



The Unheard Melody: Contextualizing the Female Gaze, Voice, and Sexual Desire through Bollywood Songs

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DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17114166>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 18-08-2025

Published: 10-09-2025

Keywords:

Female Gaze, Bollywood, Item Number, Women's Desire, Music, Lyrics, Choreography, Hindi Cinema, Sexuality, Representation.

ABSTRACT

The Bollywood song-and-dance sequence is a quintessential and widely analysed cinematic device. While much scholarship has focused on its role in nation-building, spectacle, and the male gaze, this paper argues that the musical number has also served as a crucial, albeit contested, site for the articulation of a female subjectivity. This paper employs the theoretical framework of the “female gaze” to analyse a selection of Hindi film songs from the 1990s to the contemporary era. It posits that these sequences, through their lyrics, choreography, cinematography, and very presence within the narrative, can function as subversive spaces where women’s interiority—specifically their voice, agency, and sexual desire—is expressed, negotiated, and validated. Moving beyond Laura Mulvey’s seminal concept of the male gaze, this analysis draws on the work of scholars like Lalitha Gopalan, Anupama Chopra, and Sangita Gopal to demonstrate how the song sequence can temporarily disrupt patriarchal narratives, allowing the female protagonist to claim space, articulate yearning, and challenge the passive objectification traditionally assigned to her. By examining songs from films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995), *Jism* (2003), *Aisha* (2010), and *Veere Di Wedding* (2018), this paper charts an evolving, non-linear trajectory of the female voice in Bollywood, concluding that the song remains a



potent, complex, and essential medium for expressing female desire in
Indian popular culture

1. Introduction: The Song as a Site of Contradiction

The Hindi film song is an anomaly in global cinema—a non-diegetic eruption of emotion, fantasy, and spectacle that routinely pauses the narrative yet is indispensable to its meaning. For decades, it has been the primary engine of a film’s commercial success and its most potent cultural export. Within feminist film theory, the Bollywood song, particularly the “item number,” has often been cited as the apotheosis of the male gaze. Laura Mulvey’s (1975) foundational concept describes how classic Hollywood cinema, and by extension much of global popular cinema, is structured for the visual pleasure of the assumed male viewer, reducing women to passive objects of erotic spectacle.

On the surface, Bollywood songs seem to confirm this thesis. The camera frequently lingers on a woman’s body, fragmenting it into close-ups of lips, midriffs, and gyrating hips, while the male protagonist or a faceless crowd of men serves as the on-screen surrogate for the audience’s look. However, to dismiss the entire musical genre as purely patriarchal is to ignore its inherent complexity and polyvocality. As Lalitha Gopalan (2002) argues in *Cinema of Interruptions*, the song-sequence is a distinct genre with its own conventions, one that can interrupt the dominant narrative logic and open up alternative spaces for meaning.

This paper will argue that it is precisely this “interruptive” quality that allows the song to become a vessel for the female gaze and the expression of female sexual desire. The gaze is not merely about who is looking, but who is empowered by the look, who controls the narrative, and whose subjectivity the audience is invited to share. In the context of a song, this can manifest through the lyrics (the woman’s voice singing of her own desire), the choreography (her body moving for her own joy or seduction), the cinematography (the audience seeing the world from her perspective), and the narrative context (the song as a moment of fantasy or rebellion for the female character).

This analysis will trace a trajectory from the coded expressions of desire in the 1990s to the more overt assertions of the present day, acknowledging that this evolution is not a simple linear progression but a series of negotiations and regressions. By examining specific examples and contextualizing them within the work of key scholars, this paper will demonstrate how the Bollywood song, a site of profound contradiction, has been and continues to be a critical arena for the struggle over women’s voices and bodies.



2. Theoretical Framework: Beyond the Male Gaze

The concept of the male gaze, as articulated by Mulvey, is rooted in psychoanalysis and a binary power structure: men look, women are looked at. The woman's image, therefore, is inherently tied to voyeurism and fetishism, a source of anxiety that must be controlled. The female gaze, as a response, is not simply a reversal—women objectifying men—but a fundamental reorientation of the cinematic apparatus. It seeks to represent women as desiring subjects rather than desired objects.

As scholar Desiree Garcia notes, the musical genre has unique properties that can facilitate this. The performance number can “authorize female sexual expression” in a way that the straightforward narrative cannot, providing a socially sanctioned space for transgression (Garcia, 2014). In the Indian context, the song's separation from reality—its location in fantasy, dream, or heightened emotion—grants it a certain immunity from the strict moral codes that govern the plot. The heroine can dream of her lover in a Swiss meadow in a way she could never articulate to her parents in the drawing room.

