harassing young couples who are sitting together in public spaces, questioning them, and giving them morality lessons about what constitutes appropriate behavior (Chothe, 2019). The state of Uttar Pradesh established an anti-Romeo squad police force to protect women and children from crimes committed against them. In reality, the police were found to be harassing young boys and girls who were spending time together even as friends. The actions were an obvious breach of their obligations as police officers, as well as an invasion of residents' privacy. Vigilante organizations are also renowned for keeping an eye on public locations to ensure that boys and girls from different caste and religious backgrounds do not interact. In another example, in Uttar Pradesh, two police officers were filmed abusing a woman for being friends with a Muslim man (NDTV, 2018). The two medical students were reportedly assaulted and arrested by right-wing Hindu vigilantes. Two police officers were shown to

be abusing the girl in the video, and one of the female officers was heard asking, “Why choose a Muslim man over Hindus?” It is evident that because the two victims came from different backgrounds, the police and right-wing organizations saw them as an ideal target for condemning the so-called “love jihad⁵.” (Chothe, 2019).

Moral policing is also experienced by the Bollywood film industry. This takes place in the form of censorship, vandalism, film and actor bans, intimidation, and protests carried out by members of the Hindu right-wing agenda. The Cinematograph Act of 1952 includes a set of “censorship rules” that are designed to help the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in deciding which films to certify for the public. While most item songs manage to avoid censorship despite their blatant portrayal of women as sexual “objects” catering to the male gaze and their vulgar lyrics, the films where women are portrayed as sexual “subjects” expressing agency, empowerment, and sexual desires, have constantly come under attack and have faced the double standard of the censorship board, either as a result of the censor board’s unwillingness to grant certification, or as a direct consequence of protests by right-wing Hindu groups (Jain, 2018). For example, activists of Hindu right-wing political parties like the Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, and BJP damaged movie theaters, burnt effigies, rallied outside the home of actors, and defaced movie posters in response to the 1996 movie *Fire* which is a lesbian romance between two women who were already in heterosexual marriages. The fact that the demonstrators were able to successfully block the

⁵ Love jihad or Romeo Jihad, is an Islamophobic conspiracy theory promoted by Hindutva (Hindu Nationalism) supporters. According to the theory, Muslim men use seduction, feigning love, deception, kidnapping, and marriage to convert Hindu women to Islam as part of a larger agenda for dominance through demographic growth and replacement (Khatun, 2018).

film's screening demonstrates the great influence of moral policing institutions in determining what images of Indian women's sexuality are allowed for public viewing.

Owing to the intersectional nature of Indian society where religious tensions between Hindus and Muslims are on the rise, in another example, acclaimed director Karan Johar faced boycott of his 2016 film *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (O Heart, it is Difficult) by the Cinema Owners and Exhibitors Association (COEA)⁶ because the film starred Muslim Pakistani actor Fawad Khan at the time where political relations between India and Pakistan were strained after a cross border terrorist attack in the Kashmir region in India killed 49 Indian soldiers. After the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena and the Shiv Sena campaigned for an end to cultural relations with Pakistan, COEA was the second industry association, after the Indian Motion Picture Producers' Association (IMPPA), to impose a ban on films starring Pakistani artists.

Several industry voices, including former CBFC chairman Pahlaj Nihalani, criticized the decision: "We should fight terrorism on the border, and express solidarity with the Indian army, but COEA has sent the wrong message by trying to kill the hapless Indian film producer." (The Hindu, 2016). The terrorist attack sparked protests and a call to ban Pakistani artists working in Bollywood and revoking their work visas. Although there was no official State ban or visa revocation of Pakistani actors in India, artists from across the border have since not been seen in Bollywood films.

⁶ The COEA is a Mumbai territory association with about 400 single screen theater owners as members. (The Hindu, 2016).

3.3 Cultural Perceptions of Women and Girls in India

The culture of rape and sexual violence in India is structured in such a way that women and girls often suffer humiliation from institutional structures like the police and hospitals. Police are often unwilling to register complaints by the victim and their families, witnesses are rarely protected, and medical professionals continue to perform degrading and regressive “two-finger⁷” tests. Such barriers to justice and the victim’s dignity are exacerbated by insufficient medical services, counseling services, and legal assistance for victims during criminal trials.

In rural villages in India, there is almost no accountability due to minimal supervision by law enforcement and government agencies. Crimes in rural areas are frequently managed by village panchayats (village councils) whose ideologies are dominated by patriarchal mindsets. Women who are a part of marginalized communities are often at the mercy of men in power. For example, the late N.D Tiwari, a former Congress leader and Governor of the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh was forced to resign from his position after a video surfaced of the then 86 year old allegedly in bed with three young women (Reuters, 2009). Powerful men across cultures and nationalities are known to use their position to extort sexual favors from women in less powerful positions,

⁷ In India, medical practitioners use the two-finger test on rape victims to evaluate whether the woman/girl is sexually active and habituated to having sex. It is an unscientific and archaic procedure that involves inserting two fingers into a woman’s vagina to determine the laxity of the vaginal muscles, thus establishing her ‘virginity.’ It is based on the patriarchal assumption that a sexually active woman is less likely to have been raped (Basak, 2022).

whether it's former US President Donald Trump's sex scandal with adult film actress Stormy Daniels (*Al Jazeera*, 2023), or Jeffery Epstein's sex trafficking scheme (*Independent*, 2023), or Prince Andrew's alleged sexual involvement with underage girls (BBC, 2022), or late Fox News Chairman and CEO Roger Ailes's allegations of sexual misconduct at the workplace (*Time Magazine*, 2019), or more recently Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein's numerous sexual assault allegations (*The New Yorker*, 2017), the list of powerful men engaging in sexual activities with women in vulnerable positions is endless. Therefore, taking the context of power dynamics in Indian society into account, it would not be wrong to assert that the rape of lower-caste women by upper-caste men is an exercise of power.

Rape is perhaps the ultimate form of violent expression of both class and patriarchal oppression, and it has always been a frequently employed tactic to keep an oppressed group in fear (Hanmer & Maynard, 1987). Even legal proceedings of rape are characterized by patriarchal assumptions about the victim. Rape victims are constantly scrutinized and interrogated about their sexual history. Everything from their choice of clothing to their drinking habits and past relationships, serves as justifications for female oppression and slut-shaming and victim blaming, as it is frequently implied by lawyers and society in general that the woman was not raped but was only "asking for it" and she only claims to be have been raped due to her shame and guilt over regretting the act later. Therefore, it is frequently assumed that the victim brought it on to herself by violating social norms and veering away from Indian culture and tradition by engaging in immoral or "inappropriate" behavior.

There is a general preference for boys during pregnancy that has led to sex-selective abortions in India leading to a skewed sex ratio i.e. 907 women for every 1000 men (Statista, 2023). There are fewer women available for men to marry. Most schools in India especially in rural India do not teach sex education or the concept of consent to their students as it is considered a taboo topic. Oftentimes, Indian parents themselves do not explain to their children the concept of safe consensual sex as it is seen as an uncomfortable topic for them. Children, therefore, tend to learn these things from movies, be it Bollywood or pornographic films, and their peer group. Parents also do not teach their sons how to behave with girls. The “boys will be boys” mentality is still very much prevalent in India while girls are taught to be passive and demure.

Indian society, much like many patriarchal cultures, values the boy child as opposed to the girl child. Girls are seen as a burden, especially among lower-caste households. It is the son that is expected to carry the family name and lineage forward. Schools in rural India are not equipped with toilets and menstrual hygiene products, which hinders girls from attending classes thereby standing as another obstacle to girls in India trying to attain empowerment through education. It is important to note that child marriage is still prevalent in India despite being outlawed. According to the United Nations International Child Emergency Fund (UNICEF), each year, at least 1.5 million girls under the age of 18 get married in India, making it the home of the largest number of child brides in the world. Nearly sixteen percent of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 in India are currently married. Arranged marriages are also common in India with the parents of adult children deciding whom their sons/daughters will marry. This also allows the parents to marry their children off within the same caste and class as them, thereby ensuring “caste purity.”

A common belief in India is that one does not just marry their spouse, rather they marry their entire family. This is due to the prevalence of joint family systems where the newlyweds live under the same roof as the girl's in-laws, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins. The nuclear family system of just the husband, wife and their children is relatively a new phenomenon in India and has gained popularity due to adult married children moving away from their natal homes to big cities in search of work. Young women especially leave their villages and small towns and move to major cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and Hyderabad for a better education and better employment opportunities. While the above mentioned scenarios are not responsible for the rise in rapes, it gives us an idea about the status of women in Indian society. And somewhere in the minds of the perpetrators, women are seen as an easy target, and an object to enjoy rather than fully empowered beings. This mindset plays a pivotal role in disturbing the societal balance and the crumbling socio-cultural morality.

3.4 Cultural Perceptions of Rape in *India's Daughter* and Beyond

Media representation has shaped the discourse surrounding rape culture in India. In this section, I center my discussion on the socio-cultural perception of rape as highlighted by the documentary film *India's Daughter*, directed by British filmmaker Leslee Udwin. The documentary illuminates the legal, cultural, social history, and tension of rape culture in India. Udwin's emphasis on anti-rape protests in the aftermath of the Nirbhaya incident suggests hope for an indigenous radical mobilization to transform India's legal system and

social attitudes toward rape culture. Ironically, the documentary was banned in India by the government stating that the documentary incites violence against women. By prohibiting the documentary, the Indian government failed to admit that these heinous acts are not unique and that sexual assault is an everyday occurrence in India. This goes to show that the Indian government is reluctant to change the status quo regarding rape culture in India. They would rather brush these crimes under the table than act to put an end to the systemic nature of rape culture.

The rapists are interviewed in the film and many of the assertions made by them relate to an underlying culture of sexism, masculine aggression, and acceptance of sexual assault against women and their perceived place in contemporary Indian society. One of the accused states “They are not equal, women and men. For women, the home, housework, they should take care of such things. They are not supposed to roam around at night, go to discos and bars; getting up to mischief, wearing the wrong kind of clothes” (*India’s Daughter*, 2015). The trope of the postfeminist traditional yet modern woman is at the heart of the rape culture debates in *India’s Daughter*. A stark contrast is set up between Jyoti who dreamt of hard work and success, and the primitive, violently “anti-modern” men who sought to put her back into the chasm of “tradition.”

Mukesh Singh, one of the perpetrators, speaks of sexual deprivation, saying he once had “unsatisfactory sex five years ago,” while his lawyer compares the six men’s actions to acting out film fantasies. According to the lawyer, the perpetrators abandoned Indian culture. They were trapped in the film culture’s imagination, where they thought anything was possible. (Devasundaram, 2016). This idea lends support to my claim that gang rapes are a revenge fantasy for the perpetrators. The act of sexual violence is used as an outlet for

male anger, aggression and frustration against an ineffective political system, and a regressive patriarchal, conservative society.

Udwin's film also ignores the pervasiveness of hyper-sexualized imagery that are legitimized in Indian society and culture through Bollywood item songs. This is despite Udwin's statement with Reuters (2015) claiming that she thought "Bollywood movies are pornography." Although Udwin's film brought to the forefront the patriarchal mindset and tensions surrounding the issue of the modern empowered Indian woman, and the various intersectional elements such as caste and class into the mix, in the reality of rape culture in India, she overlooks and underplays the impact of Bollywood and the item song genre.

Shandilya (2015) observes how the Nirbhaya incident reaffirmed the notion that the Hindu, middle class, upper-caste woman is the normative subject of protest, where the body of Jyoti Singh became the site of protest, while the bodies of lower-caste, lower-class, rural women remain worthless because they are not able to produce the desired effect in the psyches of the Indian middle class. Therein lies the apathy displayed by Indian society. Society shows a lack of ethical moral outrage when the victim of gang rape is from a low-caste denomination. I believe the recent gang rapes of low-caste women by upper-caste men causing backlash is primarily due to international media attention that is on India off late due to its pervasive rape culture. Social media has also enabled news to travel fast and reach more people. Therefore it becomes more difficult for the Indian government to brush this issue under the carpet when the eyes of the world media is upon India and examining how the country is responding to these gang rapes.

The documentary created a lot of controversy due to its insensitive portrayal of rape survivors and their families. While the film was banned by the Indian government from

broadcasting stating privacy and sensitivity issues, it generated an outcry against censorship. One criticism against the documentary was that it would deter rape victims from reporting incidents for fear of having their private lives splashed across national media (Gangoli, et al., 2020). In one interview, Jyothi's mother says she feels guilty for not being able to protect her daughter from being raped; meanwhile one of the assailants blames the victim for what happened because she fought back against them during the assault. The attitudes of individuals like Mukesh Singh and his lawyers reflect the deep-seated biases against women that exist in the minds of large segments of Indians. To hold the government and the system accountable, advocates for women's rights must advocate to strengthen the complex set of laws dealing with women-specific issues such as dowry, domestic violence, workplace harassment, eve-teasing, acid attacks on women rejecting men's advances. The most essential struggle, however, is not in the legal or political spheres, but in people's minds about the role of girls and women in an ever-changing, modernizing society.

Bollywood heroines in recent years are depicted on screen as "empowered" and "modern," These women are glamorous and career-oriented; they lead independent cosmopolitan lifestyles, freely expressing their sexual desires, and seeking out male partners who satisfy their sexual needs. This fantasy of the "modern" "empowered" Indian woman is sold to women of all caste and class hierarchies by Bollywood. In reality, when middle class and lower-class women engage or try to participate in these activities, they are met with staunch opposition and punishment because women's access to the public sphere undermines the hyper-masculine patriarchal order (Shrivastava, 2016). Such was the case with Nirbhaya. This was a young

student from a lower middle-class family, walking out on the road with a male friend after midnight in Delhi, after having watched the Hollywood movie *Life of Pi* in a multiplex theatre when she and her friend were attacked and she was brutally raped. This situation alone shows the confluence of modernity and cosmopolitanism that exists in traditional India. What ensued shortly after the incident was a character assassination of the young woman, both in the media and by the lawyers representing the rapists about her relationship to the male friend in question. Critics from all corners made it a point to disparage the young woman for being alone with a man out in the city unchaperoned, essentially blaming the victim for inviting the gang rape, as no “decent” Indian woman would be out at night with a man unless she is of “loose” moral character. The idea is that ordinary Indian women are supposed to adhere to traditional conservative beliefs and to not fall prey to Bollywood fantasy, globalization, and Western influences.

The empowered modern Indian woman is not the problem nor is she at the heart of the problem of rape culture in India. There is a systemic problem of gender discrimination in India. This phenomenon is nothing new and has been a cause for concern for Indian women for a long time. In my opinion, attributing the modern empowered Indian woman for the rise in rape culture is nothing but a dog whistle to the patriarchal conservative segments of Indian society who are looking for a scapegoat to pin the blame on for the problematic behavior of Indian men. They would rather keep women outside of the public sphere than see them as active participants in the neo-liberal economy and modern Indian society.

3.5 Bollywood and Censorship

Indian culture has been reimagined as a homogeneous culture defined by sexual purity, distinct from “foreign influence,” particularly by the Hindu right. The female body has surfaced as the central focus of the cultural war, with the Indian state monitoring what the Indian woman does, what she wears, with whom she enters into sexual relationships, and how she is portrayed in popular media representations. The purpose of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act of 1986 is to “prohibit indecent representation of women through ads or in publications, writings, paintings, figures, or in any other manner, and for matters connected with or ancillary thereto” (Kishwar & Vanita, 1987). The law was the consequence of the conservative lobby groups’ effort to promote a society that was repressive of female sexuality under the guise of protecting Indian culture. Interestingly enough, this law has never been used to critique or outlaw item songs in any way. This may perhaps be due to the fact that to the Indian state and to the Bollywood industry item songs do not constitute a threat nor do they oppress women in India.

It is difficult to understand why out of all the various types of media circulating that may be considered “indecent” or “inappropriate,” the item song does not feature in that list. This goes to demonstrate the ways in which item songs possess a perceived immunity from society and from the legal system in India that makes them slip through the cracks of the morally righteous and conservative segments of society. According to Kishwar and Vanita (1987), the motive for the legislation was the predominant belief that respecting women is synonymous with treating them as sexless individuals. Significantly, the Act defines “obscenity,” “indecent,” and “morality” very broadly, with no nuanced

understanding of depictions generated by women, for women, as authentic and consensual portrayals of female sexuality.

