

## Club and Courtyard: Study on the Intersection of Bollywood Item Numbers and 'Hijra' Dance Tradition

Debasree Basu\*

Division of Languages, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Noida, India

\*Corresponding author: Debasree B, Division of Languages, Amity University, Uttar Pradesh, Noida, India, Tel: 0120-244-5252; E-mail: [debasree.basu@gmail.com](mailto:debasree.basu@gmail.com)

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### Perspective

This article attempts to find a common space between Bollywood item numbers and hijra (transgender) dance performances exploring gender, sexuality and the idea that significance of body is especially problematic for these dancers. Constantly vulnerable to be presented as a disembodied ideal, these dancing bodies reveal a counter movement towards an understanding of dance as a bodily grounded art form. The article also traces the role of ritual and Dionysian ecstasy in their dance forms and different treatments in terms of display. It is the connection between the dancing body, desire, creativity and consciousness that occupies their center of rhythmic poetics. The dancer is preoccupied with dance as a fusion between eroticism and ritual. Transforming into a concrete and active natural, the dancer attains agency and subjectivity.

“...Locking rhythms to the beat of her heart

Changing woman into life

She has danced into the danger zone

When a dancer becomes a dance.

It can cut you like a knife

If the gift becomes a fire

On a wire between will and what will be.

She's a maniac, maniac on the floor

And she's dancing like she's never danced before...”

(*Flashdance*, 1983)<sup>1</sup>.

Dance in Hindi cinema is a medium of expression, which translates our fantasies into screen 'realities' thereby circulating within and without the filmic space. While Hindi popular cinema has remained committed to the dominance of musical sequences, *filmi* song and dance has been a desirable companion frequently morphing into other forms such as belly dancing, salsa, hip-hop, jazz, and ballet and *item number*. An offshoot of this dance tradition in contemporary Bollywood cinema, item numbers, are usually presented by a performer who often is in no way related to the main plot but occupies that duration of screen time till which the performance lasts.

Item numbers are not, however, a new trend. Even in 1950s actors like Nadira and Helen performed some dances, which had cabaret movements to them, which could not be performed otherwise by the 'decent' female protagonists. But with the passage of time, the scope and nature of these 'item numbers' have undergone a transformation

and now mainstream actors are featuring in it catering to the promotion and marketing for the films' commercial success presenting them in a new format. Bollywood has always been a part of the production and circulation of film music. Far from being an additional element to the entertainment quotient, dance is the central axis along which desire and identification are reinscribed and reinforced as objects of aesthetic pleasures and transgressive renditions. The predominance of this dance mode might make more sense if we consider how we popularly think about item dance and how it contributes to the construction of cultural identity via one's body [1-6].

Usually staged in a discotheque or a nightclub, item numbers are a common convention in many popular Hindi films of today, set both in India and abroad. Conveying eroticism, the space provides a strategic opportunity to engage in overtly sexual situations that are strictly avoided under usual circumstances in Indian society. Encouraging physical proximity such song sequences are quite suggestive in their approach. Women who appear in item numbers often have little association with the main narrative of the film. Liberated from their inhibitions these dancers in revealing clothes trigger the latent sexual fantasies of the viewers.

The eroticism that is conveyed through the performances of item girls can be traced through 1950s and 1960s in the seduction scenes carried out by vamps. Through all these years dance has been used as a potent instrument by the femme fatales to entice the morally upright hero.

This rise of interest in the moving body is closely associated to a range of emotions and passion. The dancing female is a powerful, symbolic form, a platform on which gender politics are strengthened. She makes the dance sequences in the films a compelling spectacle. We want to watch her, we want to read her. We not only look at the dancing figure occupying a physical space, but the dance itself which provides us with several options of re-defining our ideas about dance as an expressional space that constantly negotiates the parameters of dichotomies (fantasy/real space, viewer-ship/performance domain, objectivity/subjectivity).

Hijras have had a dominating presence in the long and complex cultural history of India. They have closely featured in some of the country's most central theological, aesthetic and social ideologies. Since the hijra dance tradition is intertwined with religiosity, in this section, we shall discuss certain salient portrayals of hijras drawn from the religious and mythological texts of ancient and medieval India. Such texts for some reason appear to have provided fertile ground for discussion on gender and sexual ambiguity as in the iconographic representation of lord Shiva in the hermaphroditic form of

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the song 'Maniac' in the movie *Flashdance*. Music and Lyrics by Michael Sembello and Dennis Matkosky, performed by Sembello.

