



THE PASSIVE FEMALE AND SEXUALITY IN OLD BOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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Communication is primarily physical. This physicality comes through instincts and cultural codes. These cultural codes can be **voluntary**, **imposed** and/or **conditioned**. "Communication is an act." (What do Images mean in Visual Semiotics, Veyesel Kiliq, and Zekiye Sarikartal). Audio-Visual Communication like cinema is an effective medium to showcase the cultural and social norms of human society. Even in this New Media scenario, cinema is, arguably, the strongest medium. Physicality or body, when seen as a mode of communication expresses the social prevalence. "Communication "is an act of transferring meaningful signs "(do). When we see physical communication in cinema, it is significant. Because even in this **OTT** era, cinema still holds her sway. Woman, as nature has endowed her, is the more attractive sex of the species. So, the way The Woman is represented in cinema becomes important from the point of view of Visual Semiotics.

Body language or **Kinesics** is one way of Communication. What is Kinesics? According to **Raymond and John**, Kinesics "... is the way the body communicates without words, that is, through various movements of its parts". In Bollywood movies, we see that Kinesics, has emerged as part of cinematic language as far as conveying sensuality is concerned. Barring few exceptions, female body and its language has been the main conveyor of sexuality in B-town cinema. **Sexual Communication** thus is borne on the shoulders of actresses. Sexuality in Indian films was established firmly in the film *Karma* where **Devika Rani**, the goddess of Bombay Talkies kissed Himanshu Rai for four minutes long in **Karma** in the year 1933. There was nothing passive about the scene or the woman featured. The Hunterwali like **Fearless Nadia**, the Jewish females, The Anglo-Indian female actors, all were active in their cine-avatar and flaunted a sexuality which was open yet fierce. Perhaps the reason for this openness was the 1912 Censorship Act which prescribed films with adult content to be certified with A. The censorship law those days were more concerned with propaganda against the British government in Indian-made films. Obscenity remained to be a factor to be considered though. The Victorian sensibility acquired from the colonial masters left an indelible mark on the Indian psyche. The storylines, the dialogues, the coy gaze, all became means to convey sexuality, both for the female and the male. Consequently, "The **subaltern India**", the **Victorian India**, the India oblivious to the treatise of Vatsayana and Konark sculpture sensuality, created a sexual model for the woman. She is covered, she is silent and she is passive. Forgotten was the significance of the goddess **Kali** iconography. Kali stepping onto the body of **Siva** and sitting atop him connotes the active female.

As sex is part of life and films are purported to show life, Bollywood films, especially post-Independence and post - **Cinematograph Act**, 1952, found ways to show sex and sexuality in a roundabout way. Sometimes through two flowers grazing lovingly together, and sometimes the female breasts were exploited explicitly by the shrewd showman Raj Kapoor by concocting a scene of mother feeding the child. As explained in the **male gaze theory**, the woman is looked at. The average film found a path between the two extremes of innocence of flowers and exposure of female body a.k.a Raj Kapoor style. They used song and dance.



Paralinguistic communication came in a big way to the rescue to convey sensuality. The lyrics revealed the intention through linguistic semiotics whereas the visual accompanying used the physicality of the woman .

We are taking some songs from the 1960s Bollywood to examine the above statement. We have taken these songs because the films were hits of the day, and the songs are still considered to be classic examples of Bollywood romantic song choreography.

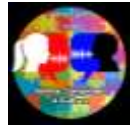
Aa ja aayi bahar(1964) Or Come , the spring is here: The **Nayika** is expressing the anguish of her heart . She is waiting for the prince of her dreams. The song opens with the shot of the hero and his sidekick, signifying voyeurism. Dancing by the water fountain, which again , is the symbol of sexuality, the heroine takes the passive reclining pose again and again. There is invitation and there is a coy seductress look aimed at the audience in the representation. There is voyeuristic visual representation . The water is motif for sex. The woman reclines on the water in a close up merging the sexuality of the facial expression and water as a sexual symbol. Her **mudra** of the hand in close-up shot and the dance at times almost signify Tantric overtures. The piece of stick held by the hero and his sidekick represents the phallus , and the heroine, oblivious to the presence of the hero, sings on. The pattern looks like:

The Hero/audience>Heroine dancing and singing>Passivity of her posture> no active engagement of the hero

Lag ja gale (1964) or Come Into my Arms: The song leaves no doubt in the mind as to the meaning of the lyrics. Here the amorous heroine requests her hero through the song to come into her arms as there may not be a second chance. Here the lips while syncing with the song , is sensual and inviting. The song opens with a pear-shaped Sadhana in reclining position, which is a clear visible representation of invitation to sex. Her face, her eyes speaking with ardour , trembling lips, sleeveless blouse in close up shot, Her supine synthetic saree-clad body in mid-shot, all suggest together the amorous intentions in a passive way. The passive sexual power is asserted . Repeatedly , close up shots show the heroine's facial expression where the eyes are closed and lips are inviting, signifying the passive mode. At the same time the hero, in close up shots and otherwise, is shown to be confused, a bit indifferent and questioning . The female's power is at the same time nullified by the non-active hero. The pattern here is:

Heroine in a reclining /passive position/expression>non-engaged hero> invitation

Ye Shama, Shama hai yeh Pyar ka(1965) or the Season of Lovemaking: In an unpretentious voyeuristic visual representation where the heroine unabashedly objectifies herself to an unseen (in the scene) man who is the representation of the audience. The visualization of the song begins with the close up shot of the man listening to the cooing of the song, which establishes the voyeuristic semiotics. Then we see the **Nagaraka** looks of the heroine. A tight-fitting sleeveless maxi like dress defining her derriere well, she dances away, mouthing the sensual lyrics. The whiteness of the dress contrasts to the night and brings before us the **Avisarika** imagery of Sanskrit literature. The lyrics speak about ' **deedar** ' (to see) which is significant. At one point of the song Nanda(the heroine reclines down on a couch signifying the passivity. The lyrics leave no doubt as to the erotic emotion playing in



the heart of the heroine. The hero looks on with an innocent expression, non-engaged yet interested. If we draw the pattern it would somewhat be like:

Hero/Audience > Male Gaze > Heroine singing and dancing > Passivity of the posture > non-engagement of the Hero

In all these songs we see the female body from **male perspective**. The camera acts for the audience, an audience to whom the female is making love. The female takes the passive position **consensually**. The cinematic portrayal of the female is giving the female **agency** through which she can make herself subservient as far as her body posture is concerned. She is at once playing up to the male in the scene (seen or unseen to her) and the male audience. The censorship is hoodwinked through the lyrical and poetic mode of presentation. The sensuality in make up, dress, accessories and lyrics serves the purpose. Though the scenes in the above songs establish the heroine's (The Female) **passive sexual power**, yet simultaneously that power is **negated** and **nullified** through the **non-engagement** of the male. The male can not be conquered. We may divide the postures of the heroine and her physicality into what Dr Devangana Deshai has termed as **Cultic** and **Secular/Nagaraka/poetic** postures of the sculptures of ancient India. The female prays for **ONENESS** with the male; The female is in search of **BLISS**; The female is tempting the male; The female is displaying **innocent** sensuality; we also see in the Visual Semiotics of the songs **Tantric** residue in the postures as **Francis Leeson** has read the ancient sculptures. All important for coitus, no doubt. But the above actions are attempted through a passive female. An active female will intimidate the male audience. The **Visual Semiotics** establishes the female's inferior position as far as sexuality is concerned.

What are the consequences of such visual representation? According to **Social cognitive** theory, "people develop expectations for real-world situations from observational learning while consuming media (Hall et al, 2012) **Jocelyn Nicole Murphy** in her essay titled '**The Role of Women in Film: Supporting the Men**' (2015) says, "Cultivation theory also reveals that representations in the media affect audience's perceptions of reality.... The theory proposes that continuous exposure to specific cultural messages will influence how the audience identifies with specific cultural messages in the long-term" **Frederickson and Roberts (1997)** asserts, "being female may create a shared social experience in that women constantly exposed to the objectification of the female body and often internalize the observer's gaze...". So, we see that the Visual Semiotics in old Bollywood movies are largely carried through the kinesics of the female body as far as portrayal of eroticism is concerned. This eroticism is passive. This passivity is a safe gambit for the film makers as the male audience is never challenged on his masculinity and the female audience cultivates a sexual role which is passive. As far as Female Sexuality in old Bollywood cinema is concerned, **Male Gaze** and **Visual Semiotics** go hand in hand.