Jain (2018) argues that in the 1960s, bars in Mumbai began displaying live dance performances. This paralleled the surge in popularity of item songs in Bollywood blockbusters. Jain further explained that these item numbers inspired the music, clothing, and dance choices of the dancers at these bars. Performing in bars provided a source of income for women and may have been a better option than providing services in brothels. It also provided a professional outlet for women from traditionally performing communities, who were experiencing a decline in audience attendance for their art form. The Maharashtra government banned these clubs in 2005, citing perceived vulgarity and immorality. The disparity between Bollywood item girls performing on-screen or in exclusive settings and bar girls performing the same numbers in low-class settings cannot be ignored. The Mumbai Bar Dancers' Union opposed the prohibition and demanded the right to dance for a living. The prohibition was challenged in the Bombay High Court. In 2005, the High Court ruled in favor of the bar dancers, and in 2013, the Supreme Court upheld this ruling (Jain, 2018).

One of the most crucial aspects of Indian cinema is its strong adherence to censorship rules, causing numerous issues for filmmakers (Szurlej, 2017). The certificate displayed at the start of each film highlights the visibility and power of the Indian censor board. The censorship rules in India are ambiguous because the same censors who restrict certain components in one film ignore them in another and allow films with underlying themes of sexuality, vulgarity, and violence to be released. At the same time, they readily

allow item songs with erotic visualization and obscene lyrics to pass through the censors without any trouble.

In 1918, the British Indian government passed the first Cinematograph Act, which was later implemented in the major Indian cities. The independent Indian government in 1949 added two new cinematic certificates labeled “A” for adults over the age of 18, and “U” which could be watched by anyone regardless of age. The Cinematograph Act of 1952 is however regarded as the year that gave birth to Indian censorship in its current form (Mehta 2012). The Act led to the establishment of the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). The CBFC claimed that film censorship is required because film is a much more popular medium than any other art form. Due to India’s low literacy rate directly after British colonialism, the establishment of the CBFC was seen as paramount for the vast majority of the population whom they believed could become easily confused between what is reality and what is fiction (Szurlej, 2017). This notion treats the Indian people as essentially children with not much understanding of the cinematic spectacle. Szurlej (2017) contends that the most pressing concerns for the Indian film censor board involve sex, violence, and politics. The CBFC is a powerful institution that can decide if a movie can get released or not in India.

Monika Mehta (2012) however observed that sexuality was and still remains the key element of dispute for censorship in Indian cinema and the worst “enemy” of moral values due to the Indian woman’s body being marked as the symbol of “Indian tradition.” This observation of Mehta may not be that surprising in the context of the female body. What is most interesting is that the Indian censors seem to suggest that the citizens of India need to be looked after, just like children in deciding what they should and shouldn’t be

watching, and the term “Indian tradition” is being used as a very wide and convenient term to justify censorship.

Jain (2018) claims that one aspect of cinema that the Indian censor board seems particularly sensitive to is eroticism. This may be due to the fact that it is also the most desired aspect of cinema. The beauty of the film medium is that it allows the viewer to indulge in the pleasure of voyeurism. The dark movie theater allows the audience to escape into a fantasy world and experience something forbidden. This is true of all movie-goers but the Indian male gaze experiences a twisted form of pleasure through the item song and the item girl. The Indian male gaze revels in the fantasy of the light skinned, upper-class, upper-caste woman playing the role of a sex worker whose entire existence is there to cater to his needs and his pleasure.

Depiction of eroticism within the storyline in Indian films has always been a major issue for filmmakers who are constricted by censorship rules. Filmmakers therefore had to get creative and devise a number of methods for circumventing censorship rules to ensure they gain back the money they spent making the movie. My understanding is that this was one of the reasons as to why item songs became a prominent and recurring feature in contemporary Bollywood films.

3.6 Conclusion

Indian society is still largely patriarchal with strict gender norms. There are conflicting moralities when it comes to female sexuality and behavior in India. On the one hand, women are expected to remain chaste and “pure” and on the other hand, Bollywood

and item songs support sexualized depictions of women. There is a disconnect when it comes to deciding what constitutes appropriate feminine behavior. This presents a paradox for Indian women. Violence against women is on the rise despite the progress made by Indian women in recent years. In Chapter One, I introduced the idea of the traditional yet modern Indian woman. This notion represents a major source of tension for women in India. More Indian women are receiving higher education than ever before. Women's participation in the workforce is also much larger. However, women's empowerment in the public realm comes at a price - namely their safety. Women occupy important roles within the family and society. Despite recent advancements in the political and legal arenas the position of Indian women in society is still a precarious one that is subjected to much scrutiny from various socio-cultural elements.

Rape culture in India is not a simple issue. It is tied to a number of complex intersectional issues such as caste, class, ethnicity, and religion. These factors play a major role when it comes to the question of women's safety in India. Despite stricter laws being introduced since the Nirbhaya gang rape case, the legal and judicial system in India has failed to adequately safeguard women and girls and punish the perpetrators. The rise in rape cases every year since the Nirbhaya gang rape case is testament to the inadequacy of the Indian judicial system. This leads to a culture where rapists receive impunity within the justice system and within society. This may result in a situation where victims and their family members are less likely to report rape cases due to the fear of social stigma and social ostracization.

Furthermore, women's autonomy and access to public spaces are restricted by moral policing carried out by vigilante groups, the police, and certain political entities. The

Nirbhaya gang rape exposed the gap between women's legal rights and their lived reality. It brought attention to the persisting idea that women are commodities whose behavior must adhere to "traditional Indian values." Therefore, Indian women's sexuality is restricted, and discussions about upholding tradition and morality are used to limit their desires for true empowerment. Traditional gender roles and patriarchal traditions in India solidify this image and normalize violence against women. The intersectional reality of India's rape culture exemplifies how numerous axes of oppression interact to uphold rape culture.

Indian society and the State have always exhibited a false morality toward the modern empowered Indian woman. Various government policies, censorship rules, patriarchal cultural norms, and misogynistic views on women all contribute to the perpetuation of a doctrine that indelibly ties societal morality to the body of Indian women, with no regard for consensual and meaningful representations of female sexuality. Comprehensive measures need to be enacted in order for the dismantling of patriarchal systems of oppression that lead to rape culture in India. Educational reform, awareness about gender violence and inequality, legal reforms, critical media engagement, political activism, and open dialogue and discussion about the conditions of women in India are required to address the systemic problems that underpin rape culture in India.

The normalization of female objectification promoted by Bollywood item songs also legitimizes the masculine gaze. Male characters are represented as having dominance over female characters. The female characters are also characterized as objects of heterosexual male sexual desire. This affects how society views women. In India, there is a lack of discourse concerning egalitarian sexual relationships, the concept of consent,

and sexual agency as they relate to women. Bollywood films and item songs are complicit in their failure to acknowledge that women's consent is as vital as male sexual desire and that women do not neatly fit into the binaries of the morally corrupt item girl versus the good, virtuous Indian woman.

Despite the number of horrific gang rapes that have taken place in India in recent years, the response from the Indian public, the government and various other social and political entities have been lukewarm. The initial outrage caused by the media often fades over time and no real sustained action or solution is adopted. The laws that have come into place after the three landmark rape cases in India unfortunately have not been enough to safeguard women and girls from sexual violence. There is no doubt that rape and rape culture exists all over the world. This is not exclusive to India. However, what is different and alarming in the case of India is the sheer number of gang rapes that are taking place, along with the brutality, violence, and dehumanization suffered by women and girls which often leads to their demise at the hands of their perpetrators. And to that effect, the lack of adequate response from society, or action from those in power, or the legal system has created an environment that is conducive for rape culture to sustain if not thrive in India.

There seems to be a general acceptance of such violence against women especially women from lower socio-economic backgrounds. I believe this apathy displayed by society is largely due to the desensitization caused by the frequent exposure to sexist, misogynistic, and often violent forms of media and cultural texts such as item songs. In my opinion, the continuous, unchecked exposure to sexually explicit content such as item songs has helped create a culture of tolerance when it comes to violence against women in India. This culture did not happen overnight. It has had decades to form and shape into what it is today. In

Chapter One I traced the evolution of item songs from the 1950s. I laid out the various shifts and changes that occurred in order for the item song to take its current form. This culture of violence has been brewing for decades perhaps even longer, therefore I also recognize that sudden social change is not attainable.

Developments in legal reform and popular culture are a start but ultimately are not enough to overturn the deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs that exist in Indian society. The paradoxical position of women in India arises out of the conflict between women's desire for modernization and social expectations to adhere to traditional gender norms. There is an imminent need to dispel the myth that women's rights and progress somehow endanger Indian culture. This calls for placing women's safety and dignity above patriarchal views that are maintained in the guise of tradition. Real progress toward genuine gender equality depends on a cultural and social revolution at the grassroots level.

4 Item Songs and Rape Culture in India

The Cinematograph Act of 1952 made it problematic to show sexual desires on screen, putting a halt to on-screen kissing, leading Bollywood to find other creative ways of displaying love, affection, sex and eroticism. Ganti (2013) states that item songs and their lyrics were used as euphemisms for sexual acts, and it became one of the main modes of showcasing sexuality on screen. Lyrics frequently described the female body in considerable detail. Item songs are distinct from other Bollywood film songs. They have no real connection to the plot of the film unlike the other songs. They appear in most cases as a filler or as a distraction but due to their glamorized portrayal and catchy tunes, these songs have become a required element of Bollywood films. Item songs in India are very popular with the audience, yet may contribute to the poor treatment of women in the country.

For instance, colorism is a major issue in Bollywood with preference for light/white skinned actresses. The desire for fair/light skin is still embraced in Bollywood (and Indian society in general) with most of the item girls meeting Western beauty standards sends the wrong message to a predominantly brown skinned population. Item numbers are frequently performed by foreign dancers and actors. Recently, mainstream Bollywood actresses have started performing these songs thereby increasing their popularity. In the last century mainstream leading actresses would refrain from performing an item number as it would go against the idea of the “ideal Indian woman” who in post-independence India consisted of the pious, dutiful wife, mother or daughter. Today, the item song has become a rite of passage for every upcoming actress in the industry. Some A-list actresses have been

rumored to be earning as much as they would doing an entire film from just a five minute song. This further reinforces the economic implications of item songs when it comes to marketing and the publicity of a movie with item numbers acting as a trailer for many of these films.

Music and movies may have a significant impact on impressionable young minds. In India, actors are viewed as role models by both boys and girls. (Slatewala, 2019). When young people witness their role models in music and movies treating women as objects and disrespecting them, they may strive to imitate them. Item songs have recently come under increased public scrutiny around the role and rights of Indian women in terms of their sexual representation and its implications. Item songs are part of a larger cultural landscape and a powerful tool to study the socio-cultural aspect of Indian society. To understand how women are objectified, these songs must be critically analyzed.

According to Frisby and Behm-Morawitz (2019), messages sent out by the media impact people's perceptions of appropriate gender-based behavior, normative gender roles, self-evaluative gender-specific standards, and self-efficacy beliefs. Rogers (2013) claims that a song can teach us almost everything about the organization of a society at a certain point in time. This includes everything from societal conventions and ideals to people's viewpoints. Item songs are important cultural artifacts that enables us to understand patriarchal mindsets that normalize rape culture in India. These songs are part of the creative cultural production and popular cultural texts that both reflect and spread regressive views about women and antiquated patriarchal ideologies.

Furthermore, Fischer and Greitemeyer (2006) reported that exposure to violent music videos increases stereotypical sex role behavior, whereas Johnson, Jackson, and

Gatto (1995) concluded that exposure to misogynistic songs increases the acceptability of gendered violence. Additionally, repeated exposure to violent media content has been proven to desensitize audiences to such violence (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). Songs with overtly misogynistic content, references to drinking, and gang imagery could influence males' attitudes and behavior toward women in the real world and item songs are riddled with such content and imagery.

Greitemeyer (2009) in his empirical study found that those individuals who are subjected to sexist music are more likely than those who are not to participate in sexually aggressive behavior. The objectifying lyrics and visuals in item songs amount to sexist messaging that could reinforce sexually aggressive attitudes in male viewers and translate to behaviors like eve-teasing, groping, and sexual assault of women in the real world. Weitzer & Kubrin (2009) are of the view that sexist music has real-world ramifications in that it promotes gendered socialization and contributes to gender inequity (Martino et al., 2006). Item songs promote rigid gender stereotypes for women and aggressive masculine attitudes for men. These gender norms and behaviors may be internalized by susceptible young viewers. Item songs glorify non-consensual behavior and subjugation of women. These songs also promote problematic notions of consent, femininity, and masculinity.

Dowd (2007) illustrates that music is intrinsically linked to topics such as "subcultures, the reproduction of inequality, globalization, identity formation, and social movements" (2007: 250). Item songs can be viewed as a subculture of Bollywood cinema, which primarily appeals to the male gaze. Item songs perpetuate inequality by stereotypically depicting women as strippers and sex workers who cater to the male audience. Identity formation is important because item songs reinforce regressive

masculinity that normalizes harassment and sexual violence while promoting restrictive ideals of femininity such as submission to male desire. Item songs can be viewed as a component of India's globalized media culture and social landscape. These songs are not just entertainment but a reflection and driver of a larger systemic gender inequality and problematic identity formation that contribute to India's rape culture. Item songs are not just means of entertainment. They also serve as a window into the systemic problem of gender inequality that underpin India's rape culture.

Ferreira (2014) states that the relationship between media content and audience attitude is akin to a causal relationship. Current discussion in mainstream Indian news media concerning the growth in sexual violence, such as rape, has been linked to exposure to sexist media material such as item songs. My study does not aim to make any kind of causal relationship between exposure to item songs and rape culture. Item songs in recent years have become an important political text when it comes to the discourse surrounding rape culture and violence against women in India. It is also worth noting that this is an ongoing debate in Indian news media and within the Indian film industry where item songs have come to be scrutinized for their blatantly misogynist, sexist lyrics and obscene visual content.

The above studies demonstrate the important role that media messages and cultural texts such as music, play in influencing people's attitudes about notions about gender, sexuality, and violence against women as well as identity formation. Keeping the above discussion in mind, I discuss my second research question (RQ2): What are the narrative, visual, and lyrical characteristics of the most popular item songs from 2012 – 2019? What

do they imply or suggest about the potential role of item songs in the growth of rape culture in India?

Several common characteristics were identified from observing the narrative, visual and lyrical content. The analysis was conducted on the visual content and lyrics of the item songs. Only ten of the most popular item songs based on YouTube views were analyzed in this study. For each of the songs that were studied, the lyrical content was read in the original Hindi language, then translated to English using online sources. Three websites were used for lyrics translation – filmyquotes.com, bollymeaning.com, and lyricsraag.com. All three websites did not have the translated lyrics for all ten item songs from my sample. Therefore, I had to rely on a combination of these websites for the translation of the lyrics. Likewise, each website had slight differences in words and meanings of songs. On such cases, I sought clarification regarding certain slang words, phrases, terminologies and local dialects from friends who are native Hindi speakers to accurately translate the lyrics. The songs were then heard and watched on YouTube a number of times. While observing the lyrics and the visual content some common patterns and trends emerged. I discuss my findings in the upcoming sections.

4.1 Item Songs Selected for the Study

Only a few recent studies have looked at rape culture in India as influenced by item songs. Despite there being several short studies on item songs and gender representation, including sexualization and objectification tropes, few researchers have studied a wider representative sample of the most notable recent item songs and investigated the socio-

cultural and political context that supports and encourages rape culture in India. The ten item songs were selected for analysis spanning a period of seven years. Few prior studies have looked at both the visual portrayal on screen and the lyrics simultaneously. Therefore this study is more holistic in nature and addresses this gap in existing literature on item songs and rape culture. I examine the ways in which the female body is objectified and how rape culture is manifested in the cinematic techniques and the song lyrics. This research is especially relevant because it is carried out during the time when the conversation around rape culture in India has intensified.

Table 4.1: Item Songs, Year of Release, Movie Name, and Views on YouTube

Item Song	Year	Movie Name	Views on YouTube
Chikni Chameli	2012	Agneepath	348 Million
Fevicol Se	2012	Dabangg 2	310 Million
Ram Chahe Leela	2013	Goliyon Ki Rasleela Ram-Leela	167 Million
Lovely	2014	Happy New Year	185 Million
Laila Main Laila	2017	Raees	770 Million
Chamma Chamma	2018	Fraud Saiyaan	313 Million
Dilbar Dilbar	2018	Satyameva Jayate	1.2 Billion
Ek Do Teen	2018	Baaghi 2	207 Million
Kamariya	2018	Stree	344 Million
O Saki Saki	2019	Batla House	718 Million

4.2 Stylistic Categories Used in Film

For my research, I adopted the stylistic categories introduced by Bordwell and Thompson (2004) that look at a collection of film elements that together make up the item song and support the narrative of the male gaze in item songs and, by extension, culminates in an environment conducive for rape culture through media representation. These

categories include the narrative, mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound. It is the combination of the narrative, visual elements and the music and lyrics that make item songs so popular in India. In the following section, I discuss in detail each of the stylistic categories and their relation to the item song genre.

4.2.1 Narrative

Narrative techniques provide the framework for films. Elements like the film structure, setting, theme, voice, and tone are important aspects when it comes to engaging the audience. A narrative is a series of events that occur in time and space and are linked by cause and effect (Bordwell and Thompson, 2004). In the case of item songs, it becomes difficult to locate the purpose of these songs in the overall film narrative. These songs are placed at random without any relation to the actual storyline. Sometimes they occur in the opening scene, sometimes the middle of the film after an intense scene, sometimes during the end credits. It is difficult to predict where and when an item song would occur within the film. The item songs are increasingly being placed in the opening or closing credit sequences. This new trend might be caused by a number of factors. Television commercials might have an important part in this. Item songs serve similar functions to teasers and trailers, and because Bollywood songs account for a large part of the film's income, these songs are frequently portrayed as the film's unique selling point. Item numbers of today have become bonus features. Most of the item songs have their share of the narrative time. Even though the sole aim of item songs is to increase the film's marketability, they remain irrelevant to the plot. In recent years directors have tried to make the item song more

relevant to the plot by strategically placing it in the middle of the movie to weave into the film's narrative.

The song and dance narrative is an integral part of the storytelling process in Indian cinema; in fact, those songs even help develop the storyline by indicating situations like marriage, religious festivals, revealing romantic feelings between the main couple of the film, friendship progression, and familial relations. Contemporary Hollywood films like *Moulin Rouge* (2001) and *La La Land* (2016) also incorporate this song and dance narrative into their storyline similar to Bollywood films.

A common theme that came up time and time again in my sample of item songs was the glamorization and celebration of illicit and criminal activities such as gang culture (*Chikni Chameli* (Shiny/Sexy/Beautiful Country Girl) (2012), *Ek Do Teen* (One Two Three) (2018)), prostitution (*Fevicol Se* (With Fevicol) (2012), *Kamariya* (Waist)) (2018)), or performance in dance bars (*Dilbar Dilbar*) (Beloved Beloved/ Darling Darling) (2018), *Lovely* (2014), *Chamma Chamma* (Jingling Jingling) (2018)) and in some cases explicit violence in the form of the hero beating up and even killing people in the middle of the dance performance as was the case in the songs *Laila Main Laila* (I'm Such a Beauty) (2017) and *O Saki Saki* (O Cup Bearer) (2019). The brazenness and the sexual promiscuity of the item girl were a significant part of every single item song observed. The item song when analyzed in the context of the film lacks a narrative function. The item girl is also not allowed to participate in the social narrative of the film. The only exception to this rule in my sample is with respect to actress Deepika Padukone's role in the film *Happy New Year* (2014) where she performs the item song *Lovely*. However, her character is that of a bar dancer, to begin with, therefore, is an anomaly. The item girl for the most part lacks

social standing in the cinematic world. When taking the item song as a separate entity devoid of the filmic purpose, the item song exhibits the above-mentioned narrative motifs.

4.2.2 Mise-En-Scene

Mise-en-scene, which translates to “putting on stage,” refers to anything that appears and takes place on stage or in front of the camera (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). Mise-en-scene can function as a component of narration, or the unfolding of the storyline. Emotions like curiosity, surprise, laughter, and joy are created by the setting, lighting, costume, staging, and performance. They are motifs that run throughout the film. The mise-en-scene in item songs represent a fantasy world where social norms and rules are suspended. In such a world there are no ethics, no morals or values that determine “Indian culture.” The world of the item song is where anything goes. Additionally, the mise-en-scene gives us an idea of the item girl’s social class. We can infer from the location, the crowd she is hanging around with, and her clothing that she is from a low-class, low-caste background. Furthermore, the choice of location in item songs create an additional visual element that helps convey the songs theme and mood.

The use of props can greatly change the mood and narrative of the song. Alcohol bottles and consumption of alcohol is a major feature in all the item songs in my sample. Therefore, alcohol bottles are used as props to give context to the location as well, which in many cases takes place in a brothel, club or a bar. The item song is often shot as a performance on stage, or at an all-male gathering and, thus, may become the space to subjectively experience the female body. This also connotes to the item girl’s profession

as a sex worker, stripper, or bar dancer. The song *Laila Main Laila* (2017) takes place in a bar and the item girl emerges from a giant bottle. All the while the patrons of the bar raise a toast to the item girl as she starts her performance. Similarly, the songs *Ram Chahe Leela* (Ram Desires Leela) (2013), *Chamma Chamma* (2018), *Chikni Chameli* (2012), *Fevico Se* (2012), and, *Lovely* (2012) depict a scenario where the item girl performs in a sea of alcohol and drunkenness.

Costumes, hairstyles, and makeup play a major role in item songs. They bring to life the glamor quotient of the item girl. The costumes worn by item girls add to their sex appeal. They are eye-catching, and meant to titillate the male spectator. The costumes leave little to the imagination with much of the item girl's skin exposed wearing modernized versions of indigenous clothes. These types of costumes also indicate a traditional element of "Indianness" despite half the item songs being performed by white or light-skinned Caucasian-looking actresses.

Bright colors such as red and pink were commonly worn by the item girls, along with other sequined outfits. These were evident in songs such as *Chikni Chameli* (2012), *Lovely* (2014), *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018), *Chamma Chamma* (2018), *Ek Do Teen* (2018), *O Saki Saki* (2019). There are some elements that act as the unifying factor in my sample of item songs. For one, the choreography in item songs as with most Bollywood songs is a synchronized performance with the tune and lyrics reflecting the rhythm and energy of the song. These songs also highlight the item girl's body. The dance moves are erotic and sexually suggestive. Water and fire elements were used to enhance the item girl's performance. For example, in the song *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018) the item girl in one scene dances inside a star shaped miniature pool in the middle of a night club.

It is a combination of all these visual elements that makes item songs appealing to the Indian audience. The mise-en-scene creates an engrossing and immersive experience for the spectator. The various elements influence the narrative, themes, and the ambiance of the item song, which in turn affects the audience's perception and level of engagement with the performance.

4.2.3 Cinematography

Cinematography includes overall techniques that include the scene composition, lighting of the set or location, camera selection, lenses, filters, camera angle and movement, and special effects (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). The filmmaker stages an event to be filmed by controlling the mise-en-scene. The filmmaker's cinematography decisions are influenced by how this creative decision will impact the audience viewing the film. This may be one of the reasons why certain women's body parts are often highlighted and zoomed in on item songs.

In the song *Chamma Chamma* (2018), the item girl appears on screen cloaked in a black hood and is framed by sparks flying in the background. The location is indicative of a bar with an elevated stage in the middle. With each step she takes, her cloak falls off her body to reveal her provocative, brightly sequined outfit. All the while we see several different cuts of the item girl gyrating and moving her body to the tune in a different location all by herself surrounded by nothing but black satin sheets swaying with her movements, green lasers lighting the dark set and her fair complexion, and her hair flying in the wind as she puts on a show for the male gaze while looking directly at the camera.

The camera makes it a point to show the spectator both the wide shot as well as close-up shots of the woman's breasts, navel, and legs. The camera also plays with several low angles so as to give the impression that it is looking up at the item girl's skirt. The camera becomes an extension of the phallus. The long lens that is used to capture the woman's upskirt shots is phallic in nature. The camera is part of the male point of view, therefore the camera represents the phallus which is used as a cinematic means to penetrate up the woman's skirt. The use of lightning is an important part of cinematography in item songs. Red, green, blue, and yellow lasers moving in rapid succession and illuminating the item girl's body movements and the stage adds to the overall effect of putting on a spectacle for the audience.

4.2.4 Editing

Editing, according to Bordwell and Thompson (2004), is the coordination of one shot with the next. Editing interacts closely with other elements of cinematic expression such as the camera angle and mise-en-scene. It also looks at their overall relationship rather than just the transition between shots. Editing patterns highlight facial expressions, body parts, dialogue, and location. Ultimately, editing enhances the viewer's overall experience of the film.

The editing patterns in item songs use rhythmic editing that reflects the fast beat of the dance song of the item girl and the background dancers. One major issue with item songs is that it dehumanizes the female body by displaying certain body parts for the male gaze. This denotes a type of violence against the female body through the technique of

editing. The item girl is only but a sum of her body parts. Another feature we see in item songs is the change of costume that takes place from one scene to the next within a fraction of a second. The item girl is no longer in the clothes that she initially started the song with. She manages to change into a series of different costumes without breaking the flow of the song. Editing plays a major role in making these transitions look seamless even though one does have to pause and wonder where, when, and how the item girl had the chance to switch costumes in the middle of a dance performance in an open space (in most cases) surrounded only by men.

Changing costumes also indicates a change of voyeuristic timing, thereby creating extra narrative space. The performance enables erotic dream space for the male. For example, in the song *Ek Do Teen* (2018), the item girl has three costume changes in the span of less than four minutes. What is curious however is that she is the only woman in the entire item song surrounded by drunk and rowdy male spectators and backup dancers wearing black leather cuts while the girl is the only person wearing anything that is colorful bringing even more attention to her. She performs in an underground nightclub of sorts. These sudden outfit changes bring up the question as to when and how the outfit change took place in the song narrative and did the item girl in fact have to be naked in front of the audience in order for her to make those outfit changes. While I concede that this is speculation on my part and the multiple costume changes are simply an editing technique made to add glamor to the song, given the complex, complicated, and almost “orgy” like nature of item songs, it still is something to critique. Although not a part of my sample, there was one particular item song called *Mera Naam Mary* (My Name is Mary) from the film *Brothers* (2015) that supports my claim of the item girl changing costumes in front of

her audience. The item girl played by actress Kareen Kapoor for the second half of her performance strips in front of the all-male audience in an outdoor bar area indicative of a rural town in India. She takes off her silver sequined strapless bustier and midriff baring skirt only to don a gold version of the previous outfit. The camera goes back and forth as the item girl takes off each item of clothing with her back turned to the audience as the men stare at her wide eyes and lustfully. She resumes her performance in her new outfit as though nothing had happened.

In most item songs the male protagonist appears as a passive audience member watching the item girl's performance. In some ways, the item girl is seen as a distraction from the male protagonist's perspective. Item girls of the yesteryears could be considered an antagonist in a way, who were in cahoots with the villain. However contemporary item girls though not out rightly an antagonist, still in many cases appear within the confines of an antagonistic scene or storyline, almost as a way to lessen the tension of what would otherwise be a tense scene. She distracts him from his goal. The male lead is seen as the entity that is there to move the narrative forward but the item girl does not allow him to do so. Editing plays a major role in narrative progression. The item girl sets a psychological trap for both the male protagonist and the audience with her performance thereby threatening the narrative conclusion.

4.2.5 Sound

When sound and image occur at the same time, they are regarded as one event rather than two. As a result, the item song also has to be taken in its entirety and not as separate

components of the visual element and lyrics. There are three types of sound in the cinema. These include speech, music, and noise, which are called *sound effects* (Bordwell & Thompson, 2004). For my research on item songs, I mainly focus on the musical aspect of sound. The dance performance takes place after the song has already been recorded. The song is used as a playback in order to shoot the dance performance during filming much like any other music video. Once the dance performance is recorded and edited, the studio version is juxtaposed to the final edited post-production piece.

Today's item songs make use of a range of musical sounds from techno to rap and R&B to local beats and instruments. In my research, I discovered that five out of the ten songs in my sample were remixes of songs from the 80s, 90s and early 2000s. In recent years remixes of classic Bollywood songs have garnered interest among the masses and film directors have tapped into this market in order to build their revenue stream. Remixes of old classics have breathed new life through modern item songs. It is not uncommon to hear the latest remix of item songs from the 70s and 80s in a club in Mumbai or Delhi these days.

One feature that kept arising in a number of item songs was the presence of background noise in the form of crowds cheering, hooting, whistling and chanting the item girl's name while she dances, (as in the case of the songs *Laila Main Laila* (2017), *Lovely* (2014), and *Ek Do Teen* (2018)) thereby encouraging her as she performs for the men in the audience. Additionally, there were certain instances where the male background cast/dancers were seen to be singing the lyrics meant for the male in the absence of the male protagonist. It's become more and more common to place the item song within the film narrative than as a filler song for sheer entertainment. Directors have started to add

scenes with dialogues in certain areas of the song between the male protagonist and his enemy in order to keep the flow of the storyline going so as not to get distracted from the larger plot as was the case in *Chikni Chameli* (2012) and *Laila Main Laila* (2017), where in the latter there was a full-blown gunfight where the male protagonist kills nine people in a shootout in the upper level of the clubhouse as the item girl continues to dance and entertain the audience in the lower level all the while nobody heard or noticed anything amiss as the hero walks through the crowd with his face covered in blood.

4.3 Findings

The stylistic categories mentioned in the previous section manifest in a number of interconnected ways in my sample of item songs. The following narrative, visual and lyrical characteristics emerged after analyzing the stylistic elements of these item songs: glamorization of illicit activities and behavior, sexual objectification of the female body, violence, and alcohol abuse.

4.3.1 Glamorization of Illicit Activities and Behavior

Glamorization of illicit and unlawful activities in item songs operates on different levels. It provides a narrative form and structure to the item song which allows certain things, such as gang culture, prostitution, stalking, groping, chasing, and teasing as acceptable forms of behaviors. The majority of these item songs hold gang culture, and the tropes of gang rape such as slut-shaming, victim blaming, impaired mental and cognitive

state due to alcoholism in high regard. The songs also seem to normalize as well as glamorize sexual harassment and non-consensual behavior. It is a major component of the mise-en scene and the choreography. Bollywood's romanticization of bad boys who do bad things and engage in illegal and immoral activities is problematic. It gives the impression that it is heroic and "cool" to gang rape a woman. However, organized gangs in real life in India have a bad reputation with police routinely on high alert. Organized gangs in India have been associated with political demonstrations in the past that have led to violence and destruction of public property. For this reason, the Indian government and the police force thwart any displays of gang culture before it can come to fruition. This also raises questions about the actual freedom of expression that is allowed in a supposedly democratic country like India.

The item girl dances in front of hundreds of men who are wielding weapons, indulging in smoking, or drinking alcohol. They are stalking, leering, shouting, teasing, and groping the item girl without much resistance on her part. Simply put the men in these songs are portrayed as randy and lustful who use the item girl like a ragdoll. The item girl is dehumanized to the point where she becomes an appendage for male pleasure and nothing else. For example, in the item song *Chikni Chameli* (2012), the item girl performed by A-list actress Katrina Kaif is seen wearing sexualized and provocative versions of several traditional Maharashtrian dresses and dancing to the tune of hundreds of inebriated men. The men are seemingly part of a dacoit (armed robbers) gang dancing with guns and wooden sticks surrounding them, chasing and stalking the actress. What is alarming is that she is the only female among the gang of men. Much of the time the item girl is seen to be "inviting" men to join her in the dance. This is quite problematic as women represented on

screen instigating men to stalk and chase them may perpetuate rape culture in a deeply patriarchal society like India.

Additionally, the mise-en-scene also gives the backdrop for where such activities take place. In my sample, most of the item songs were performed in either bars or strip clubs and in the case of the song *Fevicol Se* (2012) it was performed in a red light district with brothels. These activities are highlighted in the lyrics as well. The lyrics make reference to gang rape with the woman stating she is surrounded by a lot of “lovers.” The men are depicted as being wild, chaotic and lustful as they gyrate and press their bodies against the item girl in some cases dry humping to elicit erotic pleasure. The men in these songs have a singular goal in mind which is to have sexual intercourse with the item girl. Take another example. In the song *Chamma Chamma* (2018), the lyrics indicate the following:

*Mere aage piche ghume jaane kitne lover.
(So many lovers surround me all the time)*

*Tere haath na aani
(Don't put your hand on me)*

This implies that there is some resistance on the part of the item girl and that she is not consenting to being touched or to the sexual act with multiple men. Even though item songs appear to portray women as autonomous, empowered sexually liberated beings who have power over the men around them, the reality of the situation in India is that women lack any kind of power or agency in such situations, and most high-profile rapes in India are reported to be gang rapes that transcend caste and class barriers.

My analysis indicates that item songs show certain eerie similarities to gang rape culture in India. Item songs mimic or mirror gang rapes in many ways. Both item songs

and gang rapes dehumanize the female body treating it as an object or a vessel to satisfy the assailant's violent desires. This normalizes the idea that women's bodies simply exist for the satisfaction of male pleasure. Item songs also blur the line between consent and coercion. These songs depict scenarios where the item girl is lavished with attention from gangs of drunk men. Even in situations where the item girl shows some form of resistance or where she plays "hard to get" her discomfort is often downplayed or ignored completely. This reinforces the problematic idea of normalization of non-consensual behavior. Item songs much like gang rapes have the ability to perpetuate victim blaming narratives whereby women are blamed for the actions of men. Item songs portray women as seductive and provocative characters. This in turn can lead to a situation where the blame can be shifted to the victim of rape suggesting that she was responsible for the rape as she invited the violence through her own "immoral" behavior. This in turn creates a culture that creates impunity for the rapists while placing the burden on the victim.

4.3.2 Sexual Objectification of the Female Body

Sexual objectification of the female body is one of the main findings from this study and popular media such as item songs may contribute to the problem of rape culture in India. Body exposure was found to be one of the ways of conveying sexual objectification. Item girls are seen wearing little to nothing on screen ensuring that their bodies are on full display for the male gaze. The definition of sexual objectification specifically mentioned a woman being represented as a "collection of body parts" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997), implying that sexual objectification takes place whenever body parts such as cleavage,

chest, buttocks, and pelvis are displayed in a fragmented manner. Fredrickson & Roberts (1997) found that women internalize objectification due to the media's repeated sexual objectification of the female body. The styling and camerawork used in Bollywood, which fragments women's bodies into parts for the male gaze, is in line with Frederickson and Roberts' studies on how women internalize sexual objectification. Item girls are conditioned to objectify themselves. This could lead to a situation where female viewers of item songs could also absorb behavioral traits similar to the item girl and internalize unrealistic beauty standards based on what the item girl looks like.

According to Mulvey, (1975) when the camera lingers on certain body parts rather than on the face or the entire subject, the gaze conveys an asymmetric power dynamic between the watcher and the watched. The emphasis on the body parts separated from one another strips the woman of agency, thus relegating her to the status of an object. This notion is like what Simone de Beauvoir (2015) states in *The Second Sex* that women throughout history have been reduced to objects for men and denied the right to their own subjectivity. For de Beauvoir, this fundamental principle pervades all aspects of social, political, and cultural life to the point where women themselves internalize this objectified stance. In such a scenario, the looker takes a superior stance, demonstrates control and power, and disempowers the "looked at." The "looked at" occupies the position of an object or the victim. The male gaze can thus be characterized as a result of patriarchy and a means of ensuring male dominance in society.

Everything from the item of clothing, the sexually suggestive dance moves, the way in which camera angles focused on certain parts of the woman's body such as the eyes, lips, breasts, navel, hip, thighs, and buttocks highlighted how item songs portray women

as sexual objects and not as individual beings with agency. Cinema has the power to create a sense of fetishistic desire in its viewers. According to Christian Metz (1982), the film image has fetishistic attributes due to its ability to freeze moments in time. Metz is of the view that the fetishistic power of cinema comes from the spectator's desire to have control over the image and stems from a state of lack much like Freud's analysis of fetishism as a defense against castration anxiety. The spectator rejects the knowledge of the absence of the filmic image in the same way that fetishism disregards the absence of the phallus (penis) in the female body. The viewer understands that the images, the story narrative, and the protagonists are not real and are all a work of fiction. Nonetheless, in order to be enjoyed these fictional elements must be dismissed and must be regarded as real. The item girl is a work of fiction. In reality, there is no such person as the item girl in Indian society. Such a woman in real life would be considered blasphemous to Indian culture and values. Yet she exists in Bollywood. There is something very real about the item girl from the Indian male gaze's point of view. The item girl is depicted as a hypersexual being. She embodies sexual liberation in what is otherwise an ultra-conservative society. She does not shy away from male attention. In fact, she relishes it. What I am arguing is that when a character like the item girl makes herself and her body available to everyone in her vicinity with no regard for her safety and her own self-care, it demonstrates enormous recklessness on her part. The item girl seems to lack the capacity for trauma as her body has been used and abused consistently by the men she wishes to please. She has become a prisoner of her own making through her sexual desires.

Cinematography and editing play a major role in the sexual objectification of the female body. Fragmentation of the body takes place as a result. Exemplary of this trend is

the song *Chamma Chamma* (2018), where Swedish-Greek actress Elli AvrRam plays the item girl and is reduced to her body parts with the camera zooming in on her private parts from different angles as she dances to the catchy tune. She is however, shown to thoroughly celebrate her femininity and body on stage in front of a crowd of drunk men despite her semi-nude state. In certain scenes, the director made a conscious effort to cut off her face from the rest of her body as she shook her hips surrounded by male backup dancers in a nightclub. Many of the item songs consisted of one woman surrounded by hundreds of men, the visuals show the men often surrounding the woman, trying to touch her, picking her up, lifting her off the ground, and in some instances literally tossing her around like a ragdoll as she continues to entertain the crowd. This was evident in songs such as *Chamma Chamma* (2018), *Ek Do Teen* (2018), and *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018).

Additionally, all the songs glorify and romanticize women in stereotypical sexual roles as strippers, bar dancers and prostitutes. The item girls serve as sexual objects for male pleasure. In these songs, women perform provocative dance numbers that are cheered on by inebriated men. The way in which women are portrayed on screen may reflect societal attitudes toward women in everyday life. The fact that item songs have a life outside of the movie narrative demonstrates the intricate relationship between the Bollywood film industry and society where people find it normal to utilize the female body as a source of pleasure

It is impossible to ignore the fact that these item songs were written by men for primarily a male audience. All of the item songs I analyze in my research were written for females to perform vulgar dance numbers while stereotyping them and minimizing them to the status of sex symbols. The songs also had sexual overtones which objectify women

through the use of metaphors, slang, and explicit language. This was most evident when observing the lyrics.

Sexist, misogynistic and sexually suggestive lyrics were a major reason for the objectification of the female body in item songs. Take the case of the item song *Kamariya* from the 2018 movie *Stree* (woman) where a group of men surround the item girl asking her to join them during a bonfire/house party. They ask her to shake her waist (which is the literal meaning of the word *Kamariya*) while she strips for their pleasure. These lyrics exemplify this particular scene:

Aaj bijli bhi girwaani hai
(I want lightning to crack down today)

Fire Bhi Lagwaani Hai
(I want fire to erupt today)

Jo tu aa ke baby hamre saath ma aa aa aa ke
(When you join us baby and...)

Kamariya... hila de hila de, hila de hila de, hila de hila de
(Shake your waist all around)

Najariya... mila de mila de, mila de mila de, mila de mila de
(Strike your gaze with mine)

Kamariya... hila de hila de, hila de hila de, hila de hila de
(Shake your waist all around)

Najariya... mila de mila de, mila de mila de, mila de mila de
(Strike your gaze with mine)

Ho... haaye re mera dil le le
(Come and take my heart)

Haaye re meri jaan le le
(Come and take my life)

Badle mein tu thhodi si haan thhodi si toh kamariya hila de
(In exchange, just shake your waist a little)

In another example, the item girl in the song *Chamma Chamma* (2018) is stated to have many lovers who surround her all the time. Much of the emphasis in the lyrics is on her body parts that highlight her eyes and slim waist. She also comes across as a tease in the video with her grabbing the man's shirt and mouthing the lines close to him and then pushing him away. This push-and-pull relationship confuses the male character but the camera immediately cuts to her dancing on stage in front of the crowd once again.

Meri patli kamar meri tirchhi nazar
(I have a slim waist, I have a sharp gaze)

Mere aage piche ghume jaane kitne lover
(So many lovers surround me all the time)

A concurrent theme as a result of sexual objectification of women that emerged was high sexual drive in women. The women are shown to have been depicted with a high libidinal drive and are often seen pleading, enticing, and seducing the man. The item girl is without a doubt the male fantasy come to life. She is unapologetic about her wants and desires. She is also a contradiction to Indian values that glorify female virtue and virginity. This may lead to the formation of another rape myth and invoke the characteristic of slut-shaming. The woman's promiscuity may be used as a reason to justify sexual violence inflicted on her. In the song *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018), the woman sings of her unbridled passion of love:

Aa paas aa tu kyun door hai
(Come close to me, why are you distant?)

Yeh ishq ka jo fitoor hai
(The madness/passion of love is over me)

Nashe mein dil tere choor hai
(My heart is intoxicated in your love)

Another example of this can be seen in the song *Lovely* from the 2014 movie *Happy New Year* where actress Deepika Padukone pleads with the protagonist Shah Rukh Khan to become her lover. She has become so enamored with him that she states that she has become crazed and intoxicated by him:

Yeh jo bangle hai re laal colour ki
(These red colored bangles)

Tere liye hi khan khan karke
(Only for you, they are jingling)

Inn haathon mein naache jaaye re...
(And dancing in my hands)

Inhe nasha chadha hai tera
(They are intoxicated by you)

Tu ban ja aashiq mera
(Please become my lover)

Tune chhua hai aise
(You've touched me in such a way)

Main kamli ho gayi...
(That I've become crazy)

In the song *O Saaki Saaki* (2019). The item girl sings:

O saaki saaki re, saaki saaki
(O cup bearer! O cup bearer)

Aa paas aa reh na jaaye koi khwaahish baaki
(Come closer to me, I don't want any desire to remain unfulfilled)

Tere jaisi mashooqa mujhe yaar chaahiye
(I want a lover just like you)

Na paisa chaahiye na hi qaraar chaahiye
(I don't want money, I don't want peace/rest)

India as a society has demonstrated time and time again its reluctance to protect victims of sexual violence. The Indian legal system does a poor job of holding perpetrators of sexual assault accountable. Yet this is the social context where a character like the item girl exists. The idea of a sexually promiscuous and sexually liberated woman is a threat to Indian society. Such a woman cannot exist in real life without fearing the consequences of rape culture. Another component of sexual objectification observed through lyrics was self-objectification by the item girl. The item girl is shown to be a highly promiscuous woman whose sole purpose is to tease and entice the male protagonist and the male audience. Much is said about her beauty and looks which she uses to her advantage to seduce the male gaze.

Sexual objectification, according to Aubrey et al. (2011), can occur through visual representations of the body such as skin exposure, wearing sexy clothing, or behavioral representations of the body like sexualized dance, gestures, etc. Furthermore, when women sexually objectify themselves, they encourage men to believe that the male gaze and attention are welcome (Aubrey et al., 2011). Rapes, gang rapes, and violence against women highlight the need to reconsider these media representations of women that can have a harmful impact on the treatment of women and girls in India.

The item girl's beauty is reduced to fragments through the lyrics. Her beauty is diminished by concentrating on only certain features and body parts. The lyrics have made the item girl unrecognizable as a whole being. She is the sum total of her body parts. Much focus is given to the woman's appearance in the item song whether it is in the visual content or in the lyrics. For example, in the 2013 item song *Ram, Chahe Leela* (Ram Desires Leela), emphasis is made on Leela's appearance and beauty.

Leela na shringaar na tarse
(They crave to see Leela's adorning)

Chudalo ne beni path no kandoro
(Bangles, nose-ring, and waist-band)

Shobhe rani rudo rang chakoro
(Make the Queen as beautiful as the Moon)

In another verse in the song *Chamma Chamma* (2018), the lyrics highlight her slim waist and her sharp gaze: *Teri patli kamar, teri tirchhi nazar* (You have a slim waist, you have a sharp/killer gaze).

By employing this kind of lyrics, Ahmad and Wahab (2016) describe how the woman is taken not for her intellect, but for the gratification that her body gives to the male gaze. The lyrics to the song *Fevicol Se* (2012) state the following:

Mai toh kabse hoon ready taiyaar
(I am ready since so long)

Patale saiyan missed call se
(You can have me with a missed call)

Mai toh tandoori murgi hoon yaar
(I am a tandoori chicken)

Gatkale saiyaan alcohol se
(You can swallow me with alcohol)

Log kehte hai mujhe mai toh hoon namkeen butter
(People say that I am like salted butter)

The lyrics are deeply problematic with lines comparing the woman to a piece of meat (tandoori chicken) to be enjoyed with alcohol. She implies that she is “easy” as she will be with the man with just a missed call from him. She is compared to yet another food item, this time she is like salted butter. Ironically, it is the woman herself that is making these comparisons to these objects and not the men in the scenario which implies a

profound level of self-objectification. She is offering herself as a product to be consumed literally and figuratively. She accepts the position of a temptress, enticing the man to pursue her. This gives the impression that she is “asking for it.” This hints at the fact as observed by Dwivedi (2017), that objectification is well internalized in society, especially among the female population. In the 2017 remix version of an old classic song called *Laila Main Laila*, the item girl portrayed by former adult film actress Sunny Leone plays the role of a bar dancer who sings the famous line:

Laila main Laila, aisi hoon Laila
(*I'm such a beauty*)

Har koi chaahе mujhse milna akela
(*That everyone wants to meet me in private*)

Jisko bhi dekhun, aaa
(*Whoever catches a glimpse of me becomes*)

Duniya bhula doon, aaa
(*Lost to the world*)

Majnu bana doon, aa... aisi main Laila
(*Men become my lovers (by just looking at me), I'm such a beauty*)

It is evident that in the songs written for the pleasure of men. The role of the item girl is to make herself look pretty and desirable and available to men. Therefore, it can be concluded that item songs depict women as objects for the male gaze and a product of conspicuous consumption. Sexism and misogyny are a major lyrical component of item songs, which manifested through the objectification of women's bodies, their individual body parts, their uncontrollable sexual urges, and their portrayal as prostitutes and strippers.

4.3.3 Violence

There are studies that found that listening to violent music enhances the acceptance of hostile thoughts (Johnson, Jackson & Gatto, 1995; Anderson, Carnagey & Eubanks, 2003). Explicit and vulgar lyrics and visual objectification of women in item songs reinforce the idea that sexual violence against women is acceptable. This may present harmful behaviors for young boys in India to emulate whereby behaviors such as stalking, chasing, and non-consensual touching are normalized through these representations. Violence in item songs can be interpreted in different ways. Violence is displayed in the visual imagery and in the lyrics. Much like the fragmented and displaced nature of the item song within the film narrative, the body of the item girl also appears fragmented and displaced within these songs. Fragmentation of the body is considered a type of violence. Fragmentation of the female body could be seen visually in the disjointed ways in which the female body was displayed in the item songs with certain body parts getting more airtime than the individual whole.

Editing plays a crucial role in promoting the dismemberment of the female body that connotes violence, with quick successive shots of the woman's cleavage, navel area, buttocks, lips, and eyes, the message being sent to the audience is loud and clear that the item girl is simply a total of her body parts while the male dancers and male protagonist are always shown as full-bodied individuals. Scenes depicting violence and death are glorified and romanticized. For example in the song *O Saki Saki*, there is a scene where the item girl goes to the male protagonist in hopes of seducing him, he reciprocates her advances by producing a prop in the form of a knife and proceeds to play enact slitting her

throat with the same knife as she continues to move her body against his, her expression showing that she is in a state of ecstasy and not in fear of death. Meanwhile, the crowd of men watch on, dancing, singing and drinking alcohol and having a good time.

A common narrative feature that kept repeating in several item songs was the use of item songs as a segue into an underworld/mafia scene whereby the male protagonist makes shady deals with the villain or beats up his enemies and in some cases even kills a number of people. All the while the item girl entertains the crowd of men unaware of the violence taking place just a few feet away. The use of *mise-en-scene* in this scenario also helps with the narrative flow of the movie. Such was the case in *Laila Main Laila* (2017) where the male lead goes on a murder spree during the item song.

As with displaying visual violence and death, lyrical themes about violence and death were found to be more common in the lyrical content. Death and violence were seen to be romanticized in item songs, displaying suffering, angst, and yearning from the female point of view. For example in the song *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018) performed by Moroccan Canadian actress Nora Fatehi, she lip-syncs:

Dilbar dilbar dilbar... dilbar dilbar...
(Beloved, beloved, beloved...)