*Ardhanarishwar* (androgynous). An interesting variant of this motif is found in the widely known *Viraat* episode of *Mahabharat* in which the virile hero Arjun having rejected the sexual advances of the nymph Urvashi, is cursed by her to lose his manhood and become a *napunkshak*, a feminine transvestite of ambiguous sex and gender. But once again as is evident in the strong divine connotations regarding hijra representations, it is Urvashi's curse that provides the underlying explanation for the necessity of Arjun's adoption of the guise of Brihannala during Pandavas year of enforced concealment at the court of King Viraat [7-12].

Though it might be true that Hindu mythological texts showcase an abundance of asceticism and eroticism arguing for the non-exclusivity of traditional Indian thought, it alone does not validate for a penetrating analysis either in terms of traditional culture itself or of modern culture regarding the deeply prejudiced phenomenon of third gender. The presentation of hijras in a theological garb does to a certain extent 'otherize' them from the mainstream affairs. Society's ambivalent attitude towards them is influenced by their auspicious / inauspicious potential. Thus the patrons who are amused by their performance also experience an underlying anxiety about them. Representative of the loss of virility inspires fear and disgust. The strategy to abandon male sexuality and gender to 'become' a woman either in emotional / libidinal terms alone or completely through metamorphosis of a hijra does not quite resolve the sexual ambiguity. In other words much of the prejudice about the third gender generates from a primary anxiety in seeing moving bodies not in the form of culturally validated dancing figures.

In my attempt to locate a point of intersection between Bollywood item numbers and hijra dance tradition, certain disjunctions surface between their established 'cultural' identity and a variety in their 'social' identity in terms of gender and sexual orientations. The simultaneous disempowerment of item girls as supposedly derogatory and the construction of them as potent entertaining agents is a disturbing feature in contemporary society and culture the ubiquity of hijras is unlikely to be an exception. The attempt to find any association of Bollywood item numbers with that of hijra dance further problematizes the issue. The hijra dance performances are the most respectable and prestigious way to earn a living within their community, but the status of item girls despite their commercial success falls short of decency. Yet these item girls do cater to our culturally tutored gender normativity unlike the third gender who generate discomfort, as we are unable to categorize them within the binary of sexual orientations.

In this section I endeavour to consider dance as a text within the hijra community and in item numbers, surfacing the cultural and political concepts embedded/embodied in them. Dance presents a gendered identity that is grounded in a particular biological dancing body showcasing clear signs of sexual difference and at the same time constructed through performance. Item numbers and hijra dances are fundamentally remote from each other. But we would like to see the boundaries crossed and dissolved to create an undivided space wherein the respective inabilities and powers of dancing bodies can mingle: one that releases meaning into both culture and society. Dances have no existence except through the bodies, which produce and reproduce them. But the dancer's body is not merely a written page. It is an artifact of blood, flesh, organs and bone as well as a construct of social and cultural values meticulously grafted onto it. A precise reading of this dancing body can proceed if the readers'/spectators' gaze penetrate beneath the radiance of the bodies' surface.

Bodies have been static metaphors for unknown and mysterious forces signifying hidden desires and irrational impulses. This mind-body binary locates its consciousness in the moving body. The female dancing body simultaneously testifies for the fear and loathing that it inspires. Beautiful yet vulnerable, alluring yet dangerous, it is a source of pleasure and nurturance but also of destruction and evil a sight of powerful and conflicting passions [13-15].

If dance is considered to be a feminine space, it falls within the logic of a patriarchal social order that its power must be controlled and constrained; unlike the item numbers and hijra dance, which are articulate in their own autonomous and independent way, transcending social control that limit and reduce the potency of the dancing bodies. Both the dance forms are contingent to this world but create their own realities. They are not simply reflective of the existing social phenomenon, but gesture towards telling their own tales good or bad. Assigned a major role in the commercial economy but a minor one in the cultural domain, the in/outsider status of these dance forms simultaneously encode and decode the gender dichotomy within the parameters of their dancing space. They represent their dance forms and are not merely inscribed by them. Hence these dances are social practices that are nonetheless profoundly political. So both these dance forms in the changing imagery of their bodies deployment in space and time contains fragments of the bodies' political history.

