The Bollywood Item Number: From Mujra to Modern Day Ramifications

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THE BOLLYWOOD ITEM NUMBER: FROM MUJRA TO MODERN DAY RAMIFICATIONS

by

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SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS

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April 26, 2013
Abstract

This thesis deals with the “item number” genre of Bollywood song and dance sequences. I argue that the item song has evolved from a combination of the historically rich culture of prostitution in old India and the western influence of modern times; and that it contributes highly to the male dominated patriarchal society perpetuated by Hindi films by means of the voyeuristic male gaze and objectification of the female body. In conjunction with this research I choreographed a dance called Item No. 3 that was performed in Scripps Dances 2013. A discussion of the significance and decisions behind the choreography is also included in this written document. A record of the performance as available on DVD through the Scripps College Dance Department or at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVNztFuezEc.
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Introduction

Much attention has been paid to the attribution of Bollywood as a platform for the construction of shared national identity for Indians all around the world. Texts like Sumita Chakravarty’s *National Identity in Indian Popular Cinema*, and Vijay Mishra’s *Bollywood Cinema: Temples of Desire*; have suggested that popular Hindi cinema is responsible for creating a sense of belonging to the nation. In fact, Vijay Mishra’s book equates watching Bollywood to the shared cultural experience of reading a newspaper, which in turn establishes a sense of national identity and belonging. Anjali Gera Roy, in Chapter 3 of *Bollywood and Globalization: Indian Popular Cinema, Nation, and Diaspora* states that, “most studies concur that the simulacra of Hindi Cinema partially facilitated the conformation, if not construction, of the Indian nation and Indian modernity.”¹ This elevates popular Hindi cinema from a form of entertainment, to a place of cultural construction, representation and influence.

The discussion of Bollywood is highly incomplete without the discussion of its song and dance; rather the discussion of Bollywood cinema often turns into a discussion of its song and dance sequences. Some say these sequences are disruptive to the narrative structure and some say that they are what make the movies. Regardless of its role, the long-standing existence of song and dance in

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Bollywood suggests that it "is the single most enduring feature of popular Hindi cinema"\(^2\) and while "song and dance is by no means the only remarkable feature of Hindi popular cinema, it is a deep structure of this tradition and crucial to the way it is described by both insiders and outsiders."\(^3\) Bollywood music and dance have their roots in Indian classical, folk, as well as Western music and dance and have often been characterized as national pop music. And, in effect, even the criticisms of the existence of these song and dance sequences in movies have helped it to gain greater legitimacy; academic attention has been paid by film scholars, sociologists, creative writers, as well as anthropologists, and elevated its status to a fundamental feature of Bollywood movies and also the key feature that differentiates it from World Cinema.\(^4\)

These song and dance sequences are of many different kinds and are used to express what cannot be said with words, or are taboo in the culture. Song and dance sequences often involve romance, allusions of sexual interaction, expressions of strong emotions, celebratory purposes, etc. As Anjali Gera Roy outlines very well, “the Bollywood song and dance routine is seen as performing a wide range of functions including heightening a situation, accentuating a mood, commenting on


\(^3\) Gopal and Moorti, 2

\(^4\) *Bollywood and Globalization*, 36
theme and action, providing relief and serving as interior monologue.”

Another very important and more controversial function that these songs fulfill is that of a catalyst to ensure commercial success, and the genre of Bollywood song and dance that fulfills, almost solely, this function is the “item number”. The item number is probably the only type of song and dance that has almost no other function than to sexually provoke the audience, which translates into a raise in the commercial viability of the film. I argue that the item song has evolved from a combination of the historically rich culture of prostitution in old India and the western influence of modern times; and that it contributes highly to the male dominated patriarchal society perpetuated by Hindi films by means of the voyeuristic male gaze and objectification of the female body.

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5 Bollywood and Globalization, 36
The Item Number

The item numbers of today are the most controversial genres of Bollywood song and dance; Anjali Gera Roy’s description sums it up perfectly, when she says “[t]he Item number is a dance sequence of raunchy movements and risqué lyrics with little relation to the plot line...In keeping with Bollywood’s libidinous drive, an item number is normally added to generate publicity, to guarantee the film’s box office success and ensure repeat viewings.”6 The songs are usually featured in a party, prostitution or villainous lair scene. The common features of an item song are a highly eroticized female figure who is scantily clad, dancing provocatively surrounded by a host of men who are usually shown using some sort of intoxicating substance, gawking, cat calling, and making suggestive gestures in relation to the female figure’s body and sex appeal. The songs have obnoxiously sexual lyrics, which objectify the woman even further; and the camera drives the point home by focusing on the parts of the body that are bare or erotic. The music is very high energy and pulsating, thus making this genre very popular and widely played over music channels on TV, the radio and night clubs. All these features make the song a big contributor to the box office success of the movie it is from.

