

## The ‘Item Number’ in Indian Cinema: Deconstructing the Paradox

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### Abstract

The “item number” is a hyper-sexualised song-and-dance performance that is characteristic to mainstream Bollywood cinema. When viewed in the context of a general tendency towards the censorship of public depictions of sexualized women in other spheres of the Indian polity, the ubiquity and popularity of item numbers reflects a confounding cultural paradox. The aim of this article is to deconstruct this paradox, by identifying the narrative structures and plot devices employed by film-makers to market these performances without suffering the disapproval of either the Indian State apparatus or the purportedly prudish Indian cinema-goer.

### Introduction

The Indian State, through both its formal and informal centres of power, continues to burden the Indian woman with the charge of guarding national pride, culture, and morality.<sup>1</sup> The defiling of the Indian woman, synonymous with her sexualisation, is the defiling of India. This parallel is evident in the title of “Mother India”, a 1957 film centred around a de-sexualised, self-sacrificial female protagonist intended to be emblematic of both the ideal Indian woman and of India herself.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the Indian film industry has succeeded at carving out a niche for the commodification and sale of female sexuality within a broader milieu characterised by the disapprobation of that very sexuality. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the “item number”,<sup>3</sup> a hyper-sexualised cinematic performance that is both paradoxically and quintessentially Bollywood.

The central aim of this paper is to deconstruct this paradox, by identifying the narrative forms and plot devices employed in Hindi cinema to “uphold the state directives and placate the controlling bodies, without sacrificing the erotic pleasures for its audiences”.<sup>4</sup> The first section of this paper discusses the manner in which the Indian State censors the depiction of female sexuality, by analysing selected administrative and legislative actions. The second section of this paper examines Bollywood’s depiction of female sexuality through item numbers, by means of a representative analysis of 30 popular item numbers from the 1950s up to the present day.<sup>5</sup> Methodologically, item numbers were selected for analysis based on two factors: *First*, the survey was intended to be representative of different eras of Bollywood, and so a minimum of three item numbers from each decade in the period spanning 1950-2018 have been selected. *Second*, the most popular item numbers were selected from each decade in order to prioritise the performances that would have had the greatest impact on the popular imagination.<sup>6</sup> This section is followed by a conclusion that summarises the findings and opinions drawn from the preceding analyses.

### State censorship

Indian Culture has been reimagined, particularly by the Hindu right, as a homogenous tradition characterised by sexual purity, distinct from ‘Western influences’. Ironically, these notions of sexual purity are in large part influenced by Victorian thought imposed through colonial rule on the country that produced the Kama Sutra and

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> M. Madhava Prasad, IDEOLOGY OF THE HINDI FILM, 91 (1998).

<sup>2</sup> See Gayatri Chatterjee, Mother INDIA, 49 (2002).

<sup>3</sup> In this paper I use the phrase “item number” to refer to the performance resulting from the combination of the “item girl”, the “item dance”, and the “item song”. A more detailed definition of the performances that fall within the scope of this phrase shall be offered in Section III of this paper.

<sup>4</sup> Sneha Kanta, Demystifying The Popular Item Number Trend: Indian Cinema, LNC SILHOUETTE MAGAZINE (10 Nov, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> The table containing the list of item numbers can be found at Table I.

<sup>6</sup> Popularity was determined based on the number of references to these item numbers in media reports, as well as the number of views on the YouTube videos of these performances.

the sexually explicit carvings at *Khajuraho*.<sup>7</sup>

The female body has now become the focal point of the battle for culture, with the nation carefully scrutinizing and policing what the Indian woman wears, who she enters into sexual relations with, and how she is depicted in public representations. This morality is reflected in a number of governmental acts, a representative sample of which shall be examined in this section. Specifically, the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1978 [A], the ban on dance bars in Maharashtra (2005) [B], and certain instances of film censorship [C] shall be analysed.

