



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487

Impact Factor:8.486(SJIF);www.ijtell.com Volume-7, Issue-3;June,July & Aug(2026)

The Cinematic Body as Spectacle: Male Gaze and Female Objectification in Indian Film Songs

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Article Received: 18/07/2026

Article Accepted: 20/08/2026

Published Online: 22/08/2026

DOI:10.53413/IJTELL.2026.7.3.68

Abstract:

Indian cinema, particularly through its song sequences, has long functioned as a visual domain where the female body is stylized, fragmented, and commodified for spectatorship. Drawing upon Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze, this paper examines how film songs construct the female body as spectacle through cinematic techniques such as camera framing, choreography, costume design, and editing patterns. Unlike narrative-driven scenes, song sequences often suspend storytelling to foreground visual pleasure, thereby intensifying objectification. Through qualitative textual and visual analysis of selected songs from Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu cinema including item numbers and romantic duets this study explores how such representations reinforce patriarchal viewing positions while also identifying emerging moments of resistance and agency in contemporary cinema. The paper argues that Indian film songs operate as both sites of objectification and spaces of negotiation, reflecting evolving gender politics in popular culture.

Keywords: Male Gaze, Female Objectification, Indian Cinema, Film Songs, Spectacle, Feminist Film Theory

1. Introduction:

Indian cinema is globally recognized for its integration of song and dance as essential components of storytelling. These sequences are not merely ornamental but function as powerful visual and cultural expressions. However, within this aesthetic tradition lies a critical tension: the representation of women as objects of spectacle. Film



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songs, particularly item numbers, frequently detach from narrative continuity and foreground the female body as a site of visual pleasure.

Laura Mulvey's seminal essay "*Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*" (1975) argues that mainstream cinema is structured around a male gaze that objectifies women through scopophilic pleasure. This theoretical framework is especially relevant in the context of Indian film songs, where cinematic techniques close-ups, fragmented shots, and stylized choreography construct the female body as an erotic spectacle. The camera often isolates body parts such as the waist, legs, and eyes, reinforcing voyeuristic spectatorship.

Yet, contemporary Indian cinema also reveals shifts in representation. While traditional item songs perpetuate objectification, newer song sequences sometimes incorporate elements of female agency, self-awareness, and narrative integration. This paper examines this duality, analyzing how film songs simultaneously reinforce and challenge patriarchal visual regimes.

2. Literature Review:

The concept of the male gaze originates from Laura Mulvey, who argues that cinema positions women as passive objects and men as active viewers (Mulvey 11). Mulvey's psychoanalytic approach, rooted in Freudian and Lacanian theory, highlights how visual pleasure is structured through gendered power relations.

E. Ann Kaplan extends this argument by emphasizing female spectatorship and the possibility of alternative viewing positions (Kaplan 25). Similarly, Bell Hooks introduce the concept of the "oppositional gaze," suggesting that marginalized viewers resist dominant visual ideologies (hooks 115). These frameworks are crucial for analyzing Indian cinema, where cultural specificity intersects with global cinematic practices.

Scholars such as Madhava Prasad and Ravi Vasudevan examine Indian cinema's unique narrative and visual structures, particularly its use of song sequences. According to Prasad, songs function as "interruptions" that create spaces for spectacle and excess (Prasad 78). This aligns with the argument that film songs intensify objectification by prioritizing visual pleasure over narrative coherence.

Recent studies have also explored the transformation of female representation in Indian cinema. Films like "*Queen*" (2014) and "*Thappad*" (2020) reflect changing gender dynamics, though song sequences often lag in adopting progressive portrayals. Thus, there exists a gap between narrative feminism and visual representation, particularly in musical sequences.