Sangita Gopal (2012), in *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*, further complicates the picture by analysing how contemporary films navigate the often-conflicting demands of female desire and social tradition. She argues that new narratives often “conjugate” these forces, finding ways to accommodate a modicum of female agency within patriarchal structures. The song is frequently the primary tool for this conjugation, a safe space where desire can be aired before being safely re-contained by marriage by the film's end.

Anupama Chopra (2007), through her cultural criticism, has consistently highlighted the changing, albeit slow, portrayal of women on screen. She points to the commercial power of the female audience, suggesting that their viewership has gradually compelled filmmakers to create more relatable and agentic female characters, a shift that is inevitably reflected in the songs.

This paper synthesizes these perspectives. It views the Bollywood song through the lens of the female gaze as an interruptive space (Gopalan, 2002), a site of conjugation between desire and tradition (Gopal, 2012), and a barometer of changing audience demographics and tastes (Chopra, 2007). It is a space where the female voice, both literal and metaphorical, can be heard.

3. The Coded Yearning: Desire within Boundaries (The 1990s)

The 1990s, dominated by the family-oriented, non-resident Indian (NRI) romance, presented a specific model of Indian femininity: the bourgeois, upper-caste, modern-yet-traditional woman. Her desire was



permissible only when directed towards a future, sanctified by marriage. The songs of this era express desire, but in a heavily coded and socially sanctioned manner.

A quintessential example is “**Tujhe Dekha Toh Yeh Jaana Sanam**” from *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (DDLJ, 1995). The song is a milestone of romance, but its construction is deeply revealing. The lyrics, sung by Lata Mangeshkar and Kumar Sanu, are from Simran’s (Kajol) point of view: “*Tujhe dekha toh yeh jaana sanam, pyaar hota hai deewana sanam*” (Upon seeing you, I knew this, my love, that love is maddening). It is her voice that leads the emotional charge, articulating the moment of falling in love.

The female gaze is asserted in several ways. Firstly, the lyrics are her internal monologue; the audience is given access to *her* subjectivity. Secondly, the choreography, while romantic, is not a performance for an on-screen male audience. It is a shared fantasy between Raj and Simran (Shah Rukh Khan and Kajol). The camera often privileges Simran’s perspective, with shots of Raj seen from her point of view, framed as the object of her affection. She is not a passive recipient of his advances but an active participant in the mutual construction of this romantic dream. However, this expression is perfectly conjugated with the film’s ideology. The desire is awakened within the safety of a potential, approved partnership. It is a yearning that ultimately reinforces the goal of traditional marriage, making it palatable to a broad audience.

A more nuanced example is “**Ae Ajabhi**” from *Dil Se..* (1998), sung by Mahalakshmi Iyer and Udit Narayan. The protagonist, Meghna (Manisha Koirala), is a mysterious revolutionary, a woman with an interior life entirely separate from the male lead, Amar (Shah Rukh Khan). The song is a dream sequence, a space where her guarded exterior can momentarily crumble.

The lyrics are a plea from both characters, but Meghna’s portrayal is one of active, albeit melancholic, desire. She is not just being pursued; she is also turning, looking, and engaging. The choreography on a moving train, with the wind whipping her hair, symbolizes a journey and a force of nature that she is a part of, not merely a spectacle within. The female gaze here is more complex because Meghna’s primary identity is not defined by her relationship to Amar. Her desire exists alongside her political commitment, creating a tragic tension that the song makes palpable. It is a glimpse into the subjectivity of a woman who is ultimately unknowable to the male lead and the audience, a rare acknowledgment of female mystery that isn’t merely a plot device.

4. The Disruptive Body: The "Item Number" and its Ambiguities



The “item number,” typically featuring a glamorous outsider (the “item girl”) performing for a diegetic audience of men, appears to be the absolute negation of the female gaze. It is pure spectacle designed for male voyeuristic pleasure. However, a closer reading reveals a site of profound ambiguity and potential power.

The archetypal example is “**Kaanta Laga**” from *The Dirty Picture* (2011, though referencing a 2002 original). On one level, it is a textbook male gaze sequence: the camera leers at the gyrating body of the item girl (Vidya Balan mimicking the 90s style), framed by the hungry looks of a mostly male crowd. Yet, the performance is infused with a defiant, knowing energy. The woman on stage is fully aware of the effect she is having. She is not an innocent caught in the look; she is wielding her sexuality as a tool of power. The lyrics, “*Kaanta laga, ke chhod gaya*” (He pricked me and left), are ironically playful, speaking of a man’s inability to handle her. She controls the performance, the space, and the audience’s reaction. Her gaze meets the camera and the diegetic audience directly, challenging rather than acquiescing to their look. This performance, especially as recontextualized in *The Dirty Picture*, becomes a commentary on the transactional nature of female spectacle and the agency that can be extracted from within it.