Because of its sexy nature, in the old days, the woman featured in this type of song was never a famous actress; a dancer or a vamp figure usually made a guest appearance.

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6 Bollywood and Globalization, 42
appearance in the film. This trend of item numbers started in the 1950’s (although the term was yet to be coined) and went on all the way till the 70’s. This character wasn’t meant to be villainous or wicked; she was meant to be an immodest, naughty woman that was sexually alluring, and one that smoked, and drank. An actress named Helen was by far the most sought after vamp figure of the era. She appeared in numbers that are popular even to the present day and have been remixed to fit today’s music taste. Some of her most famous songs are "Mera Naam Chin-Chin Choo" from the film *Howrah Bridge* (1958), "Piya Tu Ab To Aaja" from *Caravan* (1971), "Mehbooba Mehbooba" from *Sholay* (1975) and "Yeh Mera Dil" from *Don* (1978). Perhaps her Anglicized look catered to her vamp image and made her a more erotic figure in Indian cinema. She became so famous and sought after that a "Helen number" in the film ensured that the movie sold out.7

After Helen’s time there was a shift in the social climate of films. The vamp figure and heroine of the movie started to come closer together and it started to become acceptable for the heroine to perform the item number. In the 1980’s actress Madhuri Dixit starred in *Tezaab* (1988) and in it she performed the item

song “Ek Do Theen” which was added to the movie as an afterthought; however, it became the reason for the actress’s step into stardom. She is still considered one of the dancing legends of the Hindi film industry and with her started the trend of tribal or “banjaara” item numbers, which continued into the 1990’s. The choreography became sleeker and the item song became a regular addition in movies, absolutely regardless of the plot or storyline. Filmmakers invested huge amounts of money in these item numbers in order to make a grand production. The item number started featuring extravagant sets, large ensemble choreographies, expensive costumes and lots of extras. Everything became more exaggerated in order to encourage repeat viewings of the movie.

The term “item number” was formally coined in 1999 after the sequence “Main Aai Hoon UP Bihar Lootne” featuring actress Shilpa Shetty from the movie Shool. The style of the item number has remained almost constant since then, but it has evolved to become a hybrid of what was seen before, along with being more inclusive in terms of what kinds of people are featured in it. For example, the tradition of somebody other than the lead being the item girl has come back to a great extent (although the heroine of the film does do item songs occasionally) but unlike before it isn’t a vamp figure; the stigma attached to the role has been shed.
and now the item number commonly features many different kinds of people.

Leading actresses of Bollywood like Aishwarya Rai Bachchan, who is also former Miss World and daughter in law of India’s most famous movie star Amitabh Bachchan, did songs like “Ishq Kamina” in Shakti (1982) and “Kajra re” in Bunty Aur Babli (2005); another leading lady, Urmila Matondkar, did “Chamma Chamma” from China Gate (1998) which was later used in Baz Luhrmann’s musical Moulin Rouge (2001); and Kareena Kapoor, who is the daughter of one of Bollywood’s oldest and most prestigious film industry families, recently did songs like “Fevicol se” in Dabangg 2 (2012) and “Halkat Jawaani” in Heroine (2012). Apart from them, newcomers trying to make a name for themselves in the industry usually start off with doing item numbers in order to boost their careers. A good example is Jacqueline Fernandez, who did an item number “Dhanno” in the movie Housefull (2010) and later went on to star in the sequel of the same movie in 2012. Then there are some actresses like Malaika Arora Khan and Yana Gupta who have remained just item girls because they earn more than enough doing just the one song. Ultimately the item number has become a force to be reckoned with. It has been able to harness different types of female figures within Bollywood and almost every movie, regardless of its genre, in our time has a song of this nature in it.

Since the item numbers have become such a norm in the industry they have become more and more bizarre. Some over the top examples include, being filmed
on outlandish locations, “Chaiyya Chaiyya” in the movie Dil se (1998) was shot on top of a moving train; a non-Indian who isn’t even an actor or a dancer has played the item girl, a British model starred in “Imported Kamariya” in Shanghai (2012); 30 stars have been featured in one item number, “Deewangi Deewangi” in Om Shanti Om (2007) is an example of that; and movies have even started to have more than one item number, for example Billu (2009) and Heroine (2012) have three, and two item numbers respectively. As the market for the item number seems to keep growing, one must ask where did the notion of the item number come from and what effect does it have on society today?
Mujra – A Brief Description

“Mujra” emerged in the 16th to 19th century, during the Mughal rule, in northern India. Mujra was a dance form that was performed by courtesans in the Mughal courts and special venues known as “kothas.” It was a subtly sensual dance that had a heavy influence of “kathak,” which is the classical dance form of northern India. The courtesans, who spent entire evenings performing, danced mujra while surrounded by a ring of seated men as their audience. Susan Dewey has contextualized mujra and the courtesans very well,

Characterized by its soft eroticism, mujra was performed by courtesans called tawaif who were an integral part of life in the Mughal court. Mujra as a style of performance originated under the Mughal emperor Jahangir and truly flourished under Shah Jahan, who commissioned the Taj Mahal and invested enormous amounts of funds and resources in building palaces to house the tawaif who were proficient in mujra.10

The word “tawaif” was used to describe a courtesan who was highly skilled in dance, singing, as well as Urdu poetry. She was an important component of urban life during the Mughal period, and entry into the profession was strict. Mothers passed on the skill and connections to families to their daughters who in turn taught the sons of those families Urdu and poetry. A tawaif was the only kind of woman who

had access to education, the social right to interact with men, and sometimes
significant influence in politics due to her involvement with powerful men.

But with the decline of the Mughal empire, which was sustenance for the
courtesans, and the emergence of the British rule, the profession of tawaifs
degenerated. With their patrons and income gone, and western influence on social
thought, they were now considered “detrimental to society’s moral well-being.”

Today the word tawaif is considered synonymous with whore. Their rich and highly
impressive cultural background is forgotten, and their very technical and artistic
mujra is now synonymous with prostitute/bar dancing.

11 Dewey, 148
The Evolution of the Item Number from Mujra

The similarities of mujra and the item number are striking. Both dances are intentional attractions of the male gaze; both types of dance are used to describe bar dancing of today; both are linked to prostitution; both have been greatly affected by the west. The mujra was slandered and reduced to mere prostitute dancing, and the item numbers have become progressively more suggestive and the women have become more scantily clad due to western influence. I argue that the mujra slowly transformed to become what the item number is today.

The very idea of an item number, where women dance in the midst of men for their pleasure, has been taken from the 500 year old tradition of mujra, which became bar dancing and thus paved the way for the cultural existence of this scenario in real life and therefore its existence in movies. A proof of the evolution from mujra, is the similarity of the societal difference the performers of both types of dance have from the “regular women” of society. The tawaif was the only type of woman who was allowed to have contact with men and education; similarly it was acceptable for the early item girl to be immodest, and indulge in social activities associated with men like drinking and smoking.

Modern movies like *Mughal-e-azam* (1960), *Umrao Jaan* (1981 & remake 2006), and *Kisna* (2005) are among the many period films that depict the original
style of mujra. What is intriguing to me is that the portrayal of mujra in those films is very similar to the portrayal of the item number. The same emphasis is placed on the male onlookers of the performance; the performer has an erotic movement vocabulary; and, the lyrics are also on the seductive side. Therefore the mujra, albeit a subtler representation, is imagined to be the historical equivalent of the item number by filmmakers, and by extension, society.

Another, much more literal, equation of mujra and the item number, is the use of an actual mujra setting in some of the item numbers of today. “Dil Mera Muft Ka” from the movie Agent Vinod (2012), and “Anarkali Disco Chali” from the movie Housefull 2 (2012), with their identifiable mujra style of dress, music and interiors, alludes specifically to their historical equivalent. The lyrics of the song “Anarkali Disco Chali” are further confirmations of my assumption. They translate to, “after abandoning Salim’s street, Anarkali went to the disco.” Salim, later known as emperor Jahangir, was crown prince the son of Akbar, one of the most famous Mughal emperors that India knew, and Anarkali was the tawaif that he was in love with. Their story is a legend and believed to be highly embellished, yet its use in the lyrics of the very popular item number makes it very clear that the tawaif has left the Mughal courts and become the item girl we know on screen today.
The Voyeuristic Male Gaze and Social Repercussions