Though dance forms are subject to constant redefinition, these contemporary examples can be studied as texts in which social, cultural and political values of the time are negotiated. Our tutored restraint towards bodies allows for the possibility of self-concealment. But the dance of a dancer who is within the line of vision of several viewers 'speaks up' there by escaping its elusiveness, making itself heard and becoming undeniably material. This becomes clear if we delve further in to the culture of such dances that offer its participants not only a belief system and behavioral codes but also a specific lingua for comprehension and communication.

Dancers are confronted with two bodies in their course of training-one that is 'easy' and other, which is 'difficult'. The 'easy' body is the perceived and tangible one that expresses pain, ache and exhaustion after a long days practice. This body also struggles to fulfill the demands imposed upon it by circumstances and subject positions. The 'difficult' body has a specific form and ability to perform difficult moves with ease. These two bodies constantly interact with each other. The beauty of this interaction is the realization that , it is not in the presentation of the human body as it is ; struggling and sweating, but in the stylization of it that the agency will be achieved, thereby creating a desire for the dance.

The item girls' body is oriented to be displayed, to be a celebration of provocativeness and subjected to (male) gaze. In our discussion about hijra dance the question that recurred is how do we proceed with the presentation of a body that is sexually impotent, emasculated, but interestingly, associated with dance that is usually feminized? Despite the loudness, sexual suggestiveness and garishness incorporated in both the dance forms, we will find it rather difficult to even imagine that item numbers could be a derivative of hijra dance tradition. The absence of the subtle contribution of a hijra dancer's body in item numbers is an 'active' absence, an absence that is forced upon. But even that body 'speaks up' breaking the silent mode. Amidst the convenient comforts this act does not go unattended. Despite the silence the dancing body still retains its abilities to call attention upon itself in a way that cannot be ignored because dancers feminized or otherwise,

have to work with their own bodies and not with some idealized/tutored image of it.

Together with the power of their verbal assault and craft of dancing, hijras reclaim their space thereby accentuating and constructing their sexual ambiguity. By employing 'choreographed verbal insolence', they assume a position of control in their interaction with the public. Inviting the non-hijra listeners to enter a linguistic and visual space, they map their own sexual ambiguity on to linguistic and rhythmic ambiguities. Besides their dominant presence in mythology as mentioned earlier, the Indian hijras have also had various incarnations in history, offering an overview of their social and linguistic positions [16-18].

"They have been portrayed as providers of verbal and sexual relief (engaged in several role playing)...as overseers of the kings' harem in the fourth century BC; as "shampooers" in the Hindu courts during the second and the fifth centuries; as protectors of the royal ladies of the harem in Medieval Hindu courts: as administrative under the Khiljis of Delhi during the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries; as servants in the Mughal courts from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century; as slaves in the house of Muslim nobility in Awadh during 1900s; and finally, as the independent performers variously known since the early nineteenth century as *khojas*, *khusras*, *pavaiyas* and *hijras*" (Hall, 438).

The hijra's idiosyncratic and non-conforming use of language and body gestures particularly their mixing of feminine and masculine speech and step style is indicative of both gender dysphoria and sexual ambiguity. Hijras lewd jokes, love for excessive obscenity, aggressive conversational style, penchant for gossip and tendency to chatter constantly vouch for their dual nature showcased by their body language. Inhabiting the space in between coquettish curses and foul mouth flirting, they outdo the dominant verbal/visual stereotype associated with either side of the gender divide.

Item numbers usually do not influence the main narrative of the film nor do the hijras because their existence is merely tangential to the world of men and women. Hence the notion of shamelessness is evident in both the dance form freed from the constraints of decency that regulates the rest of society. Contemporary romantic song in films featuring lead actors, despite our extended acceptance of representations of intimacy, remains to an extent within the limits of restraint. But the shamelessness has varied manifestations in both the dance forms. Whereas the indecent gestures and inviting gait incorporated in hijra dance make people reluctant to provoke their obscene retaliation in public, the toned bodies of the item girls meet with the desired gaze.