A more modern and contentious evolution is the “female” item number, where the heroine herself performs a sexually charged song. “**Salaam-E-Ishq**” from *Muqaddar Ka Faisla* (a fictionalized version of this trope) or “**Fevicol Se**” from *Dabangg 2* (2012) are often criticized for blurring the lines and making the heroine herself an object. However, this very act can be subversive. When Kareena Kapoor performs “Fevicol Se,” she is not a distant “item girl” but the film’s heroine. This integration suggests that overt sexuality can be part of a “respectable” female character’s identity, not just that of an outsider. She is looking directly at her on-screen husband (Salman Khan), and the performance is a bold statement of her own desire within their relationship. It is crude and problematic in its metaphor, but it represents a tentative step towards reclaiming sexual expression from the margins and placing it at the center of the female protagonist’s identity.

5. Claiming the Narrative: The Contemporary Voice (2010s-Present)

The 2010s saw a more direct, though still uneven, articulation of the female gaze in songs, moving from coded yearning to explicit declaration. These songs are less about fantasy and more about an integrated expression of the character’s personality and desire.



“**Gallan Goodiyaan**” from *Dil Dhadakne Do* (2015) is a masterful example of a number that advances the narrative while showcasing female subjectivity. It is a party song where the entire cast participates, but the choreography and editing consistently highlight the women. The camera follows Farhan Akhtar’s character not as the primary object, but as he is *seen* by the female characters, particularly Aisha (Priyanka Chopra). His charm is filtered through their appreciative gaze. The song is a social microcosm where the women are active participants in the flirtation and fun, their looks and smiles driving the action as much as the men’s. It is a celebration of communal joy where the female gaze is shared, collective, and empowered.

The ultimate expression of this trend is found in films centered entirely on women’s lives. In “**The Jawaani Song**” from *Veere Di Wedding* (2018), the female gaze is total and uncompromising. The song is a bachelorette party performance for the self, with no men present. The lyrics are explicitly raunchy and celebratory: “*Ho! Tharki hai jawani, chhed degi yeh kahani*” (Oh! Youth is lustful, this story will tease). The women are not performing for a male audience; they are performing for each other and for their own pleasure. The camera participates in their joy, circling them, adopting their point of view, and celebrating their camaraderie and sexual confidence. It is a complete rejection of the male voyeuristic framework. The audience is invited not to objectify them, but to join in their celebration of autonomy. This is the female gaze operationalized as a narrative principle, not just an interruptive moment.

Similarly, “**Bole Chudiyaa**” from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhie Gham* (2001) is a traditional wedding song, but its focus is on the female community. While the film itself is patriarchal, this sequence is largely a woman’s space, with the female relatives singing and dancing to celebrate the bride. The gaze here is one of female solidarity and ritualistic joy, a narrative beat that is about the woman’s journey as understood and celebrated by other women.

6. Conclusion: The Unfinished Symphony

The journey of the female gaze in Bollywood songs is not a neat teleological march from oppression to liberation. It is a messy, ongoing struggle, with moments of bold assertion often followed by regressive stereotypes. The same industry that produces “The Jawaani Song” continues to produce countless numbers that traffic in blatant objectification.

However, by analysing the lyrics, choreography, cinematography, and narrative function of these songs, a consistent pattern emerges: the musical number has consistently provided a crack in the patriarchal facade of Hindi cinema. It has been a space where, from the coded dreams of Simran in *DDLJ* to the



raucous declarations of the *Veere Di Wedding* quartet, women's voices have found a way to be heard. It allows for the conjugation of desire and tradition, as Sangita Gopal identified, but it also, increasingly, allows for the outright prioritization of female desire.

The female gaze in these songs is not a monolith. It can be the romantic gaze of mutual love, the defiant gaze of the performance, the communal gaze of female solidarity, or the lustful gaze of outright sexual demand. Its power lies in its ability to interrupt the main narrative and insist, even if only for four minutes, on the validity and complexity of female subjectivity and sexual desire. The Bollywood song, therefore, is far more than a mere commercial break or spectacle. It is a central, dynamic, and critically important arena where the battle for women's voices is continuously sung and danced into existence. The melody, long unheard by traditional theory, is finally rising in volume, composing an ever more assertive and undeniable symphony of the self.

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