
Inscription of Beauty in Female's Body and Restriction of Self in Item Dances of Nepali Movies

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Abstract

In Nepali movies, the female characters construct the image of sensual seductresses who assiduously try to entrap the males through their captivating dance moves. These women appear as enchantresses because they are regulated by the social norms that constrain them to the role of an entertainer. Not only that, since these female characters are bound to entertain the males and to satisfy their carnal desire by offering their body, they put their effort to meet the so-called beauty standard designed by the society. In this ambience, this paper critically examines the reason for creating the image of female's beauty in the item dances of Nepali films. Equally, the paper analyzes the process of creating an image of the female as a beautiful object. To address these objectives, the concept of 'disciplining the body' of Judith Butler, Judith Lorber and Susan Bordo has been used. These critics view that beauty is inscribed on the body through cultural norms. Bordo discusses about the role played by the socializing agencies in disciplining the people's gender identity as she examines that the body becomes its gender through a series of acts, which are renewed, revised and consolidated through time. In Butler's perception, social norms bind the individual to acceptable standards of behavior. The paper concludes that since the female performers of these item dances are regulated by the system of beauty that is designed to privilege the male's desire, they exhibit their body as a beautiful product to the males.

Keywords: Body, gender, stereotype, item dances, aesthetics

Depiction of Female Characters in Films

In films the female characters are depicted as sex objects and objects to fulfill the desires of men. Basri et al. observe that either it is Hollywood, Bollywood, or Malaysian films, women are presented as sexual object who are eager to/compel to

offer their body to the males (13). In fact, most of the movies depict women as ardent daughter/wife/mother who devote not only her toil and sweat but blood and milk too. After analyzing the plots of American movies, Arjun M. Kumar et al. point out that in Hollywood movies, “male characters appear to be associated with a diversity of themes in movies, female characters seem predominantly associated with the theme of romance”; so, mostly, females are depicted as beautiful objects (par. 1). Kumar et al. view that associations of female characters to physical beauty is prime in Hollywood movies. He concludes that female need to appear attractive in screen because they have to meet the expectation of the male audiences.

Not only in Hollywood and Bollywood, negative representation of women is a common story of Nepali movie industry also. Women are unremittingly being objectified in Nepali movies down the ages. In Nepali movies, female characters are portrayed either as an angle of the house or a corrupt seductress. They appear either as obedient daughters, self-less mothers, affectionate sisters, and loyal wives, or enchantress who entraps a naïve hero and spoils his life. After analyzing three Nepali romantic Nepali movies, Nirmala Adhikari concludes that “limiting the role of female characters to stereotyped gender roles, Nepali movie makers seem to be indifferent to the reality of Nepali society where women have diverse images and roles” (105). In fact, from the beginning of its history, Nepali filmmakers fail to acknowledge the female as an assertive, courageous, and rational being. In their survey of 47 films from different periods Maskay et al. find that with the passage of time, Nepali movies place the female characters in the stereotyped gender roles more intensely (73). They underscore that cinema’s treatment of women in the screen can by far be seen as a continuation of the treatment of violence and male gaze; women are assigned to the subjugated roles. However, the negative representation of women in movies has been under gone stark criticism from the critics.

Film critics and reviewers such as Maskay et al., Sharon Smith, David Buckingham observe that movies have become a vexatious platform for the negative representation of women. In *Representations of Women and Girls in Nepal’s Cinema*, Maskay et al. reveal that Nepali films have played a substantial role to create negative image of women. They notice that the main reasons behind presenting the negative image of the female characters in the film are derogatory and immoral attitudes of the male film makers as well as audience towards the female. They view that after remarkable changes in the rights of women along with the promulgation of the New

Constitution 2015, there should have been “positive representation” of women (3); however, the female characters are still portrayed negatively. Likewise, highlighting an extreme irresponsibility of moviemakers, who represent damaging image of women in films, Sharon Smith accentuates that in films, images of women do not reflect the “realities of women's lives” because in films, women are presented in exaggerated way. Either they are bitch, nymph, and whore, or essentially passive, coward, and dumb (1). In fact, any sane woman would definitely not want to identify herself with such identities of the female characters. In Smith’s perception, “cinematic representations are far more complex” than reality (1). Similarly, Basri et al. condemn media and films for “portraying women as powerless being” (12). They reveal that though media makes the female visible, it presents them as a powerless person.

Highlighting the reason behind presenting negative images of the female characters in films, David Buckingham claims that films present the fact in a distorted way in order to satisfy the male audiences; therefore, “The media do not offer us a transparent window on the world but a mediated version of the world. They don’t just present reality, they re-present it” (57). Similarly, in Laura Mulvey's perception, films use all their powers of persuasion to reinforce the status quo. In her perception, films are “the crucial terrain” in which the females are objectified. (77). Mulvey notices that films tend to sexualize women for the male viewers; consequently, the female characters are rarely presented in their true self. Shivali Sharma and Anu Dandona observe that the “inappropriate portrayal of women being teased, chased, stared and groped by men” are common in films (3860). These critics unanimously draw the conclusion that films persistently present the female characters negatively. This review motivates the researcher to study item dances of Nepali movies as in Nepali movies, particularly in item dances, distorted image of female characters is formed. These critics have left the scope for the researchers to analyze the item dances in Nepali films from the perspective of gender theory. For that the researcher selects the item dances from five Nepali films: “Lali Joban Kaalo Kesh” (*Sarraswati*), “Talkyo Jawaani” (*Dui Rupaiyaan*), “Blast Hunewaalaa Jawaani” (*Looteraa*), “Bechidinthe yo Jawaani” (*Matti Maalaa*) and “Thamel Bazaara” (*Loot 2*). These item dances represent the film makers’ attitude towards the female characters in Nepali films.

Judith Butler, Judith Lorber and Susan Bordo focus on the idea that gendered bodies are formed under the pressure of the society. They claim that culture shapes the

female body. In Bordo's view, woman and her relationship with her body is a reflection of how culture molds gender performance. For Bordo, the female body can be considered as a text in itself, in which the society inscribe certain features through makeup, dress, and diet. She argