

Choreographed *Masculinity*: Representations in Twenty-First Century Bollywood

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Abstract

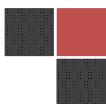
Dance serves as a rich cultural text, a repository bearing the impressions of the evolving discourses concerning the body. This paper focuses on the challenges and politics associated with the representation of the male dancing body in Bollywood, while particularly taking into consideration the twenty-first century Bollywood dance numbers.

Keywords: gendered body, language of dance, gaze, showing, production and consumption.

Representation of the male dancing body in films, like any other representation, is historically and socially situated. Dance, as an embodied performance, is inclined to be influenced by the dominant ideologies concerning body and gender. This seems to be particularly significant in the context of dance occurring within popular media texts. The instrument of dance is the body. It is the *body* which bears the historical, social and cultural inscriptions. The body has been variously interpreted as a site of power, a gendered construct, a product of discourse – in short, a social text. Sara Salih notes, “All bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence” (55) as gender is performed by the body. If bodies perform gender then bodies represented in cinemas may be described as a performance of this performativity. Popular cinema, situated at the tangency of production and consumption, encashes the prevalent gender roles to cater to the gendered outlook of the masses. Writing about popular dance films, Sherril Dodds aptly observes that choreography, “serves to convey ideas and values about the dancing bodies in motion” (Dodds 449). Gender stereotypes prevalent with a community are represented in its culture. Despite the vast diversity of Indian culture, Bollywood has been successful in securing attention of Indians from varied locales and cultures. Perhaps so. Pallabi Chakravorty calls Bollywood the “soul model of national unity” and describes the song and dance sequences occurring in Bollywood as “the repository of India’s pulsating, paradoxical, protean national soul” (61). Bollywood, can be thus be viewed as a window for analysing consciousness of the mainstream society. While representing the male dancing body, films reiterate the social and cultural myths embedded in the body. The gendered representation of the body may become problematic with the appearance of the male dancing body on the screen. This paper while addressing the representation of the male dancing body in twenty-first century Bollywood, aims to study the cultural construction of a dancer; to identify the inclusion and exclusion of dance with regard to the male dancer, the resultant acceptance or rejection of the male dancing body, to focus on the ways in which masculinity is represented in Bollywood dance, and to probe into the factors guiding the creation and reception of the male dancing body on the silver screen.

“Formalist theories of dance”, observes Ramsay Burt, “see the reception of dance as the appreciation of aesthetic forms, unaffected by external or extra-aesthetic considerations such as representation” (34). But can this be true for dances represented in films where dance is linked to the film’s narrative which too is essentially representative? Moreover, in an era when “Dances in Hindi cinema... are no longer limited to their existence within a film’s narrative. Instead, they increasingly live under the umbrella label of Bollywood dance, which describes... the bodies shaped through these dance movements... Bollywood, engages the body and the meanings the body in motion creates” (Shresthova 32). The answer is likely to be negative. Dance in films functions as a mimetic component within the film. Aristotle’s “fatal dictum” that dance imitates character, emotion and action and it is this that “assigns to the dance an aim outside of itself” seems to hold true for dances in films (Burt 34). Reading dance through the post-structuralist lens, which suggests that the body is formed within a discourse, it is almost impossible to dissociate dance from the discourses of the body.

To study the social and cultural attitudes toward the male dancer and the perception of the male dancing body by the Indian spectators I will be referring to dance numbers derived from commercial films. The representations in commercial films, targeting the *masses* rather than the *classes*, narrate the dominant sociological discourse of the mainstream society. People belonging to a particular culture, observes Hall,

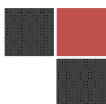


learn the system and conventions of representation... They unconsciously internalize the codes which allow them to express certain concepts and ideas through their systems of representation - writing, speech, gesture, visualization, and so on - and to interpret ideas which are communicated to them using the same systems... meaning, language and representation are such critical elements in the study of culture. (22)

Dance is often stereotyped as a feminine art for employing the body, its non-verbal feature, its expressive nature, emotional reception and its association with women. In the history of the evolution of dance in India, dance was usually practiced by women, and thrived in temples and courts performed by *devadasis* and courtesans respectively. The case of *Gotipua*, a traditional dance of Orissa practiced the males, may appear to be an exception. However, the fact that *Gotipua* was practised by young boys dressed as women, until they reached adolescence, reveals the association of femininity with dance. The figure of a traditional Indian dancer recurs in films like *Umrao Jaan*, *Pakeezah*, *Jaanisaaar* and the like and is invariably depicted to be a woman. The social association of dance with courtesans makes the identity of dance problematic. Dance of the courtesans was not seen as a separate entity – as art that transcends gender. The result was feminisation of dance. “Due in large part to dualistic thinking”, observes Doug Risner, “that separates mind from body, intellectual activity from physical labor, and to dance’s close association with girls and women, dance is often perceived as part of women’s domain” (59).

In India, the male dancing body has long been viewed with prejudice. With Independence, Indian Classical Dance was recognised as a rich cultural heritage. Yet, then too the acceptance of the male dancing body was limited to the elite few and the patrons of art but continued to remain difficult for the general masses. Mahesh Dattani’s play *Dance Like a Man*, bears testimony to the prejudices against the male dancer, to the notion that dance is a feminine activity and is opposed to manliness. In an interview on the play, Dattani comments on the gender bias with which dance is viewed in society: “Perhaps a small section of our society is open to the idea of professional male dancers. But by and large it is still considered unmanly” (Banerjee). With the popularity of the television, the body became a site for meeting consumers’ expectations of the film industry. The body as represented through films, serials, reality shows, advertisements, song and dance sequences, reflects the notions attached to it. Towards the close of the twentieth century, Bollywood industry saw the rise of the so-called “Bollywood style Western dance”, with which the male dancing body gained widespread recognition, unlike the classical male practitioners. Classical dance closely abides by the *rasa* theory presented in *Natyashastra* and as Dattani explains, “Most of the repertoire of our classical dance has been written for the *Nayika* (Heroine), so a male dancer must empathise with the *lasya* (grace) aspect of it as much as the *tandava* (physical forceful)” (Banerjee). It illuminates the challenge of acceptability faced by male classical dancers.

Further, the non-verbal nature of dance, involving movement and gestures seem to problematise the perception of the male dancing body since in logocentric world prioritisation of the realm of the verbal marginalises the realm of the non-verbal. According to the psychoanalytic theory of Freud and Lacan, the acquisition of language is taken to be a key moment in the formation of identity. Language is seen as male and patriarchal - as Lacan puts it, “the law of the Father”, and the early, non-verbal, pre-linguistic and bodily experiences are seen as marginal to dominant discourse, but a



potential site of subversion of it (Burt 51-52). Ann Daly suggested, “movement itself has traditionally been consigned to the realm of the feminine, set in opposition to male mastery over language” (Burt 44). As a result, observes Ramsay Burt, the “pre-verbal marginalizes movement and dance” (67).

The language of dance is the body. Consequently, dance is grounded in “socially constructed ideas about the body” (Burt 5). Feminist critics have noted, how through generations, femininity has been culturally associated with the body and masculinity with the mind:

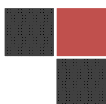
This association of the body with the female works along magical relations of reciprocity whereby the female sex becomes restricted to its body, and the male body, fully disavowed, becomes paradoxically, the incorporeal instrument of an ostensible radical freedom... In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. (Butler 16-17)

Equating men with the mind and women with the body is central to the problems associated with the male dancing body, as dance threatens to disrupt the hierarchy inherent in this binary. The visibility of dancing body threatens it to be scrutinised and objectified by the spectator’s gaze, especially in concert dance (an issue which I will further elaborate in the course of my paper). Chiara Bassetti points out that a male dancer runs the risk of being marked as effeminate and thereby homosexual, unless normalising strategies such as muscularity and prowess are incorporated.

A crucial question to contemplate upon is that, what happens when a man is watched dancing for the sake of entertainment? He is on display. So, the dancing men being *looked at* subvert the patriarchal gaze where men *look* and women are *looked at*. This is particularly true in case of concert dance and dances in films where the dance performed is *looked at* by the audience.

The act of looking is linked with surveillance. A body on display can be interpreted as a body under surveillance. Therefore, postmodern dance artist Johanna Boyce, “connects being on display with loss of power” (Burt 51). According to Ramsay Burt, “Boyce said she imagined that being on display is a fearful thing for a man because it is a situation in which he doesn’t ‘have total control or empowerment’ over the people watching him” (51).