#### *Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1978*

The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1978 is intended to “prohibit indecent representation of women through advertisements or in publications, writings, paintings, figures or in any other manner and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto”. The law was a result of the conservative lobby’s attempts to impose a culture repressive of female sexuality on the basis that it would protect Indian tradition. As Kishwar and Vanita identify, the impetus behind the legislation was the dominance of the notion that respect for women is equivalent to treating them as sexless.<sup>8</sup> The definitions of ‘obscenity’, ‘indecent’ and ‘morality’ in the Act are excessively vague, and lack any nuanced approach in dealing with representations that may be created by women, for women, as genuine and consensual expressions or depictions of female sexuality.<sup>9</sup>

#### *Ban on dance bars in Maharashtra (2005)*

Around the 1960s, bars in Mumbai began showcasing live dance performances to attract patrons. This coincided with the rise in popularity of sexually provocative item numbers in Bollywood films. The dancers in these bars imitated these item numbers, which heavily influenced their choice of music, costume, and choreography.<sup>10</sup> These bars provided a source of livelihood for women from the red-light district, for whom performing in bars was a more dignified alternative to providing services in brothels. It also offered a professional avenue for women from traditional performing communities, who were suffering from a decline in patronage of their work.<sup>11</sup>

In 2005, the Maharashtra government imposed a ban on dance bars on grounds of obscenity and immorality. The double standard being applied to the Bollywood item girls, performing on-screen or at elite venues, and the bar girls that performed the exact same numbers in lower-class locales did not go unnoticed. Mumbai’s Bar Dancers’ Union protested the ban and demanded the right to dance to earn a livelihood. The ban was challenged in the Bombay High Court on grounds of infringement of the rights under Article 14 and Article 19 of the Constitution. In 2005, the High Court ruled that the ban infringed both these rights and overturned it, and this decision was upheld by the Supreme Court in 2013.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the Maharashtra Government has continuously attempted to circumvent the directions of the higher judiciary by enacting new legislations that indirectly place restrictions on dance bars.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Film Censorship*

The Cinematograph Act of 1952 provides for certain ‘censorship guidelines’ that are supposed to guide Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC) in determining whether and to what extent to certify movies for public exhibition.<sup>14</sup> While most item numbers, despite their overt depiction of women as sexual ‘objects’, manage to evade censorship, it is films that depict women as sexual ‘subjects’, expressing sexual agency and sexual desires that have more consistently faced censorship,<sup>15</sup> either as a result of the Censor Board’s refusal of certification, or

<sup>7</sup> Richa Kaul Padte, *Keeping women safe? Gender, online harassment and Indian law*, INTERNET DEMOCRACY PROJECT, available at: <https://internetdemocracy.in/reports/keeping-women-safe-gender-online-harassment-and-indian-law/>.

<sup>8</sup> Madhu Kishwar & Ruth Vanita, *Using Women as a Pretext for Repression – The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Bill*, 37 MANUSHI, 2, 5 (1987).

<sup>9</sup> See Flavia Agnes, *Hypocritical Morality: Mumbai’s Ban on Bar Dancers*, 149 MANUSHI, 10 (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Agnes, *supra* note 9, at 11.

<sup>11</sup> Agnes, *supra* note 9, at 11.

<sup>12</sup> Utkarsh Srivastava, *Maharashtra’s Ban on Dance Bars Has Done More Harm Than Good*, THE WIRE (28 Mar, 2013) available at <https://thewire.in/25572/maharashtras-ban-on-dance-bars-has-done-more-harm-than-good/>.

<sup>13</sup> *SC seeks Maharashtra response on dance bar ban*, TIMES OF INDIA (3 Mar, 2017) available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/mumbai/sc-seeks-state-response-on-dance-bar-ban/articleshow/57436965.cms>.

<sup>14</sup> Derek Bose, BRAND BOLLYWOOD, 142 (2006).

<sup>15</sup> Monika Mehta, *What is behind film censorship? The Khalnayak debates*, 5(3) JOUVERT: A JOURNAL OF POSTCOLONIAL STUDIES (2001).

as a result of protests by right-wing Hindu groups.