As mentioned in the introduction, films are very influential and relevant in India. They not only help create a sense of national identity, but also affect the construction of what is socially appropriate. In his book *Movies, Masculinity, and Modernity*, Steve Derné points out that, “Film and film going are part of the process through which Indian men embrace love and connection…but the sexuality that is depicted legitimizes the mistreatment of women and conditions men to control women.”\(^{12}\) The item number is a space where this is very evident; in fact it is the space where women even seem to enjoy the mistreatment. When the lustful gaze of the drooling male figures falls on the item girl, she seems to welcome and encourage it. In India specially, the family is given much more importance than a husband-wife relationship and talk of intimacy is taboo; therefore films are where young adults learn about sexuality and intimacy. Also films are a space where couples don’t usually go with their parents, making the cinema an impressionable avenue for the construction of sexuality. Also, the film world focuses on sexuality and this may encourage men to learn from what they see in the movies and assume that it is the norm. Derné asks a very important question: “[i]f films are a part of the process

through which men and women learn about sexuality, what is it that they are learning?”

Laura Mulvey’s argument is the most prominent argument in contemporary film theory. She separates visual pleasure/gaze by gender, where men gaze and women become the object of this gaze by displaying what she calls “to-be-looked-at-ness.” This perpetuates scopophilia (the pleasure of looking) and male dominance in a society that has gender inequality. Many have concurred with her argument. Derné states, “[c]onsistent with Mulvey’s expectations, Hindi films position male viewers to gaze at on-screen women by making women the object of both the camera’s gaze and the gaze of men within the narrative.”

Item numbers are an especially fitting example of this. The camera often zooms into exposed or sexy body parts of the item girl’s body and provokes the male gaze; but what is really interesting to me is that it shows the men gaping, jeering and salivating over the women; and puts the audience in a position to look at the act of looking; thus putting in place a double voyeurism. Moreover because Bollywood has such an influential role in people’s idea of sexuality, this sort of scene promotes the idea of women existing for the purpose of men’s pleasure, and the behavior of the lustful men on screen as what is expected and normal. Also, the structure of most item

13 Derné, 147
14 Derné, 147
15 Derné, 147 emphasis mine
songs progresses from the man just looking to the man interacting with the woman in quite a disrespectful manner, for example dancing with her very vulgarly or grabbing her. This drives home the notion that it is normal to mistreat women, and that they are in fact subordinate. What is worse is that the women in the item songs don’t seem to mind the behavior; rather they pride themselves on being able gain such a reaction and welcome the men. Derné writes about an account of a film critic who was appalled by how men stared at actress Shilpa Shirodkar after her performances in movie Trinetra (1991);

...even though she was dressed in the sort of “sober” salwar kamiz that men identify with Indianness. The columnist reported that the men “ogled” her with “hungry looks”: "I could see lust in their eyes and that is a very dangerous sight for me to see in the morning." The columnist recognized such looks as part of men’s control: “That morning I realized we are still far, far away from the civilized society we are living in or are claiming to live in...

Similarly, Derné also mentions how a film writer lamented that the dance performed by Karisma Kapoor in a swimsuit (Prem Qaidi 1991) would confuse the young generation, and perpetuate lust instead of love. Thus we get the chance to witness how films do affect social thought and how item numbers have a legitimate effect on people.

Having grown up in India watching item numbers all my life, my personal perspective was that they were very invigorating sequences. Contrary to what I have explained in this section, I always thought that the item number was an
empowering and liberating genre of dance for women; but I also had very little understanding of visual language and how people decode the visual information they receive. After having analyzed and noticed all the components of the item number, I don't think of it in the same way anymore. In fact, I think that item numbers perpetuate violence against women. Many have one woman surrounded by a crowd of men ogling and gaping at her, and all that comes to mind is the recent New Delhi gang rape case.16

My Choreography

My choreography is a representation of all the material I have put forth in this paper, as well as my personal feelings towards the item number and the opinions of my dancers who, for me, represent the western perspective. The dance was choreographed for seven dancers plus myself. All the dancers were dressed in traditional Bollywood clothing; modest versions of what item girls wear on screen today. The decision to make it more modest was to accommodate and acknowledge the history of the item number, and the mujra; both of which were subtler in terms of movement and clothing. The dance is divided into six sections, each of which is significant in terms of either contextualizing or analyzing the item number.

