ITEM SONGS IN HINDI CINEMA AND THE POSTFEMINIST DEBATE

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Abstract

Item songs in mainstream (read=malestream) Indian cinema are difficult to decode as cultural narratives due to their polysemous linguistic and visual messages, particularly in the wake of the backlash feminism has earned in an era of (post) feminism. Rather than follow the conventional feminist approach to decode such songs as sexualizing and objectifying women, this essay reads an alternative narrative into some of these songs, by arguing that blurring the boundaries between the erstwhile ‘bad woman’ or ‘vamp’ and the modern Indian woman who is sexually liberated, independent and in control, such songs articulate a postfeminist discourse with regard to Indian femininities. To this end, I analyze two very popular item songs in recent years Shiela ki jawani (Tees Maar Khan, 2010) and chikni chameli (Agneeopath, 2012), while applying the (post) feminist critique (McRobbie, 2009; Fraser, 2016) to argue that these songs position women as sexually active, independent and agentive. They also resonate with the wider socio-cultural practices in urban India: the changing lifestyles, practiced and lived femininities of the young urban women, as well as the new breed of leading Indian female actors, who display no inhibitions in performing these songs. Seen in this perspective, the songs provide a site or space for diverse and oppositional practices regarding feminism and traditional femininities; while songs like chikni chameli, Shiela ki jawani celebrate the new woman’s empowerment through sexual liberation, her autonomy, individuation and freedom, yet simultaneously position women—through rampant sexism in lyrics and itemization of body parts through a camera lens—as the classic object of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1999).

Keywords
Feminism, femininities, Hindi cinema, visuals, lyrics, female success