

Visual Pleasures for the Female Gaze

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The display of male sexuality, particularly through erotic male songs and dances in films like *Om Shanti Om* and *Saawariya* raises questions about gendered dynamics in popular Bollywood cinema.

Like many other lovers of Bollywood cinema, I too was caught up since October this year in the countdown to the battle of all battles, with the release of *Om Shanti Om (oso)* and *Saawariya* on November 9, 2007. Reams have been written, debated and analysed on the two films in newspapers, television networks and everyday discussions. They have been depicted as films catering to very different sensibilities, and representing vastly diverse forms. The verdict seems to have declared both as average films, though *oso* seems to be faring better than *Saawariya* at the box office. I enjoyed the first half of *oso* particularly and felt *Saawariya* as a film with great form, but no content and soul.

Male Bodies and Images

However, as a fan of Bollywood popular cinema, what struck me most was one striking similarity between the two films. I thought both the films offered great visual pleasure and feast for the female spectators, where the spectacular and stylish nude male bodies and images of both Ranbir Raj Kapoor and Shah Rukh Khan, though very different from each other, were the prime objects of desire and erotic spectacle. Both *oso* and *Saawariya* have urban heroes, whose bodies are produced and carved, rooted in providing a voyeuristic visual treat, especially to women and gays. The identity of both the heroes in these films is centrally tied to the consumption of their

nude bodies by the viewer. These films, in some sense, signify the coming of age of a new genre of Bollywood cinema, where it is not so much the female body, but the male body, which circulates and is on display, offers a sexualised imaginative anatomy. In the recent past too, nude male bodies of Hrithik Roshan and Salman Khan have been offered to the viewer. It, perhaps, is also a reflection of the fact that more and more women are crowding the cinema halls and form at times the major chunk of spectatorship, and they are a vital part of the cinematic experience.

New Masculinity

These images of nude male bodies can offer us contradictory, variable and ambivalent possibilities. At one level, they endorse masculinity. However, the masculinity that they uphold is different from the traditional hegemonic masculinity of the past, which rested on “no sissy stuff”. Rather, they promote masculinity as a stylish male body that is waxed, toned and enhanced with multiple beauty products, catering in no small way to a consumerist-capitalist culture. At another level, however, their bodies question other dominant assumptions about masculinity as well. In the case of Ranbir, I think the masculinity on display is almost “feminine”, especially his shapely waxed legs, amply displayed in the song *Jab Se Tere Naina*. His lean body, draped in a scanty towel, actively invites the viewer to linger over it. And in the case of Shahrukh, his body, even if catering to masculine images of six-pack abdomen muscles, can be a delight for the women’s gaze. The object of desire is not so much the female, but the male. Gender roles are, perhaps to an extent, reversed here, where the filmic gaze can very much belong to the female. This, of course, also

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reflects that women, and here too they cannot be treated as a homogeneous entity, can alter meanings of the text, or, read the images in different ways.

In *Saawariya*, the fictional city/land is a sad space, surrounded by women sex workers, forlorn and lonely souls and darkness. In this gloomy scenario, in walks the erotic male body of Ranbir, which becomes the centre of this space. It is a body that represents an outside figure, which operates freely, beyond the spatial, bodily and moral bounds of society, offering pleasure to all. His striptease act, along with his erotic moving body symbolise a changing sexual culture. The representation of the male body itself becomes subversive in certain ways. His bodily performance can be interpreted in different ways, not

necessarily catering to just a heterosexual regime. In fact, Ranbir has been hailed by some as a gay icon. The nude body of Shahrukh in *Osó* may also be seen as a visual iconography with sexual meanings, operating in a pleasure economy, and being an icon of “permissiveness”. His performative act in the song *Dard-E-Disco* is principally centred on the male body, symbolising a different erotic genre.

Moving Male Body

The moving male body and its bodily practices are transformed in both the films, as they rely much more on the naked male body as a technique of promotional culture, than on female ones. The display of male sexuality, particularly through erotic male songs and dances provide cultural

and sexual meanings to these ephemeral acts. They raise questions about gendered dynamics in popular Bollywood cinema, and perhaps, even in our actual lives. Images of male nudity and nakedness here act as symbols of transformation across consumer and entertainment, where the moving male body caters in a large measure to the female consumer appetite. The embodied performances in the two songs particularly, to a degree subvert notions of a dominant male gaze, mutate hegemonic masculinity, question neat heteronormative categories, and undermine prescribed gender spaces and fixed gendered representations. The pleasures of the woman spectator and the lure of the nude male body appear very much to stay in the coming days in Bollywood.