

## Re-thinking the Economy of Labour/Leisure, Ambition and the Body in the Lyrical World of *Param Sundari*

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### *Abstract*

*This paper seeks to rethink the economy of labour/leisure, ambition and the body in the lyrical world of Param Sundari (an item song from the Hindi film Mimi) from a Marxist feminist perspective. The paper will argue how the lyrics of the concerned item number can be interpreted as reducing the female body to a source of purely utilitarian pleasure and thus, enabling the repetitive production and reproduction of the labour power of the working class. In this context, this paper will analyze the Hindi item song Param Sundari as an urban narrative and attempt to understand how the values of the urban working class and the idea of the female body are represented through the lyrics of the concerned item song. Employing Laura Mulvey's idea of the male gaze, the paper would further problematize the representational politics of cinema and argue how the latter's smooth operation in a society is enabled by the structural imperative of a symbiosis with patriarchy. Thus, this paper purports to explore and expound the economy of labour/leisure in a capitalist society and how capitalist hegemony belies the idea of gender inequality, and commodification of the female body behind the facade of female ambition, success and liberty.*

**Keywords:** Working class, item number, labour power and hegemony.

### **Introduction**

The word “item” derives from its Latin root, meaning “also; in like manner”. In late 16th century England, the word was used synonymously with “also” and “moreover” to write an entry in a list. It was rather used as a supplementary expression to add to the overall lexical sense of an entry or a sentence in a list. Item songs in Indian cinema are also supposed to serve a similar function but in a cinematic context, as the primary aim of an item number is to lend support to the marketability of the film by “turning the woman into a spectacle” (Nair 53) for the male gaze. In this context, this paper would analyse the lyrics of the Hindi item song *Param Sundari* from the Hindi film *Mimi* (2021) to understand the functionality of an item song in a capitalist economy and how the values of the working class and the notion of the female

body are represented in the lyrics of the song concerned. In doing this, this paper will delve deeper to understand how the culture industry employs cultural institutions, especially cinema, to hegemonize the working class and how the female body is but “a necessary input” (Banerjee 2461) in the process. Thus, the paper proposes to unveil the politics of “capitalist patriarchy” (Eisenstein 5) that largely functions through exploiting the female body and their ‘dream’/ ‘ambition’ to be free and economically independent in a neoliberal state. The paper would try to substantiate this argument through five sections.

### **What is an Urban Narrative?**

A narrative is a representation of events (real or fictional) in a temporal sequence. According to Gerald Prince, a narrative is the representation of at least two real or fictitious situations in a temporal sequence, neither of which presupposes or entails the other. According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “A narrative is a story whether told in prose (for example novel or short stories) or verse (for example epic or poems), involving events, characters, and what the characters say and do” (Abrams and Harpham 233). In the *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative*, narrative is defined as “...the representation of events, consisting of a story, (event or a sequence of events) and narrative discourse (events as represented)” (Varadarajan and Dutta 172). Now the query remains, what is an urban narrative or what makes a narrative urban?

As the name implies, an urban narrative is supposed to concern itself with the various urban issues and experiences, like, the condition of the working class, urban middle class, their values, industrialisation, the consequent urbanisation, family system etc. In fact, a careful perusal of the novels written during Victorian England, especially those of Thomas Carlyle, Charles Dickens, and Mrs. Gaskell, supposedly acquaints the reader with the abovementioned urban issues in painstaking detail. Therefore, one may arguably evaluate the ‘Condition of the England’ (Sanders 444) novels as the fictional forerunners of the urban narrative. They not only portray the condition of England but also “campaign against...the injustice or desuetude” (411) prevailing during 19th century Victorian England. The plots of such narratives are structured around the ‘logic’ of a capitalist economy that “continuously tends to work toward a closure” (Morris 38). Keeping this realist penchant toward a textual closure in mind, this paper aims at deconstructing the lyrics of the concerned item song by locating the aporetic fissures in its discourse that covertly perpetuates gender inequality, and exploitation of the working class on the capitalist plea of female empowerment, emancipation and progress. Therefore, one might evaluate any text in terms of an urban narrative as long as it conforms to the criteria sketched above.