Connected with the notion of *sharm* (coyness) is the notion of *izzat* (honour). Hijras employ obscenity during their performance as a means of reclaiming respect, which has a simplified connotation in case of item dancers because of their specified gendered identity. The nightclubs where usually item songs are picturised are one of the most public platforms in society and traditionally a man's domain. The socio- moral cartography of the society is such that pubs and bars are off limit to 'respectable' women, transcended by the item girls. But the hijras have occupied the courtyard of their patrons as well as the bazaar for their performance, once again establishing the fluid parameters of their dancing practices.

In order to make sense of the hijras seemingly innocuous dance gestures, the passerby must enter into what s/he believes to be a hijras frame of reference, a space involving sexual innuendos, crudity and

gender fluidity. Yet by doing so s/he must also admit his/hers inhabitation between the same space. Through the verbal and physical play the hijra body exploits its liminality in Indian social matrix creating an alternative socio-sexual place in a dichotomously gendered domain.

Both the dance forms are deeply rooted in to the feeling of ecstasy. The participants including dancers and musicians surrender willingly to the intoxicating mix of sight and sound, a combination that result in a pure tribal joy. All this noise, crowd, heat, loud music, colourful clothing and scantily clad bodies elicit the spirit of the new millennium. Yet it recalls a much older spirit as well, whose roots are found in a distant era that predates Western civilization itself. Thousands of years before the advent of parties, similar jubilations were held involving the same combinations of wild music, sensuous dancing and intoxication. In ancient Greece ecstatic festivals were held for God Dionysus (Bacchus). In these "Bacchanalia" the devotees gathered to surrender themselves completely to the god of wine and fertility. Wearing satyr masks they cast off their inhibitions and worshipped the God whom Ovid described as "the deliverer from sorrow, son of the thunder ...god of the wine press, the night-halloed..." [19].

To the Greeks, Dionysus represented the demonic, chaotic side of nature, which can neither be tamed nor restrained by civilization. In the wild dance steps of item numbers and hijra performances all borders are dissolved between the sexes, between classes, between nature and culture. The dancers indulge themselves in a sort of mania and exhaltation of their being, "when a dancer becomes the dance" by the delirious whirl of steps, music and all other projections of this bodily art.

The item numbers have given birth to an entire different cultural movement that has attracted a vast number of young followers. The last few years have witnessed the rise of a new culture of ecstasy, a resurrection of the pagan intoxication via electronic media. The significance of hijra dance performance to confirm fertility upon newlyweds and new borns can be traced as a direct corollary to the ancient ritual. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *'The Birth of Tragedy'*, the Dionysian impulse has never been restricted to Greek culture alone. It is a fixed element of human nature that expresses a constant longing to dismantle limits of existence and reach a state of ecstasy, beyond the sensual pleasure as a prelude to be born again.

Strangely enough the presentation of hijra dance runs the risk of contradiction true to their sexual ambiguity. On one side, they assert their individual existence by carving out a unique linguistic and rhythmic frame of reference for themselves; on the other end the longing for oblivion so deeply rooted into the ecstatic quotient of their dance cannot also be ignored. Furthermore a community which claims religious associations since its existence, this ecstasy can probably be experienced as a heightened state of consciousness as well. The raunchiness that characterizes their dance will then become visible not simply as a casting off of inhibitions, but a terrific sense of paganism and the awe they feel in its presence erupting against the cultural and social order that suppresses it.

The revival of Dionysian spirit in the item numbers involving a standard combination of light and sound has shaped it as a packaged, commercially available product there by technologizing the age old ritual. This total experience of ecstasy draws parallel between the cultural explosions in today's Bollywood on one hand and the ancient 'Bacchanalia' on the other.

However, this spirited experience has remained devoid of anything ideal or visionary. As an end in itself, it is subjective with minimal concerns for objectivity, without ascribing to them any deeper significance. Disengaged as they are from films and societies respectively, these dance forms are gripped by an alienation, characteristic of postmodern culture, hidden beneath the brilliance of skin and crude sexual display. These feelings of distance and disconnection in response to a reality the dancers feel have no room for them precisely due to their "in-between" status, have led them to channel their energies into the euphoria of trance. Ridiculed but feared, enjoyed but otherised, these dancers have truly looked in to the essence of things-one is present for a couple of minutes in the overarching phenomenon of 70 mm and the other is invisibly visible in the social matrix. This is all they have to make a difference. These dance forms are fundamentally extreme genres: from the dress, gestures, and bodies to the pace of the beat [20,21].

