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FROM LAILA WITH LOVE:

HOW THE CONCEPT OF ITEM NUMBERS HAVE CHANGED FROM THE 80'S TO 2017

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Abstract: This paper aims to analyse the evolution of item numbers by looking at the remake of two of Zeenat Aman's song – 'Laila main Laila' from *Qurbani* and 'Dum Maaro Dum' from *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* re-made in the films *Raees* (2017) and *Dum Maro Dum* (2014) and picturised with Sunny Leone and Deepika Padukone respectively. Through this analysis, I seek to understand the changes made in the text of the item song through time and whether those changes contribute to the evolving definition of what constitutes as 'sexy'. I also seek to understand and evaluate whether the binary roles essayed by actresses as a heroine or a vamp in an item number have changed within three decades from 1980 to 2017 and how these roles have incorporated themselves in the item numbers of the films we see today as a reflection of the society.

There are significant changes in the style of item song filming over generations. The term 'item number' or an 'item song', as defined by Collins dictionary is commonly used in connection with Hindi, Tamil and Telugu cinema, to describe a catchy, upbeat, often sexually provocative dance sequence for a song in a movie. The argument that I am trying to make here is that 'item songs' have evolved from a certain mind set of what seduction is to something that involves commercialization of women's bodies on the TV screen.

Zeenat Aman's 'Laila Main Laila' was significantly different from Sunny Leone's version of 'Laila Main Laila'. The Zeenat Aman version of 'Laila Main Laila' has her dressed in a white gown with a slit at the leg/hip, with a boa, holding a mic and

swaying at a party as men watch her. The focus here is the woman who is enjoying herself singing and not really attempting to seduce any man. The swaying from Zeenat Aman's side is almost minimal and unexaggerated as opposed to the almost gyratory moves of Sunny Leone in the remixed version.

The moment between Zeenat and Feroz Khan at the 2:10 ticker of the video is an interesting shot. Here, we can see that Feroz Khan wraps the boa around her and pulls her closer as she sings on the microphone. Then, she takes the mic and moves it closer to his mouth where he gives it a quick kiss. She slowly puts the microphone below them and gives him an air kiss synchronising with the music beat, moves her shoulders and looks into his eyes as he wraps the boa around her eyes. I particularly found this shot very endearing and subliminally erotic. There were so many connotations in just this one shot that lasted hardly ten seconds. The lead actors could be seen romancing each other mostly through expressions and the effect it had was personally more intense than Sunny Leone's shot of almost throwing herself on Shah Rukh Khan and forcing him to hold her waist as she moved her hips on the rotating stage. Although Zeenat Aman and Feroz Khan hardly had any physical contact (even the kiss was an air kiss), the intensity of the shot was quite unsurmountable.

If we go by Collin's definition of an item number to be a sexually provocative dance sequence, Zeenat Aman's version of '*Laila Main Laila*' works well as an item number at many levels – whether it's the slight move by Aman to slide her boa down her shoulders at 0:55 or her way of lifting her leg on the table briefly to expose her thighs to one of the men seated at the table, the tone of seduction is balanced and not over-stated.

The plot of *Qurbaani* strictly speaking is not the same as *Raees*. In the former, Aman is attracted to Feroz Khan as a partner and the song, although not officially classified as an item song back then in the 80's, was used as an entry point for her introduction. So the director's hindsight of re-making 'Laila Main Laila' in *Raees* was different from the old version.

It is quite interesting to note that at 1:03, as Zeenat bends down slightly towards one of the men sitting at the audience, we can notice that the next shot is of one of the drummers, winking directly at the camera, but slightly angled. It is at this point that the camera beautifully captures the relationship between the virtual audience in the song sequence and the real audience i.e the viewer. The wink from the drummer is a purposeful wink that he gives to the audience implying that he finds her as attractive and sexy as we are expected to find her. Thus they both know that Zeenat Aman is sexy – but the beauty of the song is that she – the protagonist – is unaware of how attractive she is.