Link to view the choreography: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVNztFuezEc
Section 1

The intention of the first section of my dance is to introduce three things right away. First, and the most important, is the fact that we are dealing with non-western material; this section, with the use of language as well as the projections from Indian films, helps the viewer understand this, and the well-informed might even understand that it is referring to Bollywood.

Second, is the dominance of the male gaze; the projection, which is a compilation of the male onlookers from some item numbers, has fairly close-up shots of the gawking men. They are so overbearing that the dominance doesn’t just exist in the men’s gaze, but also in the visual language of the presentation because they are projected very large on to the backdrop of the stage and overpower the dancers. Also, the dancers have a deadpan expression when they are together, and their movement is restricted and upright. Conversely they are happy when they are away from the group, and their movements are more full bodied. Thus the clump signifies their submissiveness to the male gaze and their movements away from the clump signify their attempts to drift away from it; however eventually they do come back to the submissive clump. This section also representd the personal struggle that I faced when coming to terms with the fact that the item number is anything but empowering to women. Another point I hope to communicate, and which is congruent with the aspect of the male gaze, is the objectification of the female body. It is only implicit in this first section because the women don’t display any sexy
movements, but the voyeuristic nature and the expressions of the men in the projections along with the scenarios of drinking, smoking, and dingy locations make the objectification and scopophilia quite apparent.

The third is the double voyeurism that I mentioned before. I tried to recreate the experience of looking at the act of looking for my audience and by repeating the images of the most sleazy and lustful looking men, I hoped to over saturate them with it. The large size of the projection helped convey this overpowering sense too. I also tried to choose men of all ages, to show that this doesn't just apply to young men. My intention was to make my audience uncomfortable with the situation, and when the dancers saw the projection running behind them as they danced, it did make them uneasy too. The little spill of the projection on to the bodies of the dancers was also a happy accident in terms of what I was trying to achieve with the piece. Hence, this first section is meant to contextualize the whole dance as well as to bring forth the main concerns of my piece.
fig 1. Contrast of movement between the dancers in the clump and away from it.

fig 2. Man drinking in the projection and deadpan expression of the dancers in the clump.
Section 2

The second section of the choreography is an attempt to imitate the item numbers we see in movies today. I wanted explicitly to show the item number in all its glory. The intention was to educate the audience on my subject. I included the famous Shiva pose, splits and handstands to further signify the spectacle nature of the item number. The movements are very provocative and the expressions that the dancers exhibit are very seductive. I wanted the objectification of women aspect to jump out at the audience. I chose to position them in a V for this very reason; a V formation is almost like an attack in my opinion, because it seems like arrow-head pointed towards the audience.

I wished that the audience understood the lyrics of the songs that I picked because they are all very relevant and intentional. To explain how obscenely objectifying the lyrics of the item song are, I include a translation of a portion of the song that I have used in this section:

\textit{Aa re pritam pyare}  
\textit{Bandook mein naa toh goli mere (x3)}  
Come O lovable sweetheart  
My gun doesn't have any bullets

\textit{Sab aag toh mere kurti mein re}  
\textit{Zara hukka utha zarrra chillam jala}  
But the fire is in my 'kurti'(Top)  
Pick up the hookah, light the ‘chillam'(the bowl where the coal is placed on the hookah)
Pallu ke neeche chupa ke rakha hai  
Utha doon toh hungama ho....  
I have hidden it under my ‘pallu’ (the part of the cloth that goes over the shoulder in a sari)  
If lifted, it will create havoc

The repeated use of phallic symbols like guns and hookahs is commonplace. In India almost every type of traditional dress has a piece of cloth which is used to cover the woman’s torso, the sari has the ‘pallu’ and the salwar and lehenga/ghagra have the ‘dupatta’ or ‘chunari’. This piece of cloth is also the metaphorical equivalent of the character and modesty of the woman. Thus when it says that if the cloth is lifted it will create havoc, apart from literally exposing the woman’s body, it also means that if the woman lets go of her modesty it will create an experience that will create havoc (in a lustful sense) for the man. Item girls don’t typically wear this piece of cloth even though they refer to it in the songs; therefore, I intentionally didn’t include it in the costumes for the dancers. But since I did want to acknowledge its symbolic value, I included it in my costume, which is explained in the fourth section of the choreography.
fig 3. The V formation.

fig 4. The “Shiva pose”.