### **Culture Industry, Entertainment and Cinema**

In their seminal essay, “Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”, Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer put forward the argument that culture industry employs cultural institutions including the cinema to inculcate into working class audience “the values and beliefs of the dominant capitalist order” (Cuddon 180). And this cultural inculcation, they argue, generates mass culture as a uniform product. The cultural uniformity consequently infects “everything with sameness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 94). According to Adorno and Horkheimer, in a capitalist society, even technology works in favour of the dominant class. Here, technical rationality is the “rationale of domination” (95). Moreover, the basis on which

technology constantly gains power over a society “is the power of those whose economic position in society is the strongest” (95). Therefore, everything ranging from the radio to motion pictures conforms to the logic of the capitalist economy which they call “an iron system” (120) - a system that sacrifices the “distinction between the logic of the work and that of the social system” (121). Therefore, cultural institutions like film become the logic of subservience to capitalism. Through totality, culture industry subdues the “parasite” of a work that may disrupt the harmony of “the formula which supplants the work” (99).

Therefore, in all likelihood, it is the schematic logic of subservience to the capitalist economy that employs the item numbers in Indian cinema as well, as doing so would possibly serve a three-fold purpose - it enhances the marketability of the film by fetishizing the female body parts and thus, playing on the “voyeuristic fantasy” (Mulvey 16) of the audience; further, cinema also instills beliefs and values of the capitalist order by way of cinematic entertainments including the “hit songs... and the specific content of the entertainment” (Adorno and Horkheimer 125), derived from “the consciousness of the production team” (125) and above all, they “impress the omnipotence of capital on the hearts of the expropriated job candidates as the power of their true master” (98). Even during the leisure hour, the working class must orient themselves according to the unity of production. Therefore, in a capitalist economy, even the leisure hour is but an extension of the labour hour. And according to Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in late capitalism, any form of ‘light’ entertainment- short story, sketch, problem film, hit song- represent “the average of late liberal taste threateningly imposed as a norm” (107). This argument can be extended to the genre of the item songs, especially how the spectator (both on screen and off screen) of the item songs including the one under discussion relishes the fragmented fetishized beauty of the item girl only to be inculcated with the normative values of late capitalism. In the next section, the paper will discuss how in cinema, scopophilia produces sexual fetish through “male gaze” (Chaudhury 31) and voyeurism.

### **Scopophilia, The Male Gaze, and Creation of Sexual Fetish**

In her seminal essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) Laura Mulvey demonstrates how “the unconscious of the patriarchal society” (Mulvey 6) is embedded in the film form of Hollywood, especially those of Hitchcock and Sternberg. To that end, she reads Sigmund Freud’s idea of scopophilia into the representational politics of the Hollywood films, theorising how the male gaze of the spectator (both on-screen and off-screen) derives voyeuristic sadistic pleasure by “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (16). Freud’s scopophilia or “pleasure in looking” (11) refers to the idea of commodifying a body as an object of sexual desire for visual pleasure. It subjects the body to “a controlling and curious gaze” (16). According to Shohini Chaudhury, though mainstream cinema is obviously designed for public exhibition, it effectively “positions its spectators as peeping tom[s]: the darkened auditorium gives each spectator the illusion of being a privileged voyeur, peeping in on a private world, separate from the rest of the audience” (34). This voyeuristic gaze at the on-screen female body is the gaze of “the ideal spectator... always assumed to be male” (Berger 64).

In her abovementioned essay, Laura Mulvey also studies Sigmund Freud’s idea of fetishism in the context of narrative cinema, demonstrating that “far from being ‘the private taste of an odd majority’, as most people think it is, fetishism pervades the mass media, mostly, at an

unconscious level” (Chaudhury 38). According to Mulvey, the woman in Hollywood films is a perfect product, whose body, “stylised and fragmented by close-ups, is the content of the film, and the direct recipient of the spectator’s look” (39). Commenting on the ‘anxious amusement’ of the spectator, embodied in the paradoxical ‘lack’ of the castrated woman, Mulvey categorically distinguishes between voyeurism and fetishism, stating that the former denotes a voyeuristic sadistic gaze of the male while the latter “transforms the represented object into a satisfying fetish” (Cuddon 295). This transformative voyeuristic gaze is produced with the frozen formula of realist narrative that “subdues their unruliness” (Adorno and Horkheimer 99), terminating the narrative of a film within “the schema of mechanical reproducibility” (100).