3. Methodology:

This study adopts a “qualitative interpretive approach”, combining textual and visual analysis of selected film songs. The methodology focuses on:

Selection Criteria:

- Popular songs (high viewership)
- Representation of item numbers and romantic songs
- Cross-linguistic diversity (Hindi, Tamil, Telugu)

Analytical Tools:

- 1.Camera techniques (close-ups, tracking shots)
- 2.Editing patterns
- 3.Choreography and gesture
- 4.Costume and mise-en-scène
- 5.Lyrics and dialogue

Mise-en-scène: costume, lighting, setting

Cinematography: camera angles, framing, shot composition

Editing: rhythm, cuts, slow motion

Performance: choreography, gestures, expressions

The selected corpus includes songs from Hindi, Tamil, and Telugu cinema, ensuring regional diversity. Songs are categorized into:

1. Item Numbers - overt spectacle and objectification
2. Romantic Duets – subtle forms of gaze and desire

This approach allows for a comparative analysis of how different cinematic contexts construct the female body.

4. Film Analysis:

4.1 Item Songs and Fragmented Spectacle

Item songs represent the most explicit form of objectification in Indian cinema. For instance, “Sheila Ki Jawani” (Tees Maar Khan, 2010) exemplifies the fragmentation of the female body through rapid cuts and close-ups. The camera isolates the actress’s waist, lips, and eyes, constructing her as a visual commodity.

Similarly, “Oo Antava” (Pushpa: The Rise, 2021) employs slow-motion shots and choreographed movements to emphasize sensuality. The lyrics reinforce this visual framing by acknowledging the male gaze, yet the performance also introduces a degree of self-awareness, complicating traditional objectification.



In Tamil cinema, songs like “Naa Ready” (Leo, 2023) include female dancers positioned as background spectacle, reinforcing male centrality. The female body becomes part of the mise en-scene rather than an autonomous subject.

4.2 Romantic Duets and Subtle Objectification:

Romantic songs often present a more nuanced form of the male gaze. In “Tum Hi Ho” (Aashiqui 2, 2013), the female character is framed through soft lighting and close-ups that emphasize beauty and emotional vulnerability. While less overtly sexualized, the gaze still positions her as an object of admiration.

In Telugu cinema, “Inkem Inkem Inkem Kaavaale” (Geetha Govindam, 2018) depicts mutual attraction but maintains a male-centric perspective. The camera frequently aligns with the male protagonist’s viewpoint, subtly reinforcing gender hierarchy.

4.3 Costume and Choreography as Tools of Objectification:

Costume design plays a crucial role in constructing spectacle. Revealing attire in item songs contrasts sharply with traditional clothing in narrative scenes, marking a shift from character to spectacle. Choreography further amplifies this by emphasizing hip movements and suggestive gestures.

These elements transform the female body into a site of consumption, aligning with Mulvey’s concept of visual pleasure. However, certain contemporary songs challenge this norm by incorporating assertive choreography and direct gaze.

4.4 Moments of Resistance and Agency:

Despite dominant patterns of objectification, some songs offer resistance. “Ghani Bawri” (*Tanu Weds Manu Returns*, 2015) presents a female character who actively engages with the camera, disrupting passive spectatorship.

Similarly, “Ra Ra Rakkamma” (*Vikrant Rona*, 2022) portrays the female performer with confidence and control, suggesting a shift towards agency. These examples indicate that the cinematic gaze is not fixed but evolving.

5. Discussion:

The analysis reveals that Indian film songs operate within a complex framework of spectacle and ideology. While traditional item numbers reinforce patriarchal viewing positions, contemporary songs increasingly negotiate these structures. The coexistence of objectification and agency reflects broader cultural shifts in gender representation.

The persistence of the male gaze suggests that visual pleasure remains central to commercial cinema. However, the emergence of self-aware performances and narrative integration indicates the possibility of alternative gazes.



Dabangg (2010)

Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:45–01:10: Camera zooms into waist and midriff
- 01:32–02:00: Male spectators shown staring, reinforcing diegetic gaze
- 02:15–02:40: Fragmented shots (eyes, lips, hips)

Lyrics:

“Munni badnaam hui darling tere liye”

Analysis:

The female body is fragmented into erotic zones. The lyrics reinforce self-objectification framed as devotion to male desire. The presence of male spectators within the frame legitimizes voyeurism.

Tees Maar Khan (2010)

Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:30–01:00: Mirror shots create self-surveillance
- 01:20–01:50: Direct gaze into camera
- 02:10–02:40: Controlled choreography emphasizing autonomy

Lyrics

“Sheila Ki Jawani” - “I know you want it but you’re never gonna get it”

Analysis:

Unlike traditional item numbers, this song introduces performative agency. The female performer acknowledges the gaze but controls access, aligning with postfeminist self-objectification.

Pushpa: The Rise (2021)

Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:50–01:20: Male crowd encircles female performer
- 01:45–02:15: Camera alternates between male gazes and female body
- 02:30–03:00: Performer confronts gaze directly

Lyrics (translated)

“Oo Antava” – “Men are all the same, they only look at the body”

Analysis:

This song explicitly critiques the male gaze while simultaneously participating in it. It represents a reflexive spectacle, where objectification is both enacted and questioned.

Maari 2 (2018) “Rowdy Baby”

Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:40–01:10: Equal framing of male and female dancers



- 01:50–02:20: Mutual gaze dynamics
- 02:40–03:10: Absence of fragmentation

Analysis:

Unlike item numbers, this song presents reciprocal desire. The female body is not isolated but integrated into a shared performance space.

Dabangg 2 (2012) - “Fevicol Se”

Timestamp Analysis:

- 01:00–01:30: Emphasis on chest and waist
- 02:00–02:30: Male consumption of spectacle
- 03:00–03:30: Repetitive visual loops

Analysis:

This song exemplifies hyper-commodification, where the female body is equated with consumable products (e.g., “Fevicol”)

Across songs, the camera dissects the female body into parts, aligning with Mulvey’s concept of fetishistic scopophilia. Songs suspend narrative progression, allowing pure spectacle to dominate. This aligns with Debord’s notion of spectacle as detached from reality.

Postfeminist Contradictions:

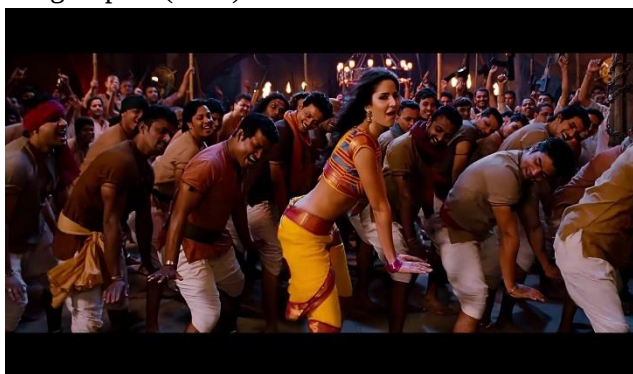
Songs like “Sheila Ki Jawani” and “Oo Antava” demonstrate, self-awareness, controlled sexuality, illusion of empowerment. Yet, they remain embedded within patriarchal visual frameworks.

Regional Variations

- Hindi cinema: More commercialized item numbers
- South Indian cinema: Increasing reflexivity and critique

6.Additional Case Studies: Scene- Based Analysis:

“Chikni Chameli” – Agneepath (2012):





Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:40–01:10: Rapid cuts isolate waist, chest, and facial expressions
- 01:50–02:20: Male crowd encircles performer
- 02:45–03:10: High-energy choreography intensifies bodily display

Lyrics:

“Chikni Chameli chhup ke akeli...”

Analysis:

The sequence constructs a hyper- sexualized rural spectacle, where lighting, sweat, and crowd density heighten corporeality. The body is rendered excessive and uncontrolled aligning with fetishistic scopophilia (Mulvey) and spectacle culture (Debord).

Dhoom 3 (2013)



Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:30–01:00: Solo female performance, absence of male gaze
- 01:40–02:10: Extreme flexibility and bodily control
- 02:30–03:00: Continuous long takes reduce fragmentation

Analysis:

Unlike traditional item numbers, “Kamli” shifts toward aesthetic spectacle over erotic fragmentation. The female body becomes a site of discipline and performance, complicating Mulvey’s gaze by foregrounding skill over sexual availability.

“Dilbar” – Satyameva Jayate (2018)





Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:50–01:20: Close-ups of hip isolations
- 01:30–02:00: Male spectatorship emphasized
- 02:10–02:40: Slow-motion accentuates sensuality

Lyrics:

“Dilbar dilbar...”