Section 3

This section deals with the mujra, which is the predecessor of the item number. I have chosen a song from *Umrao Jaan* (1981). It is one of the period based films that depict the original style of mujra. The story is from a famous Urdu novel *Umrao Jaan Ada* by Mirza Hadi Ruswa published in 1899. The novel is meant to be a true story, but its authenticity has not been validated, although there is some documentation of some of its components. The story is the life of an accomplished tawaif in Lucknow in the mid 19th century. The song that the choreography is set to is “In Aankhon Ki Masti” which means “The charm of these eyes”, the song is about the tawaif’s captivating eyes which has thousands of people madly in love with her. I chose to start this sequence with three dancers in order to focus on the detailed expressions and delicate movement. The song in contrast to the item number is a very subtle song, yet it is very seductive and sensual. The movement reflects the nature of the lyrics; it is very intricate and gestural with nuanced wrist movements. The movement has a flirtatious air to it, but it is very reserved; yet one can see traces of the item number in it.
fig 5. The reserved flirtation reflected in the expressions.

fig 6. Subtlety of expressions and intricacy of wrist movement.
Section 4

This is the solo that I choreographed on myself. It is a gestural choreography akin to the mujra. The dance doesn't move around in space, the movements are delicate and the expressions are as much a part of the choreography as the movement itself. The sadness and sense of defeat that accompany the piece hinge on the expressions, and because the expressions are so important and the movements are smaller, the choreography is placed extremely downstage, where it can be close to the audience. It is also placed this far downstage because it is about my personal perspective, and reactions, and it is meant to interact with the audience. I repeatedly look and point at the audience in an attempt to ask them a question and flip the traditional use of the gaze. The song I have chosen for this choreography is from the 2006 remake of Umrao Jaan, and it is called “Pooch Rahe Hain” which means “They are asking.” The lyrics of the song are very poignant and very relevant to the choreography. A section of it translated is:

*Pooch rahe hain, Poochne waale
Lekin hum batlaaye kya*
They are asking, The people who always ask
But what should I tell them

*Daagh yeh dil ne paaye hain kaise
Unko hum samjhaaye kya*
How my heart got these stains
How can I explain it to them

*Kitne daagh hai iss daaman mein
Kitne daagh hai maathe par*
How many stains there are on this “daaman” (another reference to the metaphoric cloth)
And on my head

Jo humko apna sakte the
Sach hai humein apnaaye kya
When those who could have kept me close didn’t
Why should anyone else

The song drips with sarcasm, and we see the reappearance of the metaphorical cloth, which has stains on it, meaning her character has been stained and she doesn’t think anybody will understand her side of the story, so there is no point in trying to explain her situation. The reason I chose this song is because I feel the same way about the item number. I hate what it perpetuates but there is no use of explaining it to a patriarchal society, which will never understand. It is a sad attempt to educate the viewer of the pain that I feel as a woman who wants to be confident and respected, and not objectified. At the end of this piece, I grab the “daaman” as I sit down to watch the rest of the dancers as they come on stage for the next section. I wrap the “daaman,” which is the metaphorical piece of cloth that this song refers to, around myself in an attempt to reclaim it, and reject the “stains” along with society’s view of the item number.
fig 7. The pointing at the audience and positioning of the dance downstage.

fig 8. The presence of the “daaman” in the costume and the importance of expression in the dance.
Section 5

This section is set to the voices of the dancers. It tells the audience in the words of the dancers what they feel when they are dancing the item song and what they think about it after having had experience with it for the entire year. The intention of this section is to give the dancers, the item girl and the tawaif a voice and to also incorporate the perspective of my dancers who represent the western response to the item number. This section had the most interesting process. It was choreographed after I had the dancers improvise movement using an exercise demonstrated to me by guest artist and kathak dancer Sheetal Gandhi during Suchi Branfmann’s improvisation class. The exercise was to visualize that one was in a cube around 6ft wide; and that the front and back of the palm, as well as the nose, had paintbrushes on them. The task was to paint the walls and edges of the cube. Using this exercise I asked each dancer to develop an eight-count solo, then the phrases were strung together in the order of when the individual dancer’s voice appeared in the music compilation of their voices.