Though Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze focalises the Hollywood films of Hitchcock and Sternberg, it has been extrapolated to Indian Cinema, particularly item songs of Hindi Cinema by several feminist film critics like Defency J. Purohit and Donna Matthew who have extensively reworked on Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze to understand how/why the narratives of the Hindi item songs reinforce the “patriarchal perception of women where role is reduced to attracting the audience...in a phallogocentric society” (Purohit 1842). The next section will critically analyse the lyrics of the item song *Param Sundari* in the context of the above discussions.

### Analysis of the Lyrics

The song involves a dialogic conversation between a supposedly talented young girl aspiring to be a film star and a chorus, voicing the concerns of her male suitors. The lyrics begin with the chorus complaining against the “*Param Sundari*” or the femme fatale for ensnaring the lives of her suitors with her hypnotizing beauty. The ‘seductress’ is accused of goading her suitors into compromising their jobs and family ties, and thus, causing them an apparent ruin. The choric complaint goes as follows - “Aye Bikaneri chokri, santare ki tokri / ghar to chhudwaya, ab kya chudayegi naukri?” (Hey girl from Bikaner, you are like a basket of oranges /you made me leave my house /now do you want me to leave my job as well). (Sanon 1-2)

These above-mentioned lyrics would keep recurring as the choric refrain throughout the song. Following the choric complaint, she sets out denouncing the romantic overtures of her suitors as uninvited and unworthy of her love. And her unworthy suitors from the street are characterized as naive and committed in their pseudo romantic pursuits. But, these naive lovers, despite their naivety and passionate consistency in their courtship, evince a moral prudishness that stands on the verge of hypocrisy and fraudulence. And the young girl seems to chastise them for their moral prudery while comparing them to the archetypal figure of Romeo in a parody.

Romeo, Romeo, gali ke Romeo  
Bholi shakal wale saare ke saare farebiyon  
Romeo, Romeo bhaade ke premiyan  
Kaahe gale pade ho bin bulaye baratiyan?” (Sanon 3-6).  
(Hey Romeo type lovers of the street,  
You all have an innocent face but you are cheats,  
Hey Romeo type lovers, your love is temporary,  
Why are you all running behind me like uninvited guests?)

According to Michel Foucault, this moral prudery and the resultant hypocrisy is discursively produced by the “polymorphous techniques of power” (11). Further, Foucault also argues that

in a capitalist society the entailing effects of the moral prudishness, in turn, ‘incite’ the industrial workers to seek “those places of tolerance” (4) that not only reintegrate the ‘illegitimate’ sexualities but also reproduce their labour power in pursuits of pleasure. The male suitors in the song are likely to belong to the *Bhadralok* community – a community, characterized by their moral prudery, abstinence from the ‘illegitimate’, adherence to the middleclass morality and sexual norms and a ‘training’ in formal and technical education. In a capitalist economy, these *Bhadralok* middle class/working class people are disciplined into “problematizing sexual pleasures” (13) while sanctioning them sexual entertainment in certain enclosed spaces of tolerance (like brothel, bars, night clubs etc) after a day’s labour. Therefore, it can be arguably said that the ethical problematization of sexual pleasures in open public spaces might have led the supposed male suitors to seek entertainment in an enclosed space that tolerates the illegitimate and the obscene. Besides, the *Bhadralok* male suitors of the song seem to parody the archetypal figure of Romeo by indulging in those pleasurable pursuits- paying visit to a nautch girl, wooing her for momentary pleasures as pseudo lovers, and being lovers for hire- that, instead of invoking the archetypal figure of Romeo, ends up parodying the archetype of platonic love, romance and adventures. Hence such pleasurable pursuits following a day’s labour would only ensure a reproduction of the labour power and thus sustain a capitalist economy. Therefore, as already stated above (at the end of the section named “Culture Industry, Entertainment and Cinema”), in a capitalist economy, even during leisure, the working class is made to orient according to the unity of production which, in turn, renders their leisure into an extended labour.