Karti qatal na aise tu chal
(You cause deaths, don't walk in such a way)

Paheli ka iss nikalo koi hal
(Please find the answer to this riddle)

The item girl is pleading with her beloved to not walk away from her as it would cause her death. Similarly, in the song *Chikni Chameli* (2012), the item girl uses the

metaphor of playing with hungry lions in the jungle. In a later verse, she talks about drowning after losing sight of the male.

*Jungle mein aaj mangal karungi
(I'll do something magical in the jungle)*

*Bhookhe sheron se khelungi main
(I'll play with hungry lions)*

*Makkhan jaisi hatheli pe angaare le lungi main
(I'll take fireballs on my butter like palm)*

*Haaye! gehre paani ki machhli hoon Raja
(Oh? I am a fish of deep waters, O my dear)*

*Ghaat ghaat dariya mein ghoomi hoon main
(I have roamed in all rivers)*

*Teri nazron ki lehren se haar ke doobi hoon main
(I have drowned only after losing to the waves of your sight)*

These lines are indicative of a recurring narrative theme where death and violence are glorified and depicted as passion and romance. Bollywood through item songs gives the impression that violence is needed when expressing passion, love, romance, and sexual desire. The message this sends young people in India is extremely concerning. Bollywood through item songs have figured out a formula that combines artistic expression with sexual violence and criminal behavior. Onscreen displays such as the ones I noted above can very well be used as an excuse and means to harass and exploit women and girls and contribute to rape culture.

Rape as a form of sexual terrorism has been used in many different cultures during conflict and as an act of war. Rape is used as a revenge tool against “the other.” I argue that gang rapes in India may serve a similar purpose. I believe gang rapes are a revenge fantasy for some perpetrators, particularly revenge against women from different caste,

class, religious, or ethnic backgrounds. The current political climate in India combined with communal tension and patriarchal norms that devalue women fosters an environment conducive to gang rapes. The glamorized portrayal of item girls as objects of the male gaze might fuel such violent fantasies in certain individuals, thereby leading to the acceptance and even justification of sexual violence against women. I believe the reason why Indian society has developed a tolerance for gang rape culture is due to the fact that the idea of the victim of gang rape reflects certain characteristics of the item girl making it easier to slut-shame or victim blame than display some sort of ethical outrage and action.

4.3.4 Alcohol Abuse

My study found that use of alcohol as a prop in the mise-en-scene is a salient visual characteristic of an item song. The location of item songs in bars, clubs, village squares etc. makes it a conducive space to promote the consumption and use of alcohol. No item song is complete without showcasing some form of liquor and the state of drunkenness of the men in the music video. I would argue that the alcohol bottle is the second most important character in an item song after the item girl. Its presence cannot be ignored. As a visual entity, the alcohol bottle is everywhere, it is in each and every scene, it is in the background, it is in the hands of the men in the crowd, it is in the hands of the male backup dancers, it is on display on the bar shelves, it is on the ground. In the song *Laila Main Laila* (2017), the item girl, Sunny Leone even comes out of a huge bottle-shaped cage as she sways her hips to the opening scene of the item number. Bollywood's love for alcohol in

item songs does not just end with its visual display on the screen. It is also a major lyrical component as well in most item songs.

Alcohol abuse and its glorification were one of the most prominent themes that emerged from the lyrics. Words such as ‘intoxication’, ‘drunk’, and ‘alcohol’, were very commonly used in the songs. Based on my findings it would seem no item song is complete without some display of alcohol and drunkenness on screen and in the lyrical element. The item song *O Saaki Saaki* (2019) itself translates to a “cup bearer” referring to someone who pours alcohol into your glass. In the song *Fevicol Se* (2012), the male protagonist states his love for wine referring to it as the daughter of a grape in the following line:

Pyar karle tu aaj angur ki daughter se
(*Make love to the daughter of grape*)

Naseeyat bhool jayega tu ek quater se
(*You'll forget all your etiquettes with one quarter (of a drink)*)

Peene wale ko bhi jeene ka maza aayega
(*The ones who drink will also have fun of living*)

In another example, this verse from the song *Dilbar Dilbar* (2018), the item girl is intoxicated and drunk in love that she is unconscious.

Yeh ishq ka jo fitoor hai
(*The madness/passion of love is over me*)

Nashe mein dil tere choor hai
(*My heart is intoxicated in your love*)

Dilbar dilbar dilbar...
(*Beloved, beloved, beloved*)

Ab toh hosh na khabar hai
(*I'm not in a conscious state/I'm unaware about everything*)

Yeh kaisa aar hai
(*I don't know what kind of reaction this is*)

One connotation that is implied as a result of alcohol use in the item songs is in relation to sexual activity. A connection is made between alcohol, its seductive powers, and the seductive powers of the item girl. The idea is that alcohol makes you lose control, it is the woman that seduces the drunk men, and therefore, the men have no control over their actions and impulses. The drunken nature of the item girl and her unconscious state also indicate that she is in no position to consent to what will happen to her body. The state of drunkenness is therefore used as an excuse to part take in rape culture which includes gestures like stalking, groping, teasing, and sexual assault.

Alcohol apart from simply being a prop is also a consumable product and its presence and its comparison to the item girl indicated that ultimately the woman is also consumable on the level of representation. When the item girl part takes in alcohol indulgence, she is seen as low-class, whereas that is not necessarily the case when the heroine of the film engages in activities that are considered part of western values and influences. There is a level of sophistication that is attached to the heroine when she indulges in drinking and smoking because she belongs to a higher class and caste privilege. There is also a difference between the type of alcohol and the way in which it is drunk. For example, a cocktail, like a martini, and drinking out of the bottle, like malt liquor gives two different meanings. One gives the impression that it is upper-class, while the other denotes that it is low-class. The vamp from previous eras is a good example of this double standard. The vamp is often shown as the “other” of the traditional Indian heroine who is more accustomed to Western influences such as wearing revealing clothes, smoking, drinking

and doing drugs, and engaging in sexual activity, yet she is still given more respect than the item girl who does all the same things.

4.4 Textual Analysis of Two Item Songs

In this section, I carry out a textual analysis of two item songs from my list that are emblematic of the most salient patterns of trends in terms of the visual and lyrical content. Textual analysis enabled me to analyze the lyrics, visual imagery, patterns, and trends of the song and to identify hidden symbolisms, subtle messages, and subtext. It is useful for studying item songs within their contextual framework. The songs I have chosen for the study in question are *Chikni Chameli* and *Fevicol Se* which coincidentally were both released in the year 2012, the same year the Nirbhaya gang rape took place. I believe the two songs I have chosen are also symbolic of the issue of rape culture and violence against women in India. The cinematic categories the filmmakers have used to depict the female body invite violence against women and threaten their agency. Not only do these songs promote sexual objectification of the female body and place the woman in a stereotypical role such as prostitute, stripper, or erotic bar dancer, but it also privileges the male gaze, and still somehow feed into the postfeminist traditional yet modern empowered woman narrative through the A-list actresses that play the item girl's role.

4.4.1 Chikni Chameli

The item song *Chikni Chameli* from the movie *Agneepath* (The Path of Fire) released in 2012 was regarded as one of the most popular songs of that year. The song was written by popular lyricists Ajay Gogavale and Amitabh Bhattacharya. The item song is strategically placed in the 1 hour 40 minute time frame of the almost three hour film. The song makes its debut during a tense scene with the protagonist played by actor Hrithik Roshan and the antagonist played by actor Sanjay Dutt. The narrative tone of the song is set in such a way that it establishes a criminal undertone right from the start with the eerie background sound that transitions into the song. Though neither man actively participates in the song and dance portion of the item number, the men are seen to gaze at the item girl as she performs for them and the men surrounding her. The item girl in question is played by British Indian A-list actress Katrina Kaif. As with the case with almost all item numbers, Kaif only appears in the songs and does not feature in the movie otherwise.

The song takes place in a dark, dingy cave-like building illuminated by fire and lanterns. The song opens with a red cloth moving across the item girl's body in a sensual manner, and at the same time, the editing techniques are used to hide and reveal parts of the item girl's body. This method of revealing the woman's body piques the curiosity of the audience, both the men in the room and those viewing Kaif on the big screen. Furthermore, the crimson fabric adds to her enticing charm. The item girl is surrounded by drunken, chaotic armed men holding beer bottles, firearms, and bamboo sticks. The males are holding their breath in anticipation of what is to come. The camera focuses on the woman's waist when the fabric is stripped away, allowing her body parts to be "itemized"

and objectified. An alcohol bottle is also tied around the exposed waist of the item girl. The song exemplifies the stereotypical connotation of affiliating the item girl with addictive, carnal desire and sensual pleasure. The sight of the item girl taking off the fabric from her body is particularly suggestive because it is meant to arouse male fantasies. She is quite literally stripping in front of hundreds of men. The men are depicted as being excited as they jeer and wolf whistle as the girl prepares her dance number. In Maharashtrian slang, the word “*Chikni*” can mean shiny, sexy, or beautiful which effectively summarizes the entire item song. The item girl calls herself “*Chikni Chameli*,” a slang term used to signify a sexy or beautiful country (rural) girl. As the item girl starts her dance performance, the crowd of men enthusiastically joins in.

Fire is used as an important prop within the mise-en-scene. It also adds to the lighting and tone of the overall song. I believe the use of fire is aimed at creating an atmosphere of burning passion. The song is sung in a Mumbai dialect. The song starts with the following line:

Bichhoo mere naina
(My eyes are like scorpions)

Badi zehereeli ankh maare
(They give a very poisonous wink)

Kamsin kamariya saali
(This damn slender waist of mine)

Ik thumke se lakh mare
(Kills millions with just one jerk)

She claims that her scorpion-like eyes twinkle with poison and that a jerk of her hip/waist may kill millions. Individual body parts *naina* (eyes) and *kamar* (waist) are objectified, each part performs a role in capturing the male attention. When it comes to the

practice of fragmenting the female body, Mills (1995) believes it has two fundamental impacts. First, the female body is reduced to its constituent components. Because the female character is not depicted as a unified physical entity, we are not seeing her portrayal from her perspective but rather from the perspective of the male character who for the most part remains outside the scope of the song and is relegated to the position of a passive spectator. Next, fragmentation of the female body is thus associated with male focalization where the female is depicted as an item or a series of body parts for the male gaze. This fragmentation approach is prevalent in all the item songs and is a unique visual feature that makes it easy to distinguish a regular Bollywood song from an item song.

Third, the lyrics, "*Hussn ki teeli se beedi chilam jalanay aye*" (*I've come to light cigarettes with the matchstick of beauty*) relate to the item girl's beauty and appeal. The clever camera technique shows the item girl lighting the match stick from her ample breasts and leaning in to light the cigarette of one of the men surrounding her. The camera focuses on her movement of lighting the matchstick from her cleavage while the men dance and carry pistols and clubs, making the entire scenario extremely provocative.

In another scene, the item girl holds two alcohol bottles and shakes her breasts, using her eyes and facial expression to convey to the audience to pick a bottle on either side of her. The wide shot of the scene shows fire being blown in front of the girl as the camera focuses on the movements of the girl's cleavage. The men smile and nod and watch on as they continue to go into a drunken stupor while holding on to their weapons. The lighting also played a role in illuminating the item girl's body parts with light coming from yellow lamps and fire torches.

The cinematography is such that the darkness of the location gives it a sultry, seductive feel. The item girl is at the forefront in almost every scene. Her fair skin is a direct contrast to all the brown men surrounding her. The men in the background seem to be coming out of the shadows while the item girl is illuminated perfectly. The fact that Katrina Kaif has a very Caucasian look despite her wearing traditional clothes and accessories cannot go unnoticed. We as spectators are expected to believe that a white woman wearing revealing traditional Indian clothes surrounded by gangs of rowdy drunk Indian men belongs to a low-caste/low-caste community dancing at the behest of the mafia boss played by Sanjay Dutt. Colorism is evident in this scenario. Not a single person on screen shares her fair complexion, not even the hero Hrithik Roshan who is considered one of the most handsome men in Bollywood, even though he is made to look much darker than he normally is in this film owing to the makeup and lighting no doubt.

The song's lyrics also imply that she is sexually active and experienced. The line "*Jangal main aaj mangal karungi, bhooke sheron se khelungi main*" (*I'll do something magical in the jungle, I'll play with hungry lions*) presents the item girl saying she can fulfill the men's desires, whom she refers to as hungry lions who will devour her. This line embodies both the item girl's sexual desire as well as the violent nature of the act by her comparison of the men who will perform the act as hungry lions who will essentially "kill" her as a result of her promiscuity. The lyrics establish the power dynamic of the item girl as the prey and the crowd of men as the predator. One might say that these men are simply background performers but that is hardly the case. Just like hungry lions ready to pounce on their prey, throughout the song, these men are seen circling her, leering at her, and reaching for her body as though they can't wait to grope and manhandle her. This

establishes a power imbalance between the crowd of men and the item girl, subconsciously teaching the audience how to interact with women. In everyday life, this translates to excessive hooting and inappropriate behavior in cinema halls, including cat-calling and eve-teasing.

The song promotes the commodification of women, who are represented as simply commodities (items) to satisfy the male gaze. The fast tempo of the song is such that it complements the lyrics and goes in tandem with the dance moves. The outfits tell us several things about the narrative, the item girl is meant to be a rural working girl, a dancer who is used to dancing in front of large crowds of men. She is also affiliated with the underworld as she performs in one of the villain's domains. She does not show fear when surrounded by violent gangs of men carrying weapons like guns. The item girl wears several revealing Maharashtrian (from the state of Maharashtra) outfits in bright colors and sequins, while the men wear white, beige, and brown loin cloths (lungi), long pieces of cloth wrapped around the man's waist and legs.

One of things that is evident from my analysis of item songs is the item girl's sexuality. In one line, the item girl says that her youth is crazy and she wants to overcome her loneliness by sharing it with men: "*Joban ye mera crazy hai raja. Saare pardo ko kaatungi main. Shaamein meri akeli hain aaja sang tere baatungi main*" (*O dear, my youth is crazy. I'll tear apart all the curtains. Come, my evenings are lonely, will share them with you*) presents a situation where she is inviting men to have sex with her and objectifying herself in the process. She implies that her body is a means of pleasing men and satisfying their sexual desires. She claims that her body has the ability to fulfill their hunger. This is in direct contrast to the traditional patriarchal Indian values that shun female sexuality. The

lyrics suggest that the item girl is the one who desires sexual release. It invites men to indulge her. One might think this is an expression of her sexual liberation. This song was used to pique the audience's interest in the film before its release. Since most item songs also perform as movie teasers, *Chikni Chameli* contributed immensely to the film's box office success.

The choreography allows for the item girl to show mannerisms such as winking, drinking alcohol, lighting cigarettes, teasing. The item girl even makes sexual advances as she sings about breaking all taboos associated with sex. In this song, the look of the audience is relayed by the look of the two male protagonists who are watching the item girl's performance. From the very beginning, the item girl looks straight into the camera as she starts her performance. The item girl is bold and proud. She is neither shy nor ashamed. Though she recognizes the presence of the other characters in the song, she continues to address the camera, exposing the camera's look and, by extension, the audience's look. The item girl invites the female viewers to imagine themselves as bold too just like her.

The song *Chikni Chameli* perfectly illustrates all the characteristics from my findings: glamorization of illicit behavior and gang culture is glorified to a large extent, we as the viewer at times are made to feel uncomfortable as we watch a young woman being chased, surrounded, followed, grabbed, and objectified by quite literally hundreds of drunk men, all the while she is dressed in provocative clothes that leave little to the imagination that's also suggests her complicity in her putting herself in these gang rape like scenarios. The narrative implication here is that criminal activities are permissible in item songs and drunken behavior is therefore excused. We also cannot ignore the fact that the song suggests that this "orgy" is consensual. She is not so much chased, as she is flirting and

inviting their passions. Editing is used in such a way that we even see three costume changes from the item girl in the span of six minutes. Costume changes reflect voyeuristic timing, allowing for more narrative space. The act allows the male to be in an erotic dream space. The lyrics indicate a high level of sexism and self-objectification by the item girl. She revels in her sexuality and openly discusses her desires, in direct contrast to the typical Bollywood heroine who does not express her sexual desires or better yet is not encouraged and is often shunned from behaving in a way that would jeopardize her “virtue.”

Though never out rightly discussed, the class-caste dimension of the item girl is implied through her profession, her performance and her clothes. The connotation is that only those girls from low-class and low-caste backgrounds would stoop to take part in professions like bar dancers and prostitutes and behave like the item girl. No Indian girl from a respectable family and community would compromise her morality by engaging in sexual activities before marriage let alone be used as an object for male desire. Expressions of violence and death are a recurring theme in the item song. Several metaphors are used to indicate all the ways in which the item girl is injured or dies, whether it is through drowning or being attacked and killed by lions or being burnt by fireballs. Her comparison of herself to objects and animals such as butter, scorpion, or fish, does little to help her portrayal as an empowered woman with agency. The item girl satisfies the primal need of men to ravage women. She favors destruction over civility. She represents the wild, while the good Indian girl (the main female actress in the case of Bollywood films) represents civilization.

The item girl can be observed through the prism of taboo as a controversial and provocative figure that subverts traditional ideas of femininity, emphasizing the social

tensions surrounding sexuality and gender roles in a patriarchal country like India. The portrayal of the item girl symbolizes an infraction of taboo, which refers to social or cultural rules that are seen as prohibited or forbidden. The item girl's presence challenges these social conventions regarding gender, sexuality, and acceptable behavior, and viewers are left with a perplexing combination of desire, fascination, and unease. In her performance, the item girl is still relegated to the position of a prostitute. What makes the heroine of the film Priyanka Chopra different from the item girl is the essence of respectability. The item girl appears freer and more liberated, yet it is an illusion as her perceived freedom is still within the bounds of patriarchy set forth by a rigid society that has done a very good job of delineating the Madonna from the whore.

4.4.2 Fevicol Se

Fevicol Se (with Fevicol) is an item song from the 2012 Bollywood movie *Dabangg 2* (Fearless 2) featuring Bollywood superstar Salman Khan, A-list actress Kareena Kapoor and actor Arbaaz Khan. The lyrics of the song are written by brothers Sajid Khan and Wajid Khan (popularly known as Sajid-Wajid) and Ashraf Ali. The song starts at the 1 hour 35 minute mark of the 2-hour film, right after an emotional scene between the two main male characters who are also brothers, where the older brother (a married police officer) asks his younger brother if he has any plans for the night, and upon the younger brother stating no, the older brother tells him to join him for some "fun." The scene immediately cuts to a red-light district with sex workers as the tune for *Fevicol Se* begins.

The camera panning away from a board saying “Open 24 hours” gives away the location, thereby setting the scene for the item number. The scene implies that women in this area are available all day and all night. The song opens with a sound of a woman gasping in what can be concluded as orgasmic pleasure. This technique of using such a sound adds to catering to male fantasies. The first scene of the item girl is of her shaking her buttocks to the camera while the camera zooms in on this region of her body. The song starts with the line is “*Angdaaiyaan leti hoon main jabb zor-zor se uff!* *angdaaiyan leti hoon main jab zor-zor se Uhh ahh ki awaaz hai aati har ore se,*” (*When I stretch my body in a huge, huge way. When I stretch my body in a huge, huge way. The sounds ooh and ahh come from all corners.*) Kareena (the item girl) describes her notoriety and demand as a prostitute in the district, saying that everyone knows about her because of her beauty. She proudly displays her curves in a tight black sequined crop top and sequin blue skirt which are both westernized versions of the traditional Indian choli (blouse) and lungi (skirt) set that women wear in rural towns and villages. The supporting female dancers depicted as prostitutes also wear similar clothes to that of the item girl i.e. sequined lehengas and cholis (a traditional Indian long skirt and crop top attire). She is encircled by a crowd of men who are enthralled by her entrance and watch her in awe as she moves her body to the catchy tune. In the line “*Main to kab se hoon ready- tayyar, patale saiyyan miscall se*” she is stating that she has been ready for a while and that she is restless and can be persuaded by a missed call from the man.

The dance moves from the item number are borrowed from the mujra tradition which refers to a specific type of dance form that has its origins in the Muslim Mughal rule in India where the elite class and local rulers would have courtesans perform for them for

entertainment. However, this is a modern rendition of the once-traditional art form. The musical notes and sound in *Fevicol Se* make use of traditional Hindustani music with harmonica and catchy local percussion instruments such as the Tabla (a type of drum) that can be traced to the Uttar Pradesh region of India located in North India. The raunchy background noises along with the dance movies made the song a major commercial hit with the audience.

As with *Chikni Chameli*, the camera angles in *Fevicol Se* give a lot of emphasis on the female body. The woman's bosom and naval area are shot from a close lens and the item girl's facial expressions are of particular interest with her looking directly at the camera and winking, biting her lips, and displaying sexually suggestive expressions almost as an invitation for the male gaze. At one point, the item girl is seen laying on a staircase surrounded by men admiring her beauty as the camera focuses on her cleavage.

Alcohol is used as a prop throughout the song with the background male dancers being in a state of constant drunkenness with their alcohol bottles. The lyrics constantly highlight the importance of alcohol in the song. The men in the song were also seen to be throwing money at the sex workers in scenes where money is falling in the background and falling from the sky.

The main male protagonist Chulbul Pandey played by actor Salman Khan, sings "*Pyaar karle tu aaj angoor ki daughter se. Naseehat bhool jayega tu ek quarter se*" (*Make love to the daughter of a grape. You'll forget all your etiquettes with one quarter (of a drink)*). He is describing his drunken state by indicating his love for wine. He states that the wine combined with the item girl can make anyone forget about proper etiquettes, no

doubt implying that the item girl can make a married police officer like Pandey forget his duties and commitment to his wife.

The lyrics: “*Aaja mere raaja, tujhe jannat dikhaun main. Barfeelee paani mein fire lagaun main*” (*Come my King, let me show you heaven. Let me set fire into the ice cold water*). The item girl is attempting to stir up the men by blatantly describing what she is capable of doing. She introduces herself as a desirable object capable of satisfying male lust and igniting fire in ice-cold water. Then Chulbul Pandey sings, “*Saare India ko tune ghulamkiya re,*” (*The whole of India is your slave*) implying that everyone in India has become a slave to her beauty.

While the visual aspect of objectification is apparent, the phrases and lyrics used in item songs sometimes go unnoticed though they intensely perpetuate sexual objectification. Auditory or lyrical objectification is a rampant theme in item songs wherein the lyrics contribute to objectification. This form of objectification hypersexualizes body parts by over-emphasizing them and reducing them to inanimate objects by portraying them as entities of sexual desire. These lyrics shift the emphasis on individual body parts and hypersexualize them. Beyond hyper-sexualization, another theme apparent in item songs is the use of figures of speech to equate women to animals or objects that are inanimate, ranging from objects like liquor, and food. Here is an example:

Main toh tandoori murgi hu yaar
(*I'm a tandoori chicken*)

Gatka le saiyan alcohol se
(*Swallow me with alcohol*)

The aforementioned lyrics portray acts of dehumanization that strip away any sort of life associated with the individuals sung about in these songs, further reinforcing the

narrative that women are lesser human beings and are just items meant to be discarded after use or consumption.

The lighting in the song is bright and in your face with the entire set decked in fairy lights in neon colors. The song is a visual spectacle and an assault on the eyes. Each frame has something new to watch whether it is a stage in the middle of the street with sex workers dancing, or a bridge connecting two buildings, a graffitied car, or a decorated jeep that takes the item girl on a ride towards the end of the song.

The song *Fevicol Se* comes across as a celebration of female sexual liberation judging from the mise-en-scene of a brothel/ red light district where prostitution is rampant. The item girl is made to appear as an agent of neo-liberal capitalism whereby she is part of the working class and yet comes across as having more freedom than the heroine of the film played by Sonakshi Sinha who for the most part is subjected to being the dutiful housewife of Pandey, the police officer and taking care of his elderly father. However, the female sexuality expressed by the item girl is eclipsed by the male gaze. Even though she gets to shake her hips and dance with any man she fancies, it still serves the male “look” and male pleasure. The audience is also hooked into that relay of the look as expressed by the male point of view.

The song *Fevicol Se* glamorizes prostitution and depicts the prostitutes as having agency and control over the men soliciting them. This is far from reality. It is a known cultural fact that no woman from a respectable family in India would willingly put herself in a situation where she would bring shame to her family by engaging in sex work. This reiterates the class and caste division in India. The working conditions of sex workers in India are appalling, and the sector is beset by institutional obstacles. Existing governmental

rehabilitation programs frequently violate their bodily autonomy and serve as moral disciplinarians, leaving them vulnerable to abuse (Patnaik, 2021). Despite the prevalence of red-light areas in several Indian cities, sex worker laws are vague. They are not protected by labor laws or trade unions but can seek help from national organizations. But even government relief efforts are often accompanied by moral policing schemes that aim to correct their “immoral” behavior rather than addressing the socio-economic factors that caused it (Patnaik, 2021). Sex workers have stated that even after being rescued, they have been subjected to intrusive bodily examinations by health care practitioners despite not giving consent (Patnaik, 2021). Though sex work is legal in India, other related activities such as soliciting, owning or running a brothel, prostitution in a hotel, child prostitution, pimping, and pandering, are prohibited under the IPC and the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA), and women who engage in them frequently face harassment and abuse. Sex workers can be escorts, highly educated business women who are confidants of very influential men. Historically in many cultures around the world, they have been teachers of proper social etiquette and representatives of the highest social trends. However, the item girls and the women in my research are not that. They are strictly “meat” for the eyes of men. Their sexual desires do not reflect real women and their complex psychological and sexual needs.

The issue with the item song is that the item girl only gets to flaunt her sexuality under certain conditions. Both the heroine in the film and the item girl are products of postfeminism but postfeminism manifests in different ways for both. The heroine in the film is content being the pious, traditional housewife who looks after the household and father-in-law and is looking forward to her impending motherhood while the item girl is

celebrated for her sexual promiscuity. Since the item girl is meant to be a prostitute from a lower social class and caste, her possibilities for a respectable living, free from social judgment are limited. Sex workers' engagement in civil society is severely limited due to restrictions to working prospects, upward socio-economic mobility, healthcare coverage, and/or labor rules that naturalize, normalize, and institutionalize disparities (Patnaik, 2021).. Her main appeal is without a doubt her sexual freedom but even that has an expiration date, considering the item song highlights the connection between her youth and her beauty.

Kareena Kapoor is one of the lightest-skinned actresses in Bollywood who also comes from a mixed Punjabi, Sindhi, and British background. Similar to Katrina Kaif, Kareena with her fair skin and green eyes is not reflective of the appearance of the average Indian woman. She is also one of the most successful and highest-paid actresses in Bollywood, yet she routinely performs item songs that cater to the male gaze. Item songs in general are known for their euphemisms and use of what I term *poetic pornography*. For example, the word “love” in item songs is not suggestive of platonic love or romantic love, rather it is a euphemism for sexual intercourse.

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of this song is not the portrayal of the item girl on screen, or the prostitution aspect, or her being compared to a piece of meat, but the narrative implication of what the term *Fevicol Se* means in the larger context of this song. Fevicol is a popular brand of adhesive used in India that is similar to superglue. It is used by people of all age groups for arts and crafts projects. The color and the texture of the substance and its particular usage in this song where the item girl (a prostitute) asks her lover to stick a photo of her to his chest with fevicol has a double meaning and can be

likened to the practice of male ejaculation. There is a certain kind of permanence associated with superglue that you cannot take off once you apply it. The semen represents the superglue. The superglue indicates the permanence of the power of rape. The underlying assumption of the song is that the man's semen, much like the superglue, will never come off. This notion is as offensive as it is violent. This also echoes the Freudian psychoanalytic notion of castration anxiety and the female illusory fantasy of the male penis. The connotation here is that the item girl brazenly asks her lovers to masturbate to a picture of her. The consumer aspect of this product and the song go hand in hand. It was also revealed in a study conducted by research agency Ormax Media that the maker of Fevicol, Pidilite Industries signed a marketing and promotional deal with the producer of the movie before its release. Needless to say, this product gained even more popularity in India after the release of the item song.

4.5 Conclusion

Feminist scholars (Walter et al, 1995; Tuchman, 1978; Dasgupta & Hedge, 1988) consider mass media a powerful tool of gender socialization because it takes into account a number of gender-related issues. The spectacle that is item songs have legitimized an implausible characterization of Indian women as overly sexualized objects of male fantasy. Massive transgressions occur as a result of complicit cinematography that treats women as sex symbols and inferior to men. Indian media has in the last few years begun to highlight the obvious sexism, misogyny, and objectification in Bollywood item songs' portrayal of women. Mainstream publications such as *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*,

Indian Express, Huffington Post, New York Times, The Guardian, and Scroll are among the media outlets that have voiced this opinion. The public outrage over item songs has become more widespread than ever before since the sharp increase in gang rapes in the country over the last decade. And item songs have been likened to influencing rape culture in India by industry insiders like veteran actress Shabana Azmi and lyricist Javid Akhtar and a slew of others from various walks of life.

As previously mentioned, item songs have no direct bearing on the plot of the film. The narrative contribution of the item song in my opinion is that it provides an escape from the film's actual plotline or provides a break from the narrative flow of the movie. Filmmakers objectify the female body through lyrics, cinematography, clothing, and choreography to tempt the audience to watch the film. The women in item songs are portrayed as erotic objects for male pleasure. This could be one of the reasons why filmmakers assume that objectifying women will benefit their films financially.

Depictions of women being teased, chased, stared at, and groped by men on screen may give young men in India the wrong impression about what consent means. This type of observational learning in acquiring new behaviors from media is explained in Bandura's (2001) Cognitive Theory of Social Communication. According to this approach, the audience imitates the behavior depicted in the media. Thus, the glamorized depiction of multiple men chasing after and groping a woman on screen may incite individuals to participate in such behavior. Songs are an important cultural tool in attitude formation. Whatever is consumed by the audience by way of songs is accepted on a broad level with limited critical thinking. This may be one of the reasons why sexism and

objectification are a ubiquitous feature in item songs and may have a tendency to influence audience behavior.

In each of the item songs, the colors, camera angles, costume, and the cheering male crowd of spectators, along with the sound, beat and tempo transform the item girl into an attractive and desirable object appeasing the male gaze. Color is often used to set the tone of a scene. Item songs predominantly utilize red whether it's in their background or in the costumes of the actors or in the props they use. The color red in Hindu culture symbolizes luck, purity and fertility. Hindu brides often wear red sarees or lehengas for their weddings. The color red in the item songs may also symbolize love, passion, power, eroticism, and fantasy.

The camera angles can generally be described as voyeuristic, as they aim to reduce the item girl to the sum of her body parts, as opposed to portraying her as a whole person. The camera work is exaggerated and involves several quick cuts focusing on her woman's eyes, legs, navel, breasts, hips, and lips, thus, objectifying the female body and displaying the body of the item girl in disjointed ways.

The cinematography focuses primarily on the item girl and her body, making it clear that the item girl herself is the main feature of an item song. The act of fragmentation of the female body and reducing her to body parts is a form of violence carried out on the item girl's body, whether through lyrics or visuals, it has created a culture of objectification and commodification of the female form. The woman is dehumanized; she emerges as an object, an animal, food etc. There is no personhood that is associated with the item girl. It is not the individual who is sung about in the songs, but

the gendered body of the female. The depictions are unabashedly sexual in the music video.

Ramasubramanian and Jain (2009) contend that these portrayals of women as objects of the male gaze reinforce the notion that patriarchal societal forces can objectify, commodify, and use the female body as a site for pleasure. The performance often includes a crowd of men openly leering and invading the item girl's personal space. A viewer in a cinema hall is only watching this spectacle and is hence absolved of any charge of voyeurism.

Mulvey (1975) states that the cinematic text is organized in such a way that it relates to the cultural subconscious, which is patriarchal. The narrative film's gaze is structured as masculine while the woman is always the object, not the bearer of the gaze. In addition to normalizing the male gaze, item songs establish toxic standards for femininity, female sexuality, and beauty. It legitimizes the viewer's voyeurism because the performance is an exhibition that commands to be observed. The spectator, who is assumed to be the true owner of the voyeuristic gaze, disavows any voyeurism on the part of the film spectator (Mulvey, 1975). Cinema allows the audience to develop scopophilia. The darkness in the movie theater provides the audience with a sense of separation from each other and the shifting patterns of light and shade on the screen contrasting with the darkness of the theater encourages the voyeuristic gap. Thus, pleasure is derived through subjecting performers to a controlling gaze and using them as objects of sexual stimulation.

Sound and tempo are crucial when it comes to adding to the experience of item songs. The musical notes and tempo create a rhythm for proactive dance moves, and the

showmanship produced in item songs is grounded in how the filmmakers would like their viewers to perceive the cinematic experience. The use of background noise of men cheering on the item girl, hooting and whistling and catcalling, and the item girl at times moaning and making sexually explicit noises and singing explicit lyrics are what separates item songs from other Bollywood songs.