For instance, *Fire*, a 1996 film based on a lesbian relationship between two married Indian Hindu women, was met with violent protests from Shiv Sena, Bajrang Dal, and BJP workers who attacked cinema halls, demonstrated outside the actor's house, and vandalized the movie posters.<sup>16</sup> The fact that the protestors effectively managed to halt the screening of the film despite the Censor Board having approved it twice reflects the immense power of the non-governmental moral police to determine what depictions of Indian women's sexuality are appropriate for exhibition in public spaces.<sup>17</sup>

More recently, *Lipstick Under my Burkha* (2017), a film exploring the secret fantasies and sexual desires of four women in small-town India was initially refused certification by the CBFC for being "lady oriented".<sup>18</sup> A movie intended to shed light on the issue of the suppression of female sexuality in India thus fell prey to that very phenomenon. Ultimately, the decision was reversed by an appeals board, and the film was released.<sup>19</sup>

### **Bollywood "item numbers"**

#### *Introduction*

The word "item" being synonymous with "object", the objectification in referring to performing women as "item girls" and their performances as "item numbers" is apparent. The phrase "item number" was first used by the media as late as 1999, to describe Shilpa Shetty's performance in *Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne (Shool)*. The term has since been used to re-label performances from as far back as the 1950s.<sup>20</sup> The notion of the item girl has therefore replaced that of the cabaret dancer, the bar dancer, the folk dancer, and even the courtesan in the modern-day Bollywood-consumer's imagination.

The defining feature of an item number is that it is a song and dance sequence performed by a female that is immediately and obviously catering to the voyeuristic, heterosexual male gaze. Any stricter definition of "item number" would be a failure to acknowledge the myriad ways in which such performances have evolved over the years while, at their essence, continuing to offer up the female body as an object for sexual consumption. This "know it when you see it" definition of item numbers may be forgiven once it is observed that almost all elements of these performances – casting, costume, choreography, music, lyrics, lighting, and camerawork – function primarily to maximise both the sexualisation and the objectification of the performer.<sup>21</sup>

The visual spectacle of an item number is carefully constructed to reduce the item girl to the sum total of her body parts, rather than portray her as a whole person. The choreography involves purposeful thrusts of the breasts and pelvis, in a manner that is evocative of sexual acts. This effect is exaggerated by camerawork that, instead of displaying the woman as a whole, tends to involve a series of rapid cuts focusing on her chest, midriff, legs, eyes, and mouth. While the costumes in earlier item numbers comprised tight-fitting dresses that were decidedly Western,<sup>22</sup> they now almost always consist of sexualized versions of traditional Indian clothing,<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Barry Bearak, *New Delhi Journal: A Lesbian Idyll, and the Movie Theaters Surrender*, THE NEW YORK TIMES (24 Dec, 1998) available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/24/world/new-delhi-journal-a-lesbian-idyll-and-the-movie-theaters-surrender.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Pallavi Jha, *Representation of women in Indian Cinema: Analysis of Item Songs*, 3(4) HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES REVIEW, 190, 194 (2014); Madhu Trehan, 'When we don't get what we want, we have to get violent', HINDUSTAN TIMES (13 Dec, 1998) available at <https://archive.li/Ov7tv#selection-297.1-297.55>.

<sup>18</sup> *Censor Board refuses to certify 'Lipstick Under My Burkha'*, THE HINDU (23 Feb, 2017) available at <http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/censor-board-refuses-certificate-to-lady-oriented-lipstick-under-my-burkha/article17353939.ece>.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Safi, *Lipstick Under My Burkha's release hailed as victory for Indian women*, THE GUARDIAN (23 Jul, 2017) available at <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/23/lipstick-uner-my-burkha-release-hailed-as-victory-for-indian-women>.

<sup>20</sup> Rita Brara, *The Item Number: Cinesexuality in Bollywood and Social Life*, 45(23) ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL WEEKLY, 67, 69 (2010).

<sup>21</sup> See Laura Mulvey, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* in FILM THEORY AND CRITICISM : INTRODUCTORY READINGS, 833 (Leo Braudy & Marshall Cohen. eds., 1999).

<sup>22</sup> In 'Ek Do Teen' (Awaara, 1951), 'Mud mud ke na dekh' (Shree 420, 1955), 'Mera naam hain Shabnam' (Kati Patang, 1971), and 'Raat Baki Baat Baki' (Namak Halal, 1982) the item girl wears a Western dress.