Hence, the definition of what is termed 'sexy' slowly gets incorporated as part of our society and is deemed different in different eras. The first 'Laila Main Laila' song from *Qurbaani* was shot in 1980 and the second one from *Raees* was shot in 2017. In a span of three decades, as seen in the item numbers, the definition of 'sexy' has evolved from minimalistic gestures and expressions to minimalistic clothes.

If we look at the Sunny Leone version in *Raees*, she is wearing clothes that accentuate her figure and body. Her two-piece lehenga-choli is a loud blue that is glittery and full of sequins. The environment is of a shady bar and restaurant where men come for a quick drink and entertainment. She is dressed to impress and excite

the men around her and her dance moves also involve her shaking her hips and highlighting her breasts.

The focus however is not her; it is Shah Rukh Khan (SRK). He enters in style and Sunny tries to get his attention while he plays hard to get. The camera also constantly captures SRK looking at Sunny silently as she dances around the men who are falling at her. She rejects them all and moves towards SRK and invites him to touch her. The lyrics are also changed to suit the situation of her trying to get his attention to "*Tum aa gaye ho, tumhe chooke dekhun*" as she falls on him.

At 2:06 they share a kiss which is in stark contrast to the air kiss Zeenat and Feroz Khan shared. Her dance moves are intense and gyratory. Zeenat, on the other hand, just does a jig on the side and smiles a little – and it can still steal hearts. Her dance moves are simple hand movements and feet slides that do not require her to move her belly or hips. There is no cleavage shown. The colour of her dress is cream - which is soft, subtle and feminine. Her constant eye-contact with Feroz Khan throughout the song is romantic and flirtatious as opposed to Sunny's which is meant to seduce. Zeenat is in a well-lit discotheque and her audience consists of some women, apart from some men in suits drinking casually. Sunny's version had semi-drunk men and barely dressed women all over the place which looked like a cheap bar that served inexpensive alcohol.

We can infer from these observations that in Zeenat's version, the act of seduction was steady and slow; it was almost like a gradual process of foreplay to second base. Sunny's version has everything sped up and fast-forwarded – from the music,

to the editing style that has clubbed montage shots of her bare back and hips and the openness of Laila to allow unknown men to touch her.

'Dum Maaro Dum' from *Hare Rama Hare Krishna*(1971) seemed to represent an aspirational Hippie culture in India. Although they were prevalent even in the 60's and 70's with Helen, the term 'item numbers' in the Hindi film space became popular only in the 90's. So 'Dum Maaro Dum' picturised on Zeenat Aman was not technically an item number. It had a group of people with bare tattooed bodies sitting in groups and smoking up. At 2:08, we can even catch Dev Anand, the protagonist, looking at Aman and shaking his head in disapproval. Hence, Dum Maaro Dum was portrayed as immoral for the society and not exactly as an item number. However, the remake version with Deepika Padukone was an item number. It had elements borrowed from the original like the tattoos and the stoned expressions on everyone's faces. The camera work also had angles that had a light, airy feel to the song with the smoke rising up. The lyrics had also changed to something more harsh and blunt as opposed to a Sufi'st chant in the original song.

Thus, it is interesting to see how a non-item number like 'Dum Maaro Dum' also was re-made as an item number because of the connotations of drugs and sleaze. The song is culturally relevant because the connotation is that drugs is as bad as being sexually enticing. The term 'item number' here acts as a thread that binds these two ideas.

Laura Mulvey in her paper titled *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* talks about how women's appearance is 'coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote 'looked-at-ness'. ¹ The main premise of all item numbers is

that women are looked at as sexual objects that need to titillate the senses of men. Mulvey states 'the gender power asymmetry is a controlling force in cinema and constructed for the pleasure of the male viewer, which is deeply rooted in patriarchal ideologies and discourses.'² It has three perspectives – the gaze of the camera, the gaze between the characters and the gaze of the spectator. In most item numbers, the audience is supposed to look at women from the viewpoint of the heterosexual male. In 'Laila Main Laila', the camera focuses on Sunny Leone's body parts that are specifically female sexual body parts. There are close-up shots of her breasts and the camera moves up and down, scanning her body. In Zeenat Aman's 'Laila Main Laila', the camera closes up on her facial expressions. There isn't a single frame that focuses on her body part. Even if the camera does, it is very unapparent.