Item songs in Bollywood films have been sites of upholding a Euro-centric standard of beauty as well as sites of transgression. My observation suggests that female performers in item songs appear to be slim, toned with ample curves in the right places and the majority fit the Western beauty standard with fair to light skin and Euro-centric features. They are also relatively young in their 20s and 30s. My study also found a preference for lighter skin color with half of the item girls in the sample coming from outside India while the other half met Western beauty standards in their appearance.

Bollywood actresses are highly influential and have the power to shape the behaviors and attitudes of young girls about the ideal female body. These types of portrayals and the lack of representation of darker-skinned actors may have a negative impact on the self-esteem and self-worth of those female viewers who are frequently exposed to item songs and who do not fit the mold of Euro-centric beauty standards. Item songs also go on to define what is sexy and feminine. Lyrics classify fair skin and a slim waist as good traits to be desired. This contributes to India's larger, problematic obsession with fair skin and proliferates to strive for an hourglass figure, flat stomach, and so on, contributing to body image issues in women.

Each time we see the item girl in any item number, she is dressed in clothes showing ample skin in a semi-nude fashion. While this in itself is not problematic, what

is problematic however, is the way her body and dress is contextualized. Item girls are almost always costumed in revealing clothes and then sexually objectified by the camera, lyrics, and background performers. These combine to form the correlation that if a woman is wearing short, revealing clothes, she is trying to please or arouse a man and therefore, she's "asking for it." Item songs have hypersexualized clothes and female body parts to such an extent that consequently, we see women being morally policed for wearing certain clothes, and sexual assault and rape victims are frequently blamed for their choice of clothing.

I argue that the choreography in most of these item songs is modeled to mimic gang rape and molestation scenarios. A common occurrence in most of these songs is when the item girl's body is hoisted up by several men, their hands roaming all over her body with no regard for her consent. She does not get a say in where she gets touched, her job is simply to enjoy the act even if it is against her will. The fact that she is depicted as willing is a major problem. The actresses contribute to the fetishization of the item girl. It begs me to ask what kind of message this sends across to the audience where it is okay for men to quite literally throw the woman around where she has no choice or opinion in what happens to her body. This kind of portrayal ignores notions of consent which is something that is not talked about enough in India.

According to Ramikissoon (2009) women's representation in Bollywood cinema is problematic because it reaffirms patriarchal notions and male fantasies about women. She further illustrates how women in Bollywood films rarely exercise agency that challenges patriarchal conventions. This projection of male fantasy onto women is what Mulvey (1975) claims, narrative cinema offers by providing scopophilic pleasure.

Ward and Friedman (2006) state that frequent exposure to songs depicting objectification and sexual harassment can be extremely problematic. Moreover, the lyrics of the songs have double meaning and are sexually suggestive. In a society where rape and sexual violence against women have increased in recent years, the portrayal of harassment and mistreatment of women by gangs of men in a normalized fashion may further deteriorate the condition of women in Indian society and give more ammunition to the perpetrators of rape culture.

Bollywood is a direct reflection of Indian society where women are expected to uphold cultural traditions like wearing Indian clothes, visiting places of worship, conducting prayers, and taking care of their families, however, men do not have such rigid rules. And this morality is reflected time and again in Bollywood movies and any woman who steers away from these accepted norms is considered as the “other,” which is one of the reasons why item songs seemingly get as pass as the women in item songs are not meant to represent the traditional Indian values or traditional Indian femininity. In the larger narrative, the presence of an item girl does not threaten the moral fabric of society as she is essentially irrelevant in the storyline and simply an outlet for limited male pleasure. Bollywood also ensures that women uphold these antiquated ideals of patriarchy and traditionalism while balancing modern depictions like the item girl both of which can sadly be used to persecute women in real life who act out their fantasies and desires to step out of the bounds of patriarchy by subjecting them to the full force of rape culture.

Objectification of women in Bollywood films has existed for a long time, and with the popularity of item songs, it seems that trend will continue. While the nature of

objectification may have changed over time, perceptions and beliefs about women, and the way in which they are portrayed on screen, remain unchanged. Item songs are a microcosm and smaller narratives of a larger problem we face in Indian society. Item songs bring forth many cultural tensions especially when it comes to the idea of the empowered traditional yet modern Indian woman. Bollywood film heroines are expected to uphold traditional virtues the same as the main characters they play in movies however when the same heroine plays the role of an item girl these traditional values no longer apply to them. Somehow the item girl transcends the realism that is expected of a “good Indian woman.” She is allowed to express her desires, her wants, she is allowed to dress in provocative clothes, go to clubs and bars, sell her body and revel in her independence and empowerment.

I conclude that the reason for such a contradiction between the item girl versus the traditional Indian woman is because the item girl is an outlet for patriarchy. She is an explosion of male desires that come to life. Yet the item girl, as innocuous as her role is in the larger narrative of the film, plays a major role in the success of the film. So much of a film’s success rests on the shoulders of the item girl. She is a marketing tool that brings in the audience both within the cinematic space and to the theaters to what is essentially a family movie-watching experience. The item girl is both a threat to traditional Indian values and yet she is an embodiment of the empowered Indian woman. Item songs are an embodiment of the postfeminist sensibility that upholds women’s “freedom” from both patriarchy and feminism and women are allowed to do whatever they want as a result. The emphasis on autonomy, choice, and agency that the

item girl displays shows a new kind of empowered female who may very well also be a threat to traditional values and patriarchal gender norms.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Discussion

My study highlights the relationship between Bollywood item songs and India's persisting rape culture. The study revealed several narrative, visual, and lyrical characteristics in item songs. These include glamorization of illicit activities and behavior, sexual objectification of female bodies, violence, and alcohol abuse. Such characteristics may perpetuate and promote gender-based power imbalance and violence against women in India by giving more control to men and also absolving men of their violent behavior by placing the blame on the woman.

Item songs depict women as commodities or items for the male gaze and for male pleasure. It reinforces victim-blaming narratives by obscuring the line between consent and coercion, transferring blame from the culprits to the victims. This research highlights the potentially damaging repercussions of item songs in the larger societal context, which are often underestimated. Music and movies have the ability to shape attitude formation. Bollywood plays a significant role in the social sexualization of youth in India and is one of the first mediums that introduces the youth to notions of what love, romance, and consent is or ought to be. Bollywood therefore may contribute to promoting harmful behaviors among young men. As a result, my study highlights the potential social threats of item songs.

I argue that Bollywood item songs invoke the tropes that lead to rape culture and mirror certain aspects of gang rape culture in India. These songs not only promote violence

against women, they also contribute to the sexual objectification and dehumanization of the female body. Item songs also normalize non-consensual behavior such as groping, stalking, chasing, teasing, cat-calling, molestation, and also glamorize gang culture. One of the similarities between the rape victim and the item girl is with respect to narratives regarding victim blaming. The victim much like the item girl is blamed for inviting rape due to her “immoral” behavior. I argue that constant exposure to item songs aid in the normalization and trivialization of gang rapes in India and prepares the Indian public for the next sensationalized gang rape.

I argue that the lack of adequate response and moral and ethical outrage from society and political entities is due to the fact that the rape victims share certain similar characteristics with the item girl, namely their lower social caste and class. The glamorized representation of item girls as seductive and provocative characters feeds into some people’s violent desires and fantasies and makes gang rapes a potential instrument for revenge against women from other castes, classes, religions, or ethnic communities. The current political atmosphere in India, along with tensions between different groups and patriarchal customs, nurtures an environment that is tolerant and accepting of sexual violence against women.

The way that women are represented in item songs impacts how audiences view gender. Women are typically portrayed through the lens of men in popular culture in patriarchal nations like India. Women on screen are either shown as symbols of beauty, sexuality, and desire or as subservient, obedient, and sacrificial beings. What is needed is a more nuanced representation of Indian women on screen that showcases their actual lived experience which does not relegate them to stereotypical gender roles.

Understanding how item songs visually objectify female bodies for heterosexual male audience members relies largely on the male gaze theory as postulated by Laura Mulvey (1975). According to my findings, techniques such as fragmentation of the female body and accentuating certain body parts of the item girl not only sexualize them from a masculine perspective but also violate the woman. The lens of the camera invades and takes advantage of the female's body as an extension of the male phallus. This supports Mulvey's hypothesis that mainstream cinema serves to cater to the male gaze. Furthermore, the portrayal of item girls as sex workers, strippers, and bar dancers contrasts with the representation of the virtuous heroines of the film. This research recognizes the item girl's oppression within class, caste, and gender identities. Hierarchies are highlighted when lower-class and lower-caste men in these songs are able to live out their fantasy of gang-raping fair-skinned item girls played by upper-caste, upper-class actresses.

The glamorized portrayal of item girls in the Bollywood industry contributes to negative stereotypes and perpetuates existing power disparities by elevating upper-caste, upper-class actresses to positions of success and at the same time exploiting lower status women through their performance as the item girl while relegating lower-caste and lower-class women to inferior roles. The item girl is a contradiction. She is depicted as "modern," sexually liberated, empowered, and autonomous woman. In my opinion, this is a farce. I don't think the item girl is as free as Bollywood wants us to believe. Her agency is confined within the bounds of patriarchy. Item girls are portrayed as low-class, low-caste "whores." The sad truth is that people don't care about what happens to women like that, particularly in a traditional conservative patriarchal society that venerates women's sexual "purity." The conditions of sex workers in India are a testament to that sad reality.

One of the most contradictory features about the presence of item songs in the overall cinematic experience is that Bollywood movies in general cater to a family audience. The crux of the movie watching experience in India is that it is to be enjoyed with your entire family, starting from the 80 year old grandmother to the 5 year old child and everyone in between. Movie ratings are also not taken seriously as an ‘A’ (adult) or an ‘R’ rated movie can still be viewed by young children and teenagers in a movie theater. Most Indian films do not have kissing scenes or any scenes that depict sexual relations on screen, although in recent years this has started to change, much to the chagrin of certain conservative segments of Indian society. Therefore, it seems contrary to having the whole family be exposed to an experience that seemingly goes against “traditional family values.”

Item girls in India seem to arouse curiosity and confusion. The question that arises is why is the item girl allowed to exist when the movies are usually geared toward a family-friendly audience? One other supplementary question that bears answering is the reason why item songs are allowed to not just exist but thrive despite the Indian censor board’s usual objection to depicting eroticism on screen in the larger movie narrative? There are several reasons for this. For one, the item songs only last on average four to five minutes in a two and half hour Bollywood movie. Both the amount of time the song occupies and the fact that it is inconsequential to the plotline means that it does not make much difference to add an item song to a film that already has four or five other songs.

Secondly, the item girl in these songs played by popular actresses only makes a cameo. It is rare for the item girl in contemporary item songs to also be the main female character in the film, nonetheless, it does happen on occasion. For example, actress

Deepika Padukone in the film *Happy New Year* not only performed as the item girl in the item song *Lovely*, but is also the main female lead in the film. It is also important to acknowledge the global impact of Bollywood. Globalization, social media and streaming services and the international audience especially the Indian diaspora in the West may have played a huge role in Bollywood's decision to churn out more and more item songs each year to attract their foreign audience.

Furthermore, the item song is a cash cow for the producers. For a lot of Bollywood films that lack storytelling, the inclusion of an item song is guaranteed to bring crowds to the theater, thereby making the film a commercial success. Therefore, item songs are essentially a marketing tactic. The contemporary item girl is usually a famous actress which is a departure from the earlier days when item songs were performed by lesser-known actresses and dancers. Top actresses like Kareena Kapoor, Priyanka Chopra, Deepika Padukone, Katrina Kaif, and Sunny Leone have all embraced the role of the item girl. Sunny Leone's identity as a former adult actress was exploited by the filmmakers while marketing the film *Raees* (2017) through the item song *Laila Main Laila* despite the movie's lead actor being Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan who according to Forbes in 2017 was one of the highest-paid actors in the world.

The item girl is allowed to co-exist in the movie narrative with the virtuous heroine because the item girl is a temporary outlet for the male gaze and male fantasies. In the larger scheme of things, the item girl does not threaten the patriarchal family structure and values of Indian culture. However, her position as the "other" brings up notions of intersectionality such as her oppression due to her low-caste, low-class socio-economic background. Violence against low-caste women by upper-caste men usually goes

unreported or is brushed off by the media, the police system, the health care system, and society at large. The fact that the modern Indian woman is venturing out in public spaces and entering the workforce and becoming an active player in the consumerist capitalist economy has led to a shift in the power dynamic and traditional patriarchal structure in India. This has in some ways led women to believe that they can do it all. But the reality of the situation is that the more she tries to steer away from the hegemonic culture, the more oppression she faces in the form of workplace harassment, stalking, voyeurism, groping, teasing, acid attacks by jilted lovers, assault, and rape which all encompass rape culture in India. Part of the reason for this is because of the huge influence of Bollywood films and its glamorization and problematic representation of notions of romance, love, sexual relations, lust and consent.

In a patriarchal conservative country where interaction between the sexes outside the family dynamic is frequently subjected to moral policing, young males get little opportunity to get to know the opposite sex. Talk of sexual desire and romantic love is considered a taboo subject in India and young people, especially young men seek out ways to express their sexual desires. The lack of adequate sex education in the country also leads to a situation where young people, especially young men, rely on media such as Bollywood films, item songs, adult magazines, and pornography to gather information about sex, leading to a distorted understanding of consensual sexual relations.

Despite being a long-standing component of Bollywood, contemporary item songs in India are a significant cultural influencer in the perpetuation of sexual violence, and are a common source of sexist imagery. These songs frequently have sexist lyrics, and provocative and objectifying choreography, that reinforce negative gender stereotypes.

Item songs support a culture where women's bodies are essentially commodified and controlled by men, obscuring the lines of consent and undermining women's bodily autonomy. This is done via normalizing the representation of women as objects of desire for the male gaze. Due to Bollywood's immense popularity and impact these songs have a greater adverse effect on society's attitudes and behaviors around gender roles and sexuality, potentially fostering a negative mindset toward women that further entrench rape culture. Sexual acts, voyeurism, lust, desire, and violent acts like dismemberment, and death are frequently mentioned in the lyrics. Viewing sexual or sexually suggestive content like item songs may contribute to the early sexual awakening of adolescents in India thus leading to misguided notions of consent among an already sexually repressed conservative society.

India is riddled with issues such as an ineffective political system, regressive patriarchal conservative norms, and a tolerance policy towards sexual violence against women. This contributes to a lack of accountability on the part of perpetrators and a lack of justice for rape victims. While modernization and globalization have empowered Indian women in many ways, public safety is still a cause for concern. Women's movement, freedom, and access to opportunities are hindered by the persistent fear of sexual violence, which also limits their growth and development. Item songs have become ritualistic in India. As patterns repeat over hundreds of popular item songs, the male audience may get conditioned into thinking that it is acceptable to engage in non-consensual behavior with women.

Bollywood and Indian society at large need to critically assess how ubiquitous these images are and confront the fundamental inequalities that support these damaging

narratives if they are to effectively solve this issue. Indian society and the Bollywood film industry needs to recognize that item songs are problematic and in some ways condition men in public to behave a certain way towards women and girls. India also needs reform in terms of the laws safeguarding women's safety and the patriarchal attitudes displayed by society at large. However, the former may be easier to achieve than the latter.

India has a long standing history with the item girl but we are yet to have an "*item boy*" or an "*item man*." Even if we were to see the odd *item boy* in a similar fashion as the item girl, it would not be the same. The *item boy* would never endure the same level of objectification as the item girl. The *item boy* would not be a male prostitute, he would not represent someone from the lower-class or lower-caste community, and he would be a "stud" or a "player" who gets all the women. An item song with an *item boy* surrounded by hundreds of half-naked women would be every heterosexual male's wildest fantasy come to life. There is no threat of rape for the *item boy*. In my view, India simply is not ready for that kind of conversation. Therein lies the hypocrisy of Indian society. I would not characterize the item girl as the embodiment of the postfeminist modern woman, nor does the item song genre do what feminism is meant to do to empower women in India.