At the same time it is also true that dance which makes the dancer’s body vulnerable to display and gaze, also offers a scope for the subversion of such power relations between the performer and the spectator. A dancer in a way manipulates power. A dancer in his or her act of dancing has complete control over the expression of his or her body and equipped with aesthetic power mesmerises the audience. Sahibjaan holds her audience in awe (*Pakeezah*), Raja Ameer Haider is spellbound by Noor’s dance (*Jaanisaar*), Nawab Sultan is enchanted by Umrao’s performance (*Umrao Jaan*) and Raju is enamoured by the grace of Rosie’s dancing figure (*Guide*). Yet, such an interchange of power through the act of dancing earned the dancing woman the title of a *femme fatale*, that is to say, the power emanated by the dancing girl was equated with the power of a

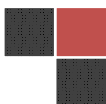


seductress and led her dance to be viewed as a spell. Such a spell implied the spectator being caught in the maze of the dancer's feminine grace and dancing feats. Therefore, even if the male dancing body, tries to operate power similarly, it will entail some stooping of the male ego for sharing feminine attributes. But in a patriarchal society which operates on gender hierarchy the man chooses never to stoop into femininity. The man's body, needs to be equipped not by feminine power of seduction but by masculine power of strength.

With the growing popularity of physical fitness, Bollywood experienced the proliferation of what is known as metrosexual masculinity. Metrosexual masculinity further developed the concept of gender as performance (Gehlawat 88). The gym-sculpted, chiseled, muscular physique of the male dancing body has taken the twenty-first century Bollywood industry by storm. In this context, the release of *Kaho Naa... Pyaar Hai*, in the year 2000, almost serves as a landmark with which Hrithik Roshan's perfect build became the "dream body" and the icon of masculinity. As Raj performs on the tracks "Sitaron ki Mehfil" and "Kaho Naa Pyar Hain", the desired male dancing body of this century is born. I use the term desired but being desired does not make this iconic male dancing body submissive or roll his eyes like the traditional dancing girls, nor does it portray him being overtly voluptuous like the vamps. The physical allure is a consequence of his physical versatility. His dancing prowess and sculpted physique continued to keep the spectators in awe in dance numbers like "Dhoom Again", "Dil Laga Na" whereas dancer numbers like "Mein Aisa Kyun Hoon" incorporate almost surreal movements. The trend of emphasising physical vitality and versatility follows in "Jalwa", "Ramji Ki Chaal" and "Bismil", to name a few. Heroes "tend to *display* their manscaped muscularity, as objects to be admired, more often than not in song and dance sequences", observes Ajay Gehlawat (95).

Representation of the male dancing body utilises the suggestive power inherent in the non-verbal language of dance while portraying masculinity through the male dancing body. Dance performances in most commercial films reiterate the gender discourses of a particular culture. If discourse tells the story of a particular culture, then cinemas not just tell but also show this story. The *showing* component is heightened in dance numbers due to the presence of its nonverbal component. I have already discussed that a dancer in his or her act of dancing is on display. Being on display is linked to showing.

To reimpose the masculine control and assure strength, the male dancing body is *shown* to be powerful before the spectators. Whereas a female dancing body on display is vulnerable to male gaze and objectification, a male body on display uses the display as a strategy to demonstrate masculinity. For this, athletic movements are often incorporated in his dance, and any likelihood of Classical Dance (which brings in the reminiscence of its association with female practitioners) is carefully avoided. Such a performer draws his viewers attention more by keeping them in awe of his physical prowess rather than by engaging them emotionally. Both sports and dance are embodied practices but unlike dance, sports is linked with *power* and *winning*, and hence, *masculinity*. Maura Keefe states, "I suggest that the genuine presence, or "realness", of the athletes works to counter long-held anxieties about the effeminacy of the male dancer" (91). The influence of this in Bollywood industry is the creation and widespread popularity of the so called "Bollywood free style" numbers, often loosely described simply as "Western dance", by Indian spectators. Such a genre, which includes dance numbers like "Jalwa", "Sitaron ki Mehfil", etc., seems to occupy the limelight in twenty-first century Bollywood. The use of the term

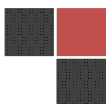


“Western” is significant because since the twentieth century choreographers of the West (especially United States), have drawn inspiration from athletic moves and even employed athletes themselves for “the assured masculinity tied to their athlete stature” (Keefe 103). Athlete moves play as defensive strategies to protect the masculinity of the dancer. Most performances by the male dancing body in the twenty-first century Bollywood incorporate spectacular jumps and energetic athletic moves.