The dominant discourse has been of patriarchy and in Indian cinema especially, one doesn't get to see how it would be if the roles were reversed and men were asked to do item numbers. Ranveer Singh in *Befikre* (2017) was a small step towards that discovery when he showed up in his red underwear for one of the scenes, and women were allowed to be the targeted spectators with the 'female gaze' for once. However, that slight deviation from the norm was just one of the rare occasions of experimentation with film and its theory and criticisms.

The change in the role of vamps and heroines in item numbers

The roles of women in films have been of two major types – the damsel and the vamp. In most item numbers, it is the vamp that takes precedence. Even in *Sholay*, it was Helen who danced to 'Mehbooba oh Mehbooba' and Hema Malini who did the painful 'Main Nachungi'. Through this, are film-makers attributing seduction and sex

negative connotations by placing the 'vamps' in the lead roles for item songs? Is the act of seduction only reserved for the bold and mysterious women with 'bad' intentions? In *Chori Chori Chupke Chupke* (2001) starring Salman Khan, Rani Mukerji and Preity Zinta in lead roles, the latter plays the role of a prostitute who is a surrogate mother to Rani and Salman's child. It was Preity who danced to 'Deewani Deewani' although her role was not technically of a vamp's. However, only because of her profession in the film, which is of a sex-worker, she was made to do the item number thus connoting that every reference to sex and seduction could be negative and hence reserved for the 'vamps'. The virginal damsel in distress would never play such a role unless she is forced to.

That concept of item numbers has now changed with even lead role actresses doing these item numbers for movies like in *Heroine*, Kala Chashma in *Baar Baar Dekho*, *Kamli* in *Dhoom 3*. What is more surprising is that now, it is the top A-list actresses who do these item numbers as a form of extra pocket money. In the 80's, there were particular actresses or item girls who were known for specific roles they play in Indian cinema – for example Zeenat Aman, Parveen Babi and Helen were known particularly for their item numbers and not so much for their acting skills. Even in late 90's and early 2000s, most of the item numbers went to Mallika Sherawat or Malaika Arora Khan – actresses who were known especially for their sex appeal only. In late 2000s, even Priyanka Chopra, Kareena Kapoor and Katrina Kaif - who are known as heroines in their films had taken up the item songs thus completely reversing and mixing the role of the vamp and the heroine, although there are a few exceptions now. Now the 80's trend seems to be coming back with film-makers choosing only a specific face like Sunny Leone for item numbers, but the concept has definitely moved to a grey space from otherwise strict binary roles. Item songs can be done by

any actress now and are now seen as a part of contemporary Bollywood cinema. The only thing that hasn't changed is the fact that it is viewed from the eyes of the male. There is no neutrality in the sex-neutral term item-actor, although by contrast the term 'actor' refers to both male and female actors. (See Brara, Rita, *Cinesexuality in Bollywood and Social Life*, Economic and Political Weekly, 2010, Vol XIV, no 23)

Item numbers are a narrative to society. The changing patterns reflect how the viewers look at the women in our world and sometimes also provide insight to how women look at themselves. They can be interesting tools of analysis to understand the concept of 'attractive', 'sexy' women and how these concepts give rise to various other latent issues that are prevalent today like 'slut-shaming', 'body-shaming' and 'empowerment'. It seems imperative to ask ourselves who exactly a slut is.

In progressive times like these, these are questions that we encounter on every social media platform as well. Earlier, we may have had the chance to write serious opinions and statuses on facebook and go back to being who we were, but now it is hard to ignore the reel world. The reel is as much a part of the real and the way it is formed on cinema and social media are an extension of the direction in which our society is moving.

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