Following the reply from the young girl, the choric complaint is resumed, mourning the fact that despite her suitors being head over heels in love with the young girl, she is absolutely nonchalant about their romantic overtures. And though their pseudo romantic pursuits are yet to be requited, they seem to idealise or rather eternalise the charisma of her transient youth by alluding to the archetypal figures of Monalisa, Lolita, and Kadambari, three archetypal figures of historical significance who can arguably be associated with vulgarity, abnormal sexuality and patriarchal repression respectively. Mona Lisa, for instance, is a representative work of Renaissance humanism – a European phenomenon in artistic and cultural discourse that was secular and anthropocentric in nature. The title of the painting which is known as Mona Lisa is supposed to have depicted the noble lady Lisa del Giocondo, although her likeness to the painting is uncertain. Besides, since in Italian the word “*mona*” is associated with vulgarity, in Italian it is spelled *Monna Lisa*. Though in English it is rarely maintained, the meticulous maintenance of spelling in Italian implies the discourse of obscenity and how patriarchy links it to the female body and class. The lyrical reference to the name Lolita can be seen as an allusion to the 1955 novel of the same name, authored by the Russian American novelist Vladimir Nabokov. The plot of the novel deals with the controversial subject of hebephilia. And, though the allusion to Kadambari refers to various interpretations across different contexts in Indian literature and philosophy, the name itself could be seen as an indirect reference to Kadambari devi, the sister-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore. She is said to have inspired the young Rabindranath in composing many of his poems with poetic feedback and comments. Her relation with Tagore was controversial. She committed suicide at a young age. Her suicide can be seen as a symbolic act just like that of Bhubaneswari devi in G.C Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* This act of suicide can be interpreted as an act of unbecoming, “a moment of capturing

the self's precarity" (Bhattacharjee 7) in a patriarchal society. And, her act of auto-effacement is impelled and animated by the political possibilities of denying the structure which denies women a subjectivity. Therefore, the archetypal figure of Kadambari is associated with the discourse of the body, that of sexuality and repression. Therefore, the historical archetypal figures hint at the systematic production of the normative and the perverted other – a point that the lyrics seem to uphold through allusively historicising the archetypal figures.

Ley toh gayi kaleja, Sang mein humein bhi leja  
 Yeh toh chori pe hai seena zori  
 Kabhi lage Monalisa, Kabhi kabhi lage Lolita  
 Aur kabhi jaise kadambari. (Sanon 7-10).  
 (You have stolen our hearts away, take us with you,  
 This is showing attitude on top of cheating,  
 At times, you look like Monalisa, at times you look like  
 Lolita,  
 And at times like Kadambari.)

So far, the lyrics make it evident that she is a young girl, perhaps performing in a modern day mehfil like setting to entertain a working-class audience including her supposed male suitors. Later the lyrics would imply how her male suitors turn her body into a thing for 'male gaze' and pleasure and the capitalist trope of ambition emboldens a desirable young girl to self-commodify to the pleasure of an urban middle class or working-class audience. Further, it can also be argued that the pseudo lovers of the young girl who probably cheat on their wives or lovers, visit such *mehfils* after a day's labour just to be 'enter-trained' (a suggested portmanteau coined by combining the words entertainment and training) in accordance with the unity of production. This speculative inference refers us back to the section named "Culture Industry, Entertainment and Cinema" where this paper has already explained how in a capitalist society the discourse of entertainment is made functional to hegemonize the working class with the values and beliefs of the capitalist order. Further, referring to Michel Foucault, this paper has also implied the interrelation between capitalism and such mehfils- which Foucault rightly calls "places of tolerance" (4).

After the choric grievance against the young girl is apparently over, she, with a tinge of narcissism and provocation, invites the spectatorial gaze to her body – "Sar se pair talak husn se bhari..." (I am a stunning beauty from top to toe) (Sanon 15). Thus, she seems to ensure voyeurism and the consequent fetishization of her body parts. According to Laura Mulvey, this fetishization "defends against castration anxiety" (Chaudhury 38) arising from the awareness of the absent presence of the phallus. Moreover, as already said, this transformative voyeuristic sadistic gaze is produced, reproduced and circulated with the realist formula that determines the narrative of a film or a hit song in a capitalist society. Though initially she seems to self-objectify, by subjecting herself to "a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 16), in the very next instance, she proclaims a self-commitment to break free from the shackles of patriarchy like a Kadambari (which literally means an easterly bird) so as to make her dream come true i.e her dream to be catapulted into a celebrity stardom in the film industry.