Writing this article was more difficult than I had anticipated. Risking its transformation in to a moral manual on these dance forms, I could not help but be inspired by the fact that they are making a desperate effort to arrive on the dance floor, in the courtyard, in the light, in a time that offers them no other viable alternatives. Given these state of affairs the element of ecstasy in these dances however problematic it might be, has opened up and liberated their platform of performance.

Though deeply rooted in to the body the dancing figure achieves a distance between herself and the audience that undercuts the eroticized performance. The space between the performer and viewer becomes problematic when applied to dance. Gaze is contingent to the distance between the viewers and viewed, but dance is a kinaesthetic art form- observed not just visually but bodily.

The raw and fiery aspects of their nature of dance render it an elementalism which desexualizes the dancer. Aligned with nature, their work becomes explicitly non sexual. It situates movement and energy as originating with the breath and in the body's inner core flowing outward to illuminate the stage. The dancer's body is thereby extended and liberated in the process. The dancing body no longer remains a product alone- of training, of consumption, of narrative- but rather a phenomenon. The dancer heads towards becoming the self in the very activity of displaying body.

This displayed body is the instrument of artistic practice, not a commodity for sexual consumption. The understanding of subjectivity as a dynamic ongoing process demonstrated in the body subverts its inner/outer binary. The dancing physique takes the shape of the mobius strip, the loop with a twist in it, so that the inside and the outside form a continuity. The manifestation of dancing body is dual-anything but sexually passive, it is pure fire if we dare to follow the desire, but also resists interpretations as a display of sexuality or a metaphor for desire alone. Oscillating between lasya (sensual moves) and tandava (ecstatic, raving, frenzied dance), it rather acts as a catalyst for and expression of the interplay between the two.

Coming to think of item numbers, while such song sequences may in fact interrupt the action or delay the denouement or not even take place in reality their insertion in to the film invariably effects the viewer's sense of space and time and their acceptance in the social grid. The hijra's dancing to the tune of Bollywood item numbers highlights the ability of these genres to bridge the gap between the clubs and

courtyards. As the dance blurs the distinctions between their dancing space, it also inevitably blurs the cultural identity of the characters featuring in them. Thus it plays an integral role in establishing the hold of the performers as prominent Indian cultural identities which in turn facilitate their inclusion and adoption in to the society. Attentions to these intersections not only problematise certain claims to visible membership in the society but that the identity of the society can be problematised itself can be as well. One can argue, that a diasporic relationship with the root can be a queer one and vice-versa, queerness can be a form of displacement as well, both of which can call in to question the very foundations of home, society and nation [22].

That male sexual control and aggression are neutralized in a setting where passion and pleasure are distanced and simulated, is perhaps an essential mechanism that dancers (item girls and hijras) have universally used to preserve their emotional integrity and dignity. The overt hustling society is the microcosm for the rest of the society. The power relations and the games are the same. But in a strange way, these dancers are in control of a part of it evoked through their sexual pretences and nakhras. Their performances echo a transcultural resonance. In quest for a stage of their own, these dancers have taken control of their lives by reversing not only the social rules but even the sexual fantasies of patriarchy. Both are on equal terms in this context of shamelessness, because the power is genuinely shared in this cultural setting where sexuality has the chance of being more fairly and fearlessly constructed. They generate for us all those anxieties-that to inspire what may appear to be an anomalous comparison-are experienced by indecent people as them who know how to cross borders and transgress boundaries. Where transculturalism only exists in prescribed forms they are perhaps among the very few, who, shall we be permitted to say, defy the very models of defiance.

"Crown yourself with oak leaf  
and dance,  
dance  
dance  
ecstatic:  
...and dance until the earth dance"<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> H.D's translation of Euripides' *The Bacchae* as quoted by Elizabeth Anderson in her article 'Dancing modernism'.

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