The voices were not meant to be completely decipherable; instead I chose to highlight certain phrases that were the most relevant in each dancer’s opinion. Some excerpts are “I enjoy it,” “it makes me feel exotic,” “sexy,” “I feel powerful and I can do whatever I want,” “sort of angry,” “for someone else,” “male dominated society,” “sexy and empowering,” “for myself,” “for the man, the male gaze.” The sound score starts to get angrier as it progresses, and at the end all the dancers are
frozen in a position where they are facing away from their hands, and the voices start to fade away until there is a single soft voice that can barely be heard say "for the man, for the male gaze."

fig 9. The frozen last position of the dancers looking away from their hands.
Section 6

This last section is choreographed to the title track of *Laaga Chunari Mein Daag* (2007), which means “the cloth has been stained.” This is yet another appearance of the metaphorical cloth in relation to a woman’s character. The story of the movie is about a girl who goes into a big city to get a job, but her innocence is taken advantage of and she ends up becoming a prostitute/escort. The song is about her transition into the life of a prostitute. Again, the lyrics of the song are very relevant to the choreography:

*Meri Laaj Main Hoon, Chunar Bhi Main Hoon*
*Chunar Pe Daag Bhi Main*
I am my shame; I am also my cloth
I am also the stain on the cloth

*Ho Gayi Maili Mori Chunariya*
*Kore Badan Si Kori Chunariya*
My cloth has become dirty
The cloth that was as untouched as my body

*Haan Jaake Babul Se Nazaren Milaun Kaise*
*Ghar Jaun Kaise*
Yes, how can I go and look into my father’s eyes?
How can I go home?

The choreography starts with four short solos; the lead of the mujra section does some part of that choreography, she is followed by the lead of the item number, then it moves to a dancer who is studying and writing, which is meant to allude to the educated tawaif, followed by a dancer looking into a mirror and fixing herself up
and is meant to allude to the importance of gaze as well as emphasis of the physical demand of beauty placed in the item girl. The choreography then shifts to a desperate attempt to get rid of something that seems to cling to the dancers’ skin.

For me this indicated trying to get rid of the objectifying male gaze, the socially warped concept of sexuality, the stigma attached to the word tawaif and everything else that made me uncomfortable during the process of making this work. The choreography ends with all dancers in a line far downstage looking at the audience. The significance of the end is to empower the dancer with the gaze that has so often been used against her.

fig 10. The four solos.
fig 11. The end of the dance where the dancers gaze back at the audience.
Conclusion

My mother was always astonished by my ability to memorize dances and even entire scenes from Bollywood movies; she couldn't believe how much I knew about every movie ranging from the blockbusters to the absolutely obscure films that nobody watched. She always told me that if I had paid that much attention to my academics I would have ranked first in school (which is every parent's dream in India). The production of the dance as well as the research has been a very rewarding experience for me. I have had the chance to turn my unusual interest in Bollywood into an academic discourse that deals with issues that I learnt to understand and acknowledge as a Scripps student. Thus this thesis is not only a culmination of my four years at Scripps, but also a chance to integrate my Indian culture to my experience as a college student here in the United States.

Although this creation seems to have reached its climax, I aspire to develop it further when I am back in India. I am intrigued by the thought of how it might be received by an Indian audience in a non-academic setting. The idea of it being performed by a completely Indian cast is also a fascinating thought. And even though, it might be impossible, it would be very interesting for me to be able to see the dance performed by the present cast along side the cast I hope to develop in India. Also, the inclusion of the voices of the new dancers would be an exciting project for me to pursue. I would perhaps include the voices of my friends and family members in India as well, because culturally they would all have a general
understanding of the topic. I believe my thesis deals with subjects that are very relevant in India today; with the regular appearance of item numbers, as well as issues related to violence against women in the Indian news. I think that the Indian audience might be quite interested in this thesis and the fact that it links the two topics together.
Epilogue – The Production of the Dance

The process of the choreography of Item No. 3 started with the fall auditions of In the Works dance concert in early September 2012. I had prepared little excerpts of choreography for the audition, which went on to becoming phrases in the item number and mujra section. I chose dancers based not only on their ability to grasp the material I had presented, but also based on their interest in my piece. Nidhi Gandhi (PO ’15), Stella Hoft (PZ ’16), Susie Klein (PZ‘15), Vivienne Muller (SC ’16), Elissa Rowe (PZ ’13) and Xiau-Ling Wee (PZ ’14) became my cast.