Pairon mein payal ki bedi se bandh ke main na rehne wali,  
 Main alhad purva ke jaisi hoon pardeson tak behne wali,

Mujhe gehno se badhke sapno ki chahat hai,  
 Jin sapno ko sach ho jaane ki aadat hai,  
 Katti hai meri mardon se, yaari filmo ke pardon se.  
 (You can't lock me with the anklets in my feet as shackles,  
 I'll flow everywhere just like the easterly wind,  
 I like dreams more than ornaments,  
 The dreams that have the habit of coming true,  
 I don't talk to men, I'm friendly with films only) (Sanon 11-15).

Therefore, what evidently follows from the above lyrics is that she aspires to be a film star. Her outlook of life makes her prioritise the pursuit of her ambition over the riveting attention of her suitors. Her aspiration to achieve stardom seems to be a propelling force in her, making it imperative for her to perform to the utilitarian pleasure of an urban middle/working class audience. Though she initially seems to hint at her self-sufficiency, she ends up catering to the 'anxious amusement' of the urban 'male' audience, resulting from the paradoxical 'lack' in her body.

The fact that she invites attention to her body to entertain the 'male' audience despite her desire for a self-sufficient life is evocative of Zillah Eisenstein's notion of "capitalist patriarchy" (Eisenstein 5) especially how the smooth operation of capitalism in a society is enabled by the structural imperative of a collaboration with patriarchy. This female body is a patriarchal construct and in the realist narrative of the item song *Param Sundari* it seems to serve "the unconscious of a patriarchal society" (Mulvey 16). This is probably why item songs often feature a female body to entertain an audience which has always been "assumed to be male" (Cuddon 295). This symbiosis between capitalism and patriarchy is what, according to the feminist film critic Shohini Chaudhury, has caused "a gender pay gap...in most professions" (6). Martha Lauzen's recent research into 'celluloid ceiling' has brought attention to these problems within the Hollywood film industry. And her statistics reveal that "not are women significantly underrepresented behind the scenes... their chances through advancing through industry are also far less than men's" (6).

If we contextualise the pursuit of the young girl, her pursuit seems to be a wild-goose chase. She never reaches her dream – something that only takes her "beyond the real" (Deshpande 100). The plot of the film featuring the song hegemonically celebrates the idea of a technology assisted motherhood through IVF procedures. She conceives a baby through IVF for a foreign couple in the hope of getting her dream fulfilled. It seems that her dream ensnares her into the capitalist machine by making her fall prey to a technologically mediated motherhood that exclusively caters to the rich capitalist (here a rich couple's need for a child). Therefore, in a capitalist society, technology seems class biased as it exclusively serves the rich bourgeois capitalist at the expense of female body, sexuality, and ambition.

### **Conclusion**

From the analyses of the lyrics, it is evident that the lyrics provide us with an urban narrative, underlain by capitalist patriarchal concerns. Furthermore, the lyrics also represent the urban working-class values and how the capitalist trope of ambition exploits the female body to produce and reproduce the labour power, and thus, ensuring maximum productivity and gain. Moreover, it also follows from the lyrical analyses, that in a capitalist society, the fetishized female body

parts are nothing but “a necessary input at one stage in the long line of the production process” (Banerjee 2461). Reduced to a source of purely utilitarian needs, the female body is required to produce the regular nocturnal fantasies of pleasures that supposedly fill up the vacuity of the soul of the alienated worker who visits her after a day’s labour. She represents the ultimate in the Marxian concept of alienation in a capitalist society. The alienation of one section of the exploited feeds upon the alienation of another. Thus, through the lyrics of the concerned item song, the paper re-thinks the economy of labour/leisure in a capitalist society and how capitalism with its trope of ambition belies the idea of gender inequality and commodification of the female body behind the facade of female economy, success and liberty.

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