The twenty-first century Bollywood industry, hardly represents a male classical dancer, which historically and socially being a form of concert dance invites gaze, except as in *Vishwaroop*. Here, Viz, seen dancing to the tunes of the song “Mein Radha Teri Mera Shyam Tu”, is consequently suspected to be effeminate. Men on the silver screen are more frequently seen to perform social dances (which may also include folk dances as in “Ghanan Ghanan”, “Radha Kaise Na Jale”, etc.) where the *act of looking* ceases to serve as the primary link between the performers and the audiences on the screen. To simplify this, in cinema, a classical male dancer is *looked at* at two levels - one by the spectators within the narrative of the film and the other, by the spectators who are also the consumers of the film; whereas, a man performing a social dance faces the gaze only of the latter and moreover here the male audience can easily identify himself with the dancer without crossing the threshold of masculinity.

The show of muscularity pronouncing masculine virility is accentuated by the attire of the male dancer. In dance sequences like “Dum Dum”, “Dhoom Again”, “Dil Laga Na”, “Ek Junoon”, “Ramji Ki Chaal”, the male dancer’s muscular torso ranges from being scantily clad to bare, leading to almost a hyperbolic display of masculinity. A dancer exuding such masculine energy is often joined by vamps (as is seen in several item numbers) or vamp like characters. The presence of such a train of female dancers with their provocative but essentially feminine gestures contrasts and amplifies the displayed masculinity of the male dancer. They appear again and again in Bollywood male dance sequences. With the advent of “Bollywood style Western” dance, “Men became more physical in the execution of their movement,” in displaying manliness (Shresthova 31).

A dancer’s need to express the emotions to be experienced by the viewers conflicts with the dominant notion that men are supposed to be rational and restrained. Interestingly, interpreting in the light of the *Rasa* theory, it is discernible that the dance performances by male dancers in twenty-first century Bollywood films, are grounded in *vir* (heroism) and *raudra* (fury) *rasa*. *Rasa* literally means emotional flavour of an aesthetic experience, experienced by the spectators. It is acceptable for a man to appear heroic, valiant, angry, powerful. Such *rasas* are easily relished by the audience and accepted to be masculine. Even if the male dancer expresses devotion or love or grief, the respective *rasas* are amalgamated with *vir* and *raudra rasa* so as to radiate masculine energy. Traditionally in a devotional dance, the dancer is supposed to dissolve or at least become oblivious of his corporeal identity to reach out to the spiritual realm. In her essay “Bharatnatyam”, Tanjore Balasaraswati writes, “The yogi by controlling his breath and by modifying his body acquires the halo of sanctity. Even so, the dancer who dissolves her identity in rhythm and music, makes the body an instrument, at least for the duration of the dance, for the experience and expression of the spirit” (198). But, in “Sadda Dil Vi Tu”, the male troupe of dancers, rather than dissolving their corporeal identity, hammers the same by their energetic, bold moves. Their expression of praise of Lord Ganesha, appears to be grounded more on corporeality than on spirituality. What is even more surprising is



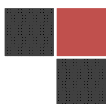
that they are joined some female dancers whose appearance and performance blur the line between spirituality and sexuality; but widens the gulf between the representation of the masculine and the feminine.