<sup>23</sup> In 'I Love You' (Mr. India, 1987) and 'Tip tip barsa Pani' (Mohra, 1994), the item girl dances in a wet sari; In 'Chaiya Chaiya' (Dil Se, 1998), 'Kajra Re' (Bunty aur Babli, 2005), and 'Beedi Jalelei' (Omkara, 2006), the item girl wears a sexualised version of a ghagra choli; In 'Mungda Mungda' (Inkaar, 1978), 'Humko Aaj Kal Hai Intezaar' (Sailaab, 1990), and 'Chikni Chameli' (Agneepath, 2012), the item girl wears a sexualised version of a Koli Sari.

eroticizing the very attire that was once used to signal the ‘purity’ of the heroine.<sup>24</sup>

This is also true for the musical elements of an item number. In the 60s and 70s, even the choice of artiste for a Bollywood song was influenced by whether it was being sung for the heroine or the vamp. This is evident in the distinction between the work of sisters Lata Mangeshkar (whose high-pitched voice came to be associated with the pure femininity of the heroine) and Asha Bhosle (whose full-bodied voice came to be associated with the sexuality of the item girls of the time).<sup>25</sup> More recently, the lyrics in item numbers have become bolder in their objectification, by de-humanising,<sup>26</sup> infantilising,<sup>27</sup> or even analogizing women to food items.<sup>28</sup>

The item number is also designed to minimize any discomfort the male cinema-goer may experience in watching a sexualized performance in as public a space as a cinema hall. For instance, the staged performance within the film is invariably accompanied by its own on-screen audience. The onscreen audience may include a crowd of men, inebriated and openly leering at the girl while attempting to touch her.<sup>29</sup> Accordingly, the viewer in the cinema hall is absolved of any charge of voyeurism, as he is only “watching the watcher”. Often, the hero of the film will also be depicted, watching the item number impassively, as if to signify that men with strength of character may witness the performance without being morally corrupted. For instance, the hero is depicted as noticeably unimpressed and unaroused by the bar dancing item girls in *Ek Do Teen (Awaara, 1951)* and *Mungda Mungda (Inkaar, 1978)*. In *Chikni Chameli (Agneepath, 2012)*, the male protagonists are seen viewing the performance, almost bored by it, and using it as an opportunity to discuss their business with each other.

The overall trend towards hyper-sexualisation of item numbers is most apparent in comparing item numbers that have been re-made 20 to 30 years after the original. For instance, the 2006 remake of *Yeh Mera Dil (Don, 1978)* involves far more explicit physical intimacy between the item girl and the hero. Similarly, the courtesan’s attire during her performances is more revealing and tight-fitting in the 2006 remake of *Umrao Jaan (1981)*.

#### *Reconciling conflicting moralities*

The Hindi film industry has an interest in reconciling the State-imposed morality that directs the suppression of female sexuality with the factual reality of a massive demand for erotic performances in movies. The ultimate objective is to guard the film from the cut of the Censor Board or the opposition of the moral police forces while maximizing the economic profits that accrue from well-marketed hyper-sexualized song and dance sequences. Accordingly, Bollywood has resorted to a number of plot devices that allow it to display the sexualized female through the item number without condoning the *morality* of the performance. These include: having the ‘vamp’ perform the item number [1], having a dancer by profession in the film perform the item number [2], having the heroine perform the item number as a ‘noble sacrifice’ [3], and having the item number performed through an unexplained cameo disconnected from the plot [4].

#### The ‘vamp’

The most painstakingly obvious method of messaging the immorality of the item number was to assign its performance to the ‘vamp’, whose immoral and seductive persona was clearly and sharply contrasted with that of the virtuous heroine. This plot device is liberally employed in the early films of the 1950s-1970s. The vamp would occupy an obviously negative role in the overall plot by attempting to lure the hero away from the heroine. The audience is further discouraged from empathizing with her by dressing her in distinctively Western clothing in order to emphasise her otherness from the Indian Woman. With Helen, arguably the most famous item girl of the 50s-70s, her otherness was amplified by her ethnicity, her Anglo-Burmese background giving her a distinctly ‘foreign’ look.<sup>30</sup> Further, the item number would often explicitly include shots of the heroine, sari-clad and watching the spectacle with shock and evident disapproval. In *Mud Mud ke na Dekh (Shree 420, 1955)*, the vamp performs a cabaret number in a Western gown in an attempt to seduce the hero, while the heroine is seen leaving the venue of the performance, dressed modestly in a sari and crying. Similarly, in *Mera Naam Hain Shabnam*

<sup>24</sup> Rachel Dwyer, *The erotics of the wet sari in Hindi films*, 23(2) SOUTH ASIA: JOURNAL OF SOUTH ASIAN STUDIES, 143, 159 (2000).

<sup>25</sup> Jayson Beaster-Jones, BOLLYWOOD SOUNDS, 105 (2015).

<sup>26</sup> Raveena Tandon is referred to as ‘*mast cheez*’ (‘fun thing’) in ‘Tu Cheez Badi Hain Mast Mast’ (Mohra, 1994).

<sup>27</sup> Sunny Leone declares ‘*Baby doll main sone di*’ (‘I am a golden baby doll’) in ‘Baby Doll’ (Ragini MMS 2, 2014).

<sup>28</sup> Kareena Kapoor refers to herself as ‘*tandoori murg*’ (‘tandoori chicken’) in ‘Fevicol Se’ (Dabangg 2, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Such audiences are present in ‘Mungda Mungda’ (Inkaar, 1978), ‘Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne’ (Shool, 1999), ‘Beedi Jalelei’ (Omkaara, 2006), and ‘Munni Badnaam Hui’ (Dabangg, 2011).

<sup>30</sup> This distinctiveness is most exaggerated in Helen’s first item song ‘Mera Naam Chin Chin Chu’ (Howrah Bridge, 1958), a song with clear racial overtones in which she appears as a dancer from Shanghai.

(*Kati Patang*, 1971), the vamp performs a cabaret number in a tight-fitting Western costume, while the heroine sits and watches the performance disapprovingly, dressed in a strikingly plain white sari. However, the distinct character type of the vamp faded from Bollywood by the late 1970s,<sup>31</sup> and the film industry resorted to other, more subtle messaging tactics to highlight the moral wrongness of the item girl and her performance.

#### The dancer by profession

The need to explain the morality of a sexualized dance performance is often dispensed with by casting the item girl in the role of a dancer. Her performances are thereby rationalised as something *necessitated* by her profession, doing away with the need to characterise them as ‘good’ or ‘bad’. Examples of this plot device include Helen’s role as a casino performer in *Intaquam* (1969), Parveen Babi’s role as a cabaret performer in *Namak Halal* (1982), and Bipasha Basu’s role as a folk dancer in *Omkaara* (2006). Where it is the female lead who occupies the role of a dancer, much emphasis is laid on the fact that the profession of dance is one that has been *forced upon her*, and is not one that a virtuous woman would choose voluntarily. In *Tezaab* (1988), Madhuri Dixit is forced into becoming a dancer by her drunkard father, while in *Umrao Jaan* (1981), Rekha is kidnapped and sold to a brothel that trains young courtesans.

#### The heroine’s ‘noble sacrifice’

It was in the 1980s that Madhuri Dixit emerged on the scene as a leading female actress who was equally sought after for her dance performances. This also coincided with (or was perhaps triggered by) the economic liberalization of the country, which allowed for a far greater flow of “Western” media and products into India, influencing the appropriate standards of beauty, style, and sexuality of the modern woman.

Yet, where the item number was to be performed by the heroine, the plot would often construct unrealistic situations where the sexualized dance performance was made essential to achieve a noble end. In *Sailaab* (1990), Madhuri Dixit plays the lead female role of a doctor. In order to justify her item number performance in *Humko Aaj Kal Hai Intezaar*, we are informed that this dance is part of a performance in a “charity show” in aid of a cancer aid society. Similarly, in *Khalnayak* (1993), Madhuri Dixit’s infamous performance of *Choli Ke Peechhe Kya Hain* is justified because she is an undercover police officer posing as a folk dancer in order to seduce and ultimately apprehend the villainous gangster. Thus, while the dance is immoral when viewed in isolation, it is sanctified by virtue of its performance in pursuance of a just cause. Helen’s performance in *Don* (1978) to *Yeh Mera Dil* in order to seduce Don and have him arrested could be categorized either as a performance of a vamp or as a performance justified by ‘noble sacrifice’, depending largely on whether Don himself is categorized as a hero or a villain.

A variation on this plot device is where the item girl is victimised and is forcibly made to perform the particular dance sequence. Perhaps the most absurd manifestation of this plot device is Raveena Tandon’s performance in *Tu Cheez Badi Hain Mast Mast* (*Mohra*, 1994). This dance sequence is immediately preceded by a scene where the villain (played by Naseeruddin Shah) injects the female lead (Raveena Tandon) with a drug to induce ‘*badan mein garmi*’ (‘heat in body’), transforming her from an unwilling captive into a seductive dancer for her captor. It is worth noting that this item number is depicted, like all others, in a manner that glamorizes and objectifies the item girl, despite the entire performance being premised on a clear violation of her consent and sexual agency.

#### Cameos

The most common way of doing away with the need to explain the morality of the item number is to display it as an obviously independent component of the film, where the item girl appears on screen solely for the performance. The item girl is deprived of any name, identity, or position in the plot. This is the case with Cuckoo in *Ek Do Teen* (*Awaara*, 1951), Helen in *Mera Naam Chin Chin Chu* (*Howrah Bridge*, 1958), Helen in *Mehbooba Mehbooba* (*Sholay*, 1975), Helen in *Mungda Mungda* (*Inkaar*, 1978), Shilpa Shetty in *Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne* (*Shool*, 1999), Malaika Arora Khan in *Chaiya Chaiya* (*Dil Se*, 1998), Aishwarya Rai in *Kajra Re* (*Bunty aur Babli*, 2005), Malaika Arora Khan in *Munni Badnam Hui* (*Dabangg*, 2011), Kareena Kapoor in *Fevicol Se* (*Dabangg 2*, 2012), and Katrina Kaif in *Chikni Chameli* (*Agneepath*, 2012). The trend from casting only ‘*nautch girls*’, who were “cinematically and socially typecast in their roles”,<sup>32</sup> to casting A-list actresses in item numbers is evident, and suggestive of an increasing normalization of sexualized women in Bollywood.

#### Conclusions

The Indian State as well as the Hindi film industry demonstrate a hypocritical morality towards the sexualized

<sup>31</sup> Sangita Shreshthova, IS IT ALL ABOUT HIPS?, 66 (2011).

<sup>32</sup> Brara, *supra* note 20, at 69.

Indian woman.

The Indian State, through the Indecent Representation of Women Act, demonstrates a belief that public morality is inextricably linked to the ‘sexless’ Indian women, with no regard for the value of consensual and meaningful depictions of female sexuality. The moralizing overtones of the ban on dance bars in Mumbai also makes clear that the right to earn a livelihood through the sexualisation of one’s body is the preserve of Bollywood actresses and dancers at elite venues. Finally, the trend towards censorship of films reveals the stark contrast. On the one hand, the vast majority of mainstream Bollywood films easily obtain certification despite their blatant objectification and sexualization of women, especially through item numbers. On the other, films that portray women as sexual ‘subjects’ with desires, fantasies, and the agency to fulfil them invite the wrath of right-wing Hindu activists as well as the Censor Board. In keeping with this morality, Bollywood has employed several plot devices in order to preserve and present item numbers for the titillation of the cinema-goer while ensuring that the item girl never occupies a position in the narrative that would have the effect of normalizing or legitimizing her overly sexual performance. Thus, the Indian State and Indian film industry have come together to ensure that the only permissible public depiction of female sexuality is one that is stripped of its agency and reduced to a de-humanised, objectified form, tailored exclusively for male heterosexual consumption. The very nature of item numbers, as is evident through their lyrics, music, choreography, costume, camerawork, and position in the overall plot are such that they will always remain fantastical spectacles of women ‘to be looked at’<sup>33</sup> rather than meaningful, empowering, or relatable depictions of female sexuality. However, there do exist some promising trends in Bollywood, both of a diminishing reliance on the needless insertion of item numbers into movies to attract audiences as well as of the creation of films that directly engage with the issue of the suppression and under-representation of female sexuality in India.

Table 1.

	Year	Item girl – Song – Movie	Role of item girl	Purpose of item number
1.	1951	Cuckoo – Ek Do Teen – Awaara	Cameo	Entertaining the bar patrons
2.	1955	Nadira – Mud mud ken a dekh – Shree 420	Vamp	Seducing the hero
3.	1958	Helen – Mera Naam Chin Chin Chu – Howrah Bridge	Cameo	Entertaining the hotel patrons
4.	1966	Helen – Oh Haseeno Zulfon Waali – Teesri Manzil	Supporting role	Entertaining the hotel patrons
5.	1969	Helen – Aa Jaane Jaan – Intaquam	Supporting role	Entertaining the casino patrons
6.	1971	Bindu – Mera Naam Hain Shabnam – Kati Patang	Vamp	Entertaining the hotel patrons
7.	1975	Helen – Mehbooba Mehbooba – Sholay	Cameo	Seducing the villain
8.	1978	Helen – Mungda Mungda - Inkaar	Cameo	Entertaining the bar patrons
9.	1978	Helen – Yeh Mera Dil – Don	Supporting role	Seducing the hero
10.	1981	Rekha – Dil Cheez Kya Hain – Umrao Jaan	Heroine	Entertaining as a <i>tawaif</i>
11.	1982	Parveen Babi – Raat Baki Baat Baki – Namak Halal	Supporting role	Entertaining the hotel patrons

<sup>33</sup> Mulvey, *supra* note 21, at 837.

12.	1987	Sridevi – I Love You – Mr. India	Heroine	Fantatising about the hero
13.	1988	Madhuri Dixit – Ek Do Teen - Tezaab	Heroine	Entertaining a public crowd
14.	1990	Madhuri Dixit - Humko Aaj Kal Hai Intezaar – Sailaab	Heroine	Performing in a “charity show” in aid of cancer aid society
15.	1993	Madhuri Dixit & Neena Gupta – Choli Ke Peeche - Khalnayak	Heroine	Seducing the hero, a criminal, so that he can be apprehended
16.	1994	Raveena Tandon – Tip tip barsa pani – Mohra	Heroine	Seducing the hero
17.	1994	Raveena Tandon –Tu Cheez Badi Hain Mast Mast – Mohra	Heroine	Seducing the villain (while drugged)
18.	1999	Shilpa Shetty – Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne – Shool	Cameo	
19.	1998	Malaika Arora Khan – Chaiya Chaiya – Dil Se	Cameo	
20.	2005	Aishwarya Rai – Kajra Re Bunty aur Babli	Cameo	
21.	2006	Aishwarya Rai – Salaam – Umrao Jaan	Heroine	Entertaining as a <i>tawaif</i>
22.	2006	Bipasha Basu – Beedi Jalelei & Namak – Omkara	Supporting role	Entertaining a public crowd
23.	2006	Kareena Kapoor – Yeh Mera Dil - Don	Supporting role	Seducing the hero
24.	2011	Malaika Arora Khan – Munni Badnam Hui – Dabangg	Cameo	
25.	2012	Kareena Kapoor – Fevicol Se – Dabangg 2	Cameo	
26.	2012	Katrina Kaif – Chikni Chameli - Agneepath	Cameo	
27.	2014	Sunny Leone – Babydoll – Ragini MMS 2	Heroine	

## References

Barry Bearak, *New Delhi Journal; A Lesbian Idyll, and the Movie Theaters Surrender*, The New York Times (24 Dec, 1998) available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/12/24/world/new-delhi-journal-a-lesbian-idyll-and-the-movie-theaters-surrender.html>

*Censor Board refuses to certify 'Lipstick Under My Burkha'*, The Hindu (23 Feb, 2017) available at <http://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/censor-board-refuses-certificate-to-lady-oriented-lipstick-under-my-burkha/article17353939.ece>

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