In the Works is a dance concert of all five Claremont colleges’ student choreography and takes place every fall at Pomona College. For this show, which was performed on December 6th and 7th 2012, I had completed only half of the choreography. It started with the item number, then the mujra, and the last section was the same, with the exception that it did not include my role. The item number and the mujra sequences were the easiest ones for me to choreograph. They were both very direct reproductions of what one sees in Bollywood movies, and they both didn’t really include any analysis of my own. The last section on the other hand was more ambiguous and little harder for me to conceptualize, although it was the easiest section to teach in terms of the movement, which wasn’t very stylized. The mujra section was the one that proved to be the hardest to teach; the intricate isolations and wrist movements were very difficult for me to explain to the dancers,
who were trained in western techniques and therefore weren’t used to using their bodies in that way. Another aspect that I had a lot of difficulty with was expressions; the two hours that we met for every Wednesday night, was spent mostly by me trying to instill the attitude of the dance in the cast. I got the same criticism during the showings of my piece. Showings are the evaluations conducted by the professors from the dance departments on campus during the development period of the piece. The first showing was conducted a couple of months after the auditions and the second was around three weeks before the show. The dancers accepted the criticism well and eventually they did get the choreography and the expressions right. What really helped them was practicing in costume, which got them into the character and made it easier for them to be a little theatrical\textsuperscript{17}. By the time \textit{In The Works} came around, they were ready.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{17} At my request my mother bought the costumes in India and let me use them throughout the year for my thesis. I would like to credit her for choosing them and trusting my dancers and me with them for the whole year.\end{flushleft}
fig 12. From the item number sequence

fig 13. From the mujra sequence
After that performance was over it became very difficult for me to develop the piece further. When I came back at the end of winter break in January I was completely lost on how I would go about finishing the piece. I was so confused that I started practices an entire month after school had started. I had to also find a new dancer to replace Xiau-Ling because she was abroad for the semester. Alison Pagan (PO’15) helped me out tremendously by agreeing to take Xiau-Ling’s place.

I had had the idea of using the dancers’ voices for a while but I did not know how to actually make it happen; I did not know how I was going to signify the male gaze and incorporate my personal feelings. Then I started choreographing the first
section and slowly things started to fall in place. I had the idea of using projections and then I started feeling very confident about the piece again. But the desire to use projections and my dancers’ voices forced me to teach myself how to edit video and sound.

Creating the voice compilation was quite a process. After recording all the dancers’ voices I had to figure out a way for them to blend with the rest of the dance. So I started to establish rules. I decided that I didn’t want the spoken word to be completely linear and didn’t want the audience to ever hear full sentences; I also wanted some sort of drum beat in the background. Initially I had thought of picking and repeating a word or a phrase spoken by each dancer, but when I actually sat down to start editing the music with Elissa Rowe, who is one of the dancers and also the co-composer of the soundtrack, she had the idea of overlapping the voices instead of cutting them and I ended up liking that idea better. We took a long time to find the beat that went in the background. After I determined that I wanted an Indian drumbeat, I had the idea of looking for “tabla” beats, which is the drum used during kathak and mujra dancing. It took us a while but eventually we were able to find a suitable one. I have already explained the process of the choreography of this sequence in ‘Section 5’ of the ‘My Choreography’ chapter, which was also an interesting process.
The process of editing the video was similar except I did that by myself. Since I wanted to use clips from item numbers, this is one of the places where my obsessive knowledge of Bollywood was very helpful. I didn’t have to look too hard to find what I needed for this section, however the actual editing process was difficult since I had never edited video before. Coming up with my solo was another challenging process for me, but after I found the music I wanted to use, that too started to flow very effortlessly.

Though the creative process was tough this semester, the practices were a lot easier to conduct, the dancers learnt the movement very quickly and I didn’t have to spend too much time trying to teach expression either. We met every Sunday for around three hours, but as it got closer to the time of the concert we started to meet sporadically during weekdays as well. The showings were conducted the same way as the previous semester and they went smoothly.

The final choreography for Item No. 3 was shown at Scripps Dances, which took place on April 12th and 13th, 2013. The concert had works made by students as well as the Scripps dance faculty. It was an honor to share the stage with my dancers and all the other performers. The show went off very smoothly and my dance got better with each performance. It was a very gratifying experience and I will always cherish it.
Bibliography


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Fig 1-4, fig 7, fig 9-11 are film stills from the video recorded by the Scripps Dance Department on the night of the Saturday April 13th performance.

Fig 5, fig 6, fig 8, are photographs by Dani Roach from the Scripps College, Public Relations Office.

Fig 12-14 were photographed by me during the dress rehearsal of In the Works 2012