The perceived immunity that the item girl enjoys in India is due to the perception that item girls are disposable objects of desire serving as a temporary source of entertainment for the male gaze. The story of the modern, powerful Indian woman is in conflict with social pressures to uphold outdated beliefs that place the blame for sexual assault on the victims. In a patriarchal culture, the media promotes male sexual desire as well as male sexual aggression. In the item songs I observed, the item girl is shown dancing in front of gangs of men who are holding weapons, consuming alcohol, and engaging in

lecherous and violent behavior. These songs glorify gang culture, non-consent, alcoholism, and violent behavior. On the one hand, the item girl is being leered at, whistled at, teased, groped, and thrown around by tens of hundreds of men. However, these item songs also appear to portray the item girl as a confident, powerful, empowered, autonomous being who has full control over her body and the men around her but the reality is the opposite. The item girl is not quite the postfeminist incarnation that we are hoping for. She is still a slave to the male gaze. As a result, item songs represent the contradictions of postfeminist theory.

The Indian censor board displays a great deal of hypocritical morality when it comes to cherry picking what type of content the Indian viewers are allowed to see. I am not advocating for censorship of item songs. My gripe is not with the item song genre in itself, even though I think it is a poor medium of displaying female empowerment, and female sexual liberation. My issue is with the Bollywood film industry and the Indian censor board that resorts to monitoring and censoring the kind of narratives that would otherwise be considered salacious and immoral for the Indian audience much like movies like *Fire* and *Lipstick Under My Burkha* and even the documentary *India's Daughter* while at the same time transferring the moral high ground and political obligation of determining the appropriateness of item songs by putting in the hands of members of the Indian polite society. What many fail to understand is that item songs don't just promote eroticism, it promotes violent lyrics and images that are being consumed by impressionable young people all over the country. Item songs essentially celebrate blatant sexism and violence against women disguised as entertainment and ignore the real life repercussions of such displays of violence.

This study is as much about the lack of appropriate social response from Indian society towards victims of rape as it is about rape culture itself. Women in India are not seen as autonomous individuals. As with many patriarchal cultures, they are seen as part of the collective and in relation to the males they are associated with i.e. their father, their brother, their husband, and their son. I believe the type of sexual liberation that the item girl espouses and by extension the actresses who play them stem from a Western idea of liberation and not an indigenous Indian idea of female liberation. Liberation is not simply limited to sexuality. It is a whole spectrum of other systemic factors which Indian women for the most part lack. Women in India are constantly negotiating their oppression and freedom. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to apply the tools of Western society to solve what is essentially an Indian problem.

Bollywood is a very powerful and influential medium that has the power to influence public perception. Media such as Bollywood through their films and through item songs have resulted in the hyper-sexualization of women, which results in an acceptance of the attitudes that support violence against women. Patriarchal societies like India lack awareness regarding the concept of consent when it comes to sexual relations. The gendered environment that reinforces the patriarchal hegemony needs to change in order to challenge the perspective of people towards rape and sexual violence which is why media and mass communication can be used to enhance public awareness about rape and rape culture in India.

Contemporary Bollywood films have started introducing complex narratives in their depiction of women on screen. Take for example, the movie *Queen* (2013) starring actress Kangana Ranaut who plays Rani Mehra, a meek young and conservative Punjabi

woman from Delhi who decides to travel to Europe on her pre-booked honeymoon alone after she was dumped by her fiancé a day before their wedding. The surprising part of the movie for me personally was the fact that Rani's parents relented and gave her permission to take the solo journey as a way for her to discover herself and find new happiness. The movie was the first of its kind with no male superstar actors or glamorous female actors anywhere in sight. The storytelling was what made the movie a hit. This was an entirely female-centric movie that was also a commercial success. The film gave hope to actresses in the industry and proved that women-centric films can in fact make money without having to rely on a male superstar to bring in the audience to the theater.

Similarly, the 2014 biographical sports film about six-time Women's World Amateur Boxing Champion *Mary Kom* played by actress Priyanka Chopra launched a new genre of sporting films starring women depicting their athletic prowess, physical stamina, and vigor on screen. The film depicted Kom's struggles with motherhood and training for her matches with her newborn twins, coupled with undertones of nationalism and patriotism. For the Indian audience this was an entirely new experience to watch a female sports-centric film starring one of Bollywood's leading actresses.

Another female-led film that made shockwaves in India for its bold female-centric storyline was the 2018 film *Veere Di Wedding* (Friend's Wedding). The film revolves around four young women. The movie discusses several issues faced by modern young Indian women within their family life, their relationships, as well as in their sexual life. I would describe *Veere Di Wedding* as Bollywood's answer to *Sex and the City*. Watching four young Indian women cursing, drinking alcohol, smoking, engaging in casual sex, getting divorced, and openly talking about sexual relations and female pleasure was

something that the Indian audience have not seen before in our movies. The fact that the Indian censor board had little to no objection regarding the content of the movie shows its progressiveness since curtailing previous female-centric films like *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016) and *Fire* (1996). There is still a long way to go before women-centric films and strong female characters become the norm in Bollywood.

There have been some positive developments in the past few years with an increase in women-centric films such as the ones I mentioned above. There has also been an increase in the number of female directors and producers with people like Farah Khan, Zoya Akhtar, Gauri Shinde, and Rhea Kapoor whose films have tried to convey positive messages about women's empowerment, power, and strength in Indian society.

The strength of my study is that it fills a gap in the literature on the influence of Bollywood item songs in perpetuating rape culture in India by looking at the socio-cultural factors that contribute to it. My research eluded to the perceived immunity of item songs in a morally conservative society like India with strict gender norms and the public's apathy and lack of adequate public outrage when it comes to gang rapes in the country. This study does not indicate a causal relationship between item songs and rape culture in India, but looked at the conditions surrounding rape culture in India and sought to understand what makes item songs an acceptable form of media in a country where women's sexuality is often repressed and where women are increasingly negotiating tensions surrounding their growing independence and empowerment.

5.2 Limitations

This research is not without certain limitations. First, the theoretical framework was designed for a qualitative study. Therefore, I did not aim to collect empirical data. Secondly, my study has a limited sample size. My study only focuses on ten item songs from 2012 to 2019 based on popularity. Since then there have been many more item songs that have come out that have captured the Indian public's imagination. YouTube views were used as a tool to analyze popularity. YouTube as a platform allows for fragmentation of the item song that is distinct from the context of the films. The item songs were, therefore, observed not within the entirety of the film narrative but as separate entities.

Given the sheer number of item songs in existence, a larger sample of item songs may have resulted in a more definitive conclusion about the impact of item songs on rape culture in India. Thirdly, as I am not a native speaker of the Hindi language, I relied on online translations of the item songs and sought help from native speakers of Hindi to effectively translate the songs from Hindi to English. Based on the online resource used, some words may have slightly different meanings and certain item songs also make use of slang words and terms that are unique to certain regions of India. India is not only a multilingual country but also culturally heterogeneous. India has several regional film industries in languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, etc. that are influenced by Bollywood films especially the item song genre but my research only focuses on Bollywood which uses Hindi as its language.

5.3 Future Directions

Discourse on sexual violence against women is a taboo subject matter in India. Rape if anything due to its intersectional nature in India is seen as a stain on the family's/community's honor than a crime against women. My dissertation is laying part of the foundation for further research on the influence of media representation of female bodies and its impact on sexual violence in India. This study can be used as a blueprint to investigate further into the topic of item songs and rape culture and its impact on Indian society. When we look at the larger scheme of the Bollywood film narrative, each film has on average five to six songs that are very much part of the storytelling process. Although not all movies have an item song in them, a substantial portion of movies does carry them, especially since the last decade. One can speculate whether the absence of an item song from a movie would make a difference to the film's profit margins.

Bollywood sets unrealistic beauty standards for the Indian youth. One observation that I made in passing was with respect to the skin color of actresses performing the item songs. The actresses reflected Euro-centric beauty standards and light skin tones which the vast majority of the Indian sub-continent do not possess. It would be beneficial to research further on the issue of colorism in India with respect to Bollywood movies. Another area to research is concerning the heroine of the film. My research focused only on the item girl. It would be beneficial to carry out a comparative study on the item girl versus the heroine of the film and analyze the difference in their values and belief systems with the film narrative.

Several questions arose while writing this dissertation. These include: What determines the need for an item song in a Bollywood film? Is it for commercial reasons? Is it for entertainment? Is it simply catering to the male gaze? Is it oppression masquerading as women's empowerment? Is it an outlet for misogyny? Or is the presence of an item song simply to ensure the economic success of a film even if the plot itself is disappointing? These are questions that can be investigated in the future.

5.4 Concluding Remarks

In this dissertation I set out to examine if item songs are contributing to the perpetuation of sexual violence against women in India. What this study has revealed is that item songs give us a glimpse into certain patterns and characteristics that are associated with rape culture and particularly gang rapes in India. My dissertation is not geared towards a solution to this complex issue. This study is a critique of the item song genre and its potential effects on rape culture in India. I am not advocating for censorship, or a ban, or boycott of item songs. I do not believe that censorship is the answer to the complex issue of rape culture in India. I cannot say with certainty that there is a solution to this problem of gang rapes in India. But what this research indicates is that there are some identifiable patterns that allude to a culture of violence against women and misogyny when looking at a creative cultural production such as Bollywood item songs. Furthermore, the social response from Indian society and the leaders in power regarding gang rapes of lower-caste, lower-class women is one of indifference and apathy. This inaction is primarily due to the fact that Indian society has a Madonna-Whore complex, where the lower-caste, lower-class

women are deemed the whore and therefore undeserving of justice. Item songs affirm this ideology i.e. the lack of adequate action from society to seek justice for the victim of rape because the prevailing mindset is that the woman/girl got what she deserves. This is a deeply troubling situation for women in India.

I started my dissertation in Chapter One with a discussion about the 2012 Nirbhaya rape case in Delhi. This was a major catalyst in the women's rights movement in India in recent years. This was one of the first times in Indian society that violence against women was openly discussed not just in the media but across several different platforms and social media. This incident resulted in a lot of national and international media attention on India where rape amounts to a *social epidemic* that haunts the moral consciousness of the people and remains a stain in the socio-cultural milieu. When rape occurs, women are often told to not report it due to the social stigma surrounding rape in India. Victims and their families do not want society to think they lack morals and are indecent, causing others to speculate what caused the rape in the first place. Questions about what the victim was wearing, who she was with, where she was at the time of the incident, etc. are often asked when rape cases have been filed with the police and later taken to trial. This adds additional distress to the victim as it puts the onus of blame on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The Nirbhaya gang rape brought to the forefront the issue of sexual violence in India. Even though the incident shed light on similar cases, it also resulted in additional restrictions on female liberty and autonomy in India. According to Shrinivasan (2017), the constant focus on rape statistics further restricted women's movements outside the home. Shrinivasan further stated that following the Nirbhaya rape, woman's freedom is being sacrificed on the altar of women's safety. Despite all the legal measures, rape and rape

culture is still widespread problem in India. The Nirbhaya rape, as well as subsequent rapes featured in the media that I note in Chapter One, demonstrate that rape is one of the biggest concerns for women in India.

Movies reflect the society we live in. The term *art imitates life and vice-versa* has never been truer than in the case of Indian society. Bollywood films are a true representation of various socio-cultural elements, be it a celebration of family, religion, love, politics, violence, and the treatment of women. Therefore, films can be both a cultural product and a social practice. Films reflect a society's fundamental values and beliefs. Bollywood thus can be an important medium when it comes to the formation of gender roles and gender socialization. It is apparent that Bollywood is still male-dominated and considering how a ruling ideology of patriarchy perpetuates itself, this is not surprising. It can be seen in the representation of women in item songs. Also, considering the number of films with male stars dominating the market, there are notably few women-centric and female-led movies that succeed at the box office. The availability of item songs on YouTube, radio, and television channels such as MTV, etc. plays a part in supporting the ethos of the item song genre. What is needed is a movement from within the film industry to challenge the status quo of item songs and their continued presence in Bollywood films. As I mentioned in Chapter One, several prominent filmmakers and actors in recent years have come out against item songs. For there to be real change, the Bollywood film industry as a whole must first acknowledge that there is a problem and in some ways, the film industry is contributing to this culture of misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy in the country that is making life difficult for Indian women.

The media fuels rape culture in a society in the form of sexist songs, objectification of female bodies in pop culture, problematic song lyrics, glamorization of violence against women, victim blaming, slut shaming, and so on. The general language surrounding rape or violence against women is problematic. Rape culture used for entertainment not only trivializes the trauma of victims but also normalizes the concept of rape. Narratives about sexual violence against women in India and even the way it is reported in the press combine undercurrents of honoring a woman's body while also victim blaming. For there to be any kind of social change when it comes to the issue of violence against women in India, social action is necessary.

Music and movies play a huge role in influencing people's attitudes and behaviors. Representation, therefore, is an important subject matter. How women are represented on screen through item songs creates a false narrative about the actual lived experiences and conditions of women in India, especially those women from lower-caste and lower-class communities. The seemingly immune and untouchable nature of item songs has come under scrutiny since the 2012 Delhi rape. It is my understanding that the sole purpose of an item song in the film is for marketing purposes to attract the audience to the movie theater. However, the violence against women that is displayed through these item songs cannot be denied.

In Chapter Four, I laid out the various narrative, visual, and lyrical characteristics that are all-encompassing in item songs. These characteristics and the representation of the item girl in my opinion comes off as disingenuous to the plight of women in the country by selling a fantasy of the empowered, sexualized, modern Indian woman that can venture out in male-dominated public spaces without the fear of sexual violence and other

determinants that form rape culture in India. Sexual liberation for a woman should also come with the sexual safety of the woman. A woman getting gang raped in an alleyway or a bar is still rape, no matter how sexually liberated she is. This is the distorted narrative that item songs seem to brush off. When we take away all of the stylistic elements of the item song, the glitz, the glamor, the costumes, the music, the mise-en-scene, and the dance, what we are left with is a jarring situation of gang rape. And unfortunately, Indian society and Bollywood have deemed the item girl to be a low-caste, low-class “whore.” Therefore, it is easier for society to tolerate and accept gang rape on women similar to the item girl because essentially what they are saying is she does not deserve justice because of her low status in society.

The danger of sexual assault is ever present in a patriarchal and male-dominated environment and will never realistically go away. Every time a woman asserts herself and expresses her needs and desires she is in danger of the consequences of rape culture in a sexist, misogynistic society that devalues women. This is also not the same as teasing and provoking as in the figure of the item girl. The item girl provokes and proves to be a daring figure in a male-dominated space. She invokes the tropes that lead to rape culture. The item girl is paying lip service to rape culture. She imbues a false sense of power believing that she is in control, when in reality it is always the man who is in control. Her liberation is still dependent on the man’s pleasure—his pleasure in seeing her, hearing her, wanting her, and touching her. The male gaze has all the power. The item girl is a well-trained vessel who derives pleasure from male pleasure. Her idea of pleasure is drawn from her willingness to serve the man. She is simply a slave to male pleasure. Her own needs are

secondary. The measure of success for the item girl stems from her ability to please men. She is a maker of her own misery cloaked as sexual liberation.

I recognize that this false sense of sexual liberation is how the item girl feels a sense of power. The aim of my dissertation is not to shame and victim blame the item girl. Far from it. In fact, I am compassionate to her situation. The item girl is a product of the patriarchal framework of Indian society. Even the item girl should be able to exist in a world that is safe and where she is not at risk of rape, unfortunately, that is not the kind of world we live in. One thing that became apparent during the course of my research was the realization that there is no alternative to the item girl. The item girl exists and is never censored or banned in the industry or shunned by the Indian audience because the item girl in her current avatar does not pose any real threat to the moral fabric of Indian society.

The item girl will only become a threat once she does something for her own pleasure that is independent of the male gaze and male pleasure. That is the ultimate fear of a patriarchal society. When the woman is in complete control of her body and is no longer interested in deriving pleasure from the male gaze and is indifferent to the male gaze that is when she is truly liberated. The Bollywood film industry in my opinion has not been brave enough to showcase what a truly empowered and sexually liberated woman looks. A character such as that would be a radical concept for Indian society. The Indian woman's body and freedom from the time of her birth is controlled by her external elements such as her family, society, and patriarchy. She is shamed for wanting independence; she is shunned for wanting to be empowered; and she is threatened and assaulted for creating pleasure for herself in whichever way she sees fit. Ultimately, it is about control. Controlling the female body, controlling female sexual pleasure, and controlling what type

of content can be shown to the audience by the film industry, the government, and the censor board. The real threat occurs when the Indian woman decides to go rogue and no longer cater to male pleasure but her own. I realize that what I am asking of the item girl and the Bollywood film industry is very difficult. And yet, it must be done in order for there to be any real lasting social change.

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