Such a demonstration and celebration of masculinity undoubtedly leads to commodification of the male body – a commodity whose performance is crucial to the success of the box-office. Referring to Hrithik Roshan's physique, the heart-throb of the new millennium, Gehlawat notes Deshpande's observation that the flawless perfection seems somehow unreal and plastic and yet it is this that is the "object of consumption" (93). This is true for all the Bollywood male dancers of this century. Thus, it would be unfair to state that the representation of the male dancing bodies can elude objectification or display. Rather it would be more appropriate to state that both the male and the female dancing bodies are commodified and yet appear distinct because of their gendered representation. If one appears provocative, the other appears powerful, if one implies submission, the other implies strength. The male dancer in looking at the female dancers serve as the spectator surrogate. In her essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey states, "Traditionally, the woman displayed has functioned on two levels: an erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator within the auditorium" (751). If male spectators are motivated to identify with the male hero, then what about the female spectator of the film? Ramsay Burt recounts John Berger's observation that 'the "ideal" spectator is always assumed to be the male... "Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at"' (Burt 49). However, the presence of female gaze cannot be completely ruled out, especially in the context of the twenty-first century Bollywood dance numbers, where women dancers usually cease to appear coy and gaze at the male co-dancers; and in an era when the gym-sculpted muscular male dancing body is produced as an object of consumption, for the viewers, by the Bollywood industry. Yet, the "male gaze is always more predominant" and the ultimate aim of the female gaze is in being overcome (Nair 54).

It is this identification with and acceptance of representations that determines the viewers' engagement with the screen. Javed Akhtar, a highly successful screen-writer, lyricist and poet, explains this concept as a delicate balance of the familiar and the fantastic (Ganti 284). "Psychoanalytic film theory discusses film spectatorship in terms of the circulation of desire. That is... mobilizing the structures of unconscious fantasy" (Flitterman-Lewis 180). Viewing cinema is akin to dreaming – dreaming to identify with the desired self. According to film theory the spectator in front of the screen corresponds to the infant in front of the mirror – "both being fascinated by and identifying with an imaged ideal, viewed from a distance" (Flitterman-Lewis 184). In this light, assuming that cinematic production operates on spectators' desire, it cannot be wholly negated that the popularity of the male dancing bodies, displaying heightened masculinity, is a manifestation of the viewers' desire to adhere to and identify with conventional gender roles that are internalised historically, socially and culturally as the ideal.

Here, it is apt to recall, Philip Auslander's observation of theatre dance:

Presence is about power, and there is sometimes collusion between political structures of authority and persuasive power of presence (1987:24-5). The way in which the male dancer's presence succeeds or fails in reinforcing male power is clearly central to an understanding of representations of masculinity in theatre



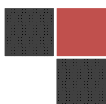
dance. How spectators read dancers' presence is determined partly by visual cues. Some of these cues are given by the dancers, through the way they present themselves to the audience, and in the way they themselves focus their gaze (Burt 50).

From this observation, one may assert, the creation and representation of the male dancing body indeed manipulate the way of seeing the dancing body by the spectators. However, at the same time, it is also true that the meaning of the semiotics of dance is generated by an interaction between the screen and the spectators; by the process of encoding (by the performer) and decoding (by the spectator). The "visual cues" that Auslander speaks about are provided keeping in mind the spectators' preferences. The spectators' preferences are determined by the success of the box-office – "commercial success ("hit") or failure ("flop") is read as evidence of viewers' propensity to accept, or identify with, a particular film... The act of purchasing a ticket is understood as an endorsement or appreciation" (Ganti 285-286). At the same time, it is interesting to note, "Bollywood dance and music has become a way of promoting the movies... People may remember the film because of the songs and dances" (Shresthova 32). Now, since the filmmakers operate in line with the audience's likes and dislikes; and as Bollywood dance is integral in promoting a film, it is just to interpret the box-office, not just as a commercial but also as a cultural index. Box-office is a pointer to the cultural preferences of the on lookers and reflects societal expectations.

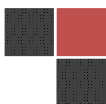
Judith Lynne Hanna opines, "Attitudes towards the body and emotion emerge in making and perceiving dance... Dancers and audiences respond to the body usage of their times" (27). Their expectations being met, the spectators find themselves comfortably seated in their *conceptual universe*. Representation is conditioned by and in turn conditions the shared social and cultural consciousness. Though representation may fail to replicate the meaning of the real world, it nevertheless goes a long way in re-stating and re-affirming "cultural myths". Representation of dance in the twenty-first century Bollywood, ceases to be merely an aesthetic experience and is rather disposed to convey conventional gender roles. The way the male dancing body is represented in Bollywood films reflect and reinforce the dominant structure and discourse of the twenty-first century Indian society and insinuates towards the dominant cultural consumption tendencies of a patriarchal society. As a reiteration of stereotypes leads to "assimilation of cultural myths" (Dasgupta 126), the threat remains that such representation tends to block any escape from and instead complicate the maze of a patriarchal society.

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