Analysis:

The use of belly dance vocabulary intensifies exoticization. The body is coded as both ethnic and erotic, reinforcing globalized commodification of femininity (Gill).

Tip Tip Barsa Pani – Mohra (1994)



Timestamp Analysis:

- 01:00–01:40: Wet saree clings to body
- 02:00–02:30: Alternating male/female gaze
- 03:00–03:30: Slow-motion rain intensifies erotic charge

Analysis:

Rain functions as a cinematic device of erotic revelation, transforming costume into transparency. The scene exemplifies classic male gaze aesthetics, where nature itself participates in objectification.

“Beedi Jalaile” – Omkara (2006)





Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:45–01:15: Facial expressions foregrounded
- 01:40–02:10: Suggestive gestures toward male audience
- 02:20–02:50: Rhythmic editing intensifies engagement

Lyrics:

“Beedi jalaile jigar se piya...”

Analysis:

The performance merges folk aesthetics with erotic display, creating a localized spectacle. The female body becomes a mediator of male bonding and pleasure.

“Oo Solriya Mama” – Pushpa (Tamil version, 2021)



Timestamp Analysis:

- 01:00–01:30: Direct address to male audience
- 02:00–02:30: Confrontational gaze
- 03:00–03:30: Repetition of critique in lyrics

Analysis:

This version strengthens the critical voice against male desire, yet remains visually complicit. It demonstrates self-reflexive objectification.

“Arabic Kuthu” – Beast (2022)





Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:30–01:00: Balanced framing of male and female leads
- 01:40–02:10: Shared choreography
- 02:30–03:00: Minimal fragmentation

Analysis:

The song resists objectification by emphasizing collective performance. Desire is mutual rather than one-directional, indicating a shift toward egalitarian visuality.

“Butta Bomma” – Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo (2020)



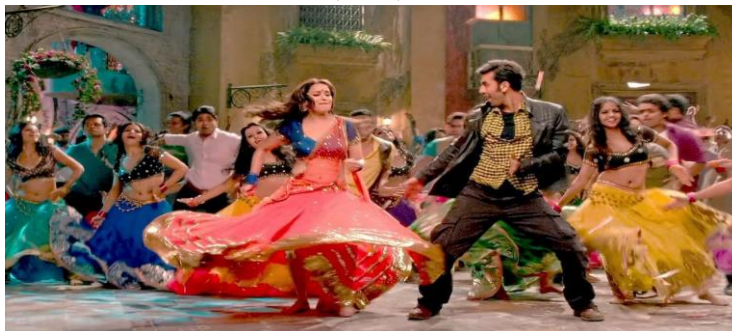
Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:50–01:20: Soft focus on female face
- 01:40–02:10: Male admiration through gaze
- 02:20–02:50: Limited bodily fragmentation

Analysis:

Here, the female body is idealized rather than eroticized, aligning with romantic gaze aesthetics. Objectification is subtler, embedded in admiration rather than overt display.

“Ghagra” – Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani (2013)



Timestamp Analysis:

- 01:00–01:30: Emphasis on costume movement



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- 02:00–02:30: Male gaze embedded in narrative
- 03:00–03:30: Star persona dominates

Analysis:

The spectacle is tied to celebrity performance. The female body is not merely objectified but iconized, complicating the gaze through stardom.

“Lovely” – Happy New Year (2014)



Timestamp Analysis:

- 00:40–01:10: Glamorous close-ups
- 01:30–02:00: Male spectatorship foregrounded
- 02:20–02:50: Slow-motion hair and body shots

Analysis:

The song exemplifies luxury spectacle, where the female body is embedded within wealth aesthetics. Objectification merges with consumer capitalism.

Synthesis of Additional Case Studies

Across these 10 new examples, three expanded patterns emerge:

1. Intensified Commodification:

Songs like “Dilbar” and “Lovely” show the female body as a global commodity, shaped by transnational aesthetics.

2. Reflexive and Critical Performances:

“Oo Solriya Mama” introduces meta-commentary, where the song critiques its own gaze.

3. Emergence of Balanced Visuality

“Arabic Kuthu” and “Rowdy Baby” (earlier) suggest a shift toward mutual desire, though still limited.



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7.Comparative Table: Gaze vs Agency vs Fragmentation:

Song	Year	Film	Male Gaze Intensity	Female Agency	Body Fragment -ation	Spectacle Type
Munni Badnaam Hui	2010	Dabangg	High	Low	High	Item number
Sheila Ki Jawani	2010	Tees Maar Khan	High	Medium	Medium	Postfeminist spectacle
Oo Antava	2021	Pushpa	High	Medium –High	Medium	Reflexive spectacle
Rowdy Baby	2018	Maari 2	Medium	High	Low	Mutual performance
Fevicol Se	2012	Dabangg 2	Very High	Low	Very High	Commodity spectacle
Chikni Chameli	2012	Agneepath	Very High	Low	Very High	Hyper-erotic spectacle
Kamli	2013	Dhoom 3	Low	High	Low	Performance spectacle
Dilbar	2018	Satyameva Jayate	High	Medium	High	Exoticized spectacle
Tip Tip Barsa Pani	1994	Mohra	High	Low	Medium	Erotic-natural spectacle
Beedi Jalaile	2006	Omkara	High	Medium	Medium	Folk-erotic spectacle
Arabic Kuthu	2022	Beast	Medium	High	Low	Egalitarian spectacle
Butta Bomma	2020	Ala Vaikunthapurramulo	Medium	Medium	Low	Romantic gaze
Ghagra	2013	YJHD	Medium	Medium	Medium	Star spectacle
Lovely	2014	Happy New Year	High	Low–Medium	High	Luxury spectacle



8. Conclusion:

This paper has examined how Indian film songs construct the female body as spectacle through cinematic techniques and narrative structures. Drawing on feminist film theory, the study demonstrates that these representations are deeply embedded in patriarchal visual regimes. However, the analysis also highlights emerging moments of resistance, suggesting a gradual transformation in cinematic representation.

Future research may explore audience reception and the role of digital platforms in reshaping visual culture. As Indian cinema continues to evolve, the negotiation between objectification and agency will remain a critical area of inquiry.

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- Dabangg*. Directed by Abhinav Kashyap, performances by Salman Khan and Sonakshi Sinha, Arbaaz Khan Productions, 2010.
- Dabangg 2*. Directed by Arbaaz Khan, performances by Salman Khan and Sonakshi Sinha, Arbaaz Khan Productions, 2012.



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Dhoom 3. Directed by Vijay Krishna Acharya, performances by Aamir Khan and Katrina Kaif, Yash Raj Films, 2013.

Happy New Year. Directed by Farah Khan, performances by Shah Rukh Khan and Deepika Padukone, Red Chillies Entertainment, 2014.

Mohra. Directed by Rajiv Rai, performances by Akshay Kumar and Raveena Tandon, Trimurti Films, 1994.

Omkara. Directed by Vishal Bhardwaj, performances by Ajay Devgn and Kareena Kapoor, Big Screen Entertainment, 2006.

Satyameva Jayate. Directed by Milap Zaveri, performances by John Abraham and Nora Fatehi, T-Series Films, 2018.

Tees Maar Khan. Directed by Farah Khan, performances by Akshay Kumar and Katrina Kaif, UTV Motion Pictures, 2010.

Yeh Jawaani Hai Deewani. Directed by Ayan Mukerji, performances by Ranbir Kapoor and Deepika Padukone, Dharma Productions, 2013.

South Indian Cinema (Tamil and Telugu)

Ala Vaikunthapurramuloo. Directed by Trivikram Srinivas, performances by Allu Arjun and Pooja Hegde, Haarika & Hassine Creations, 2020.

Beast. Directed by Nelson Dilipkumar, performances by Vijay and Pooja Hegde, Sun Pictures, 2022.

Maari 2. Directed by Balaji Mohan, performances by Dhanush and Sai Pallavi, Wunderbar Films, 2018.

Pushpa: The Rise. Directed by Sukumar, performances by Allu Arjun and Rashmika Mandanna, Mythri Movie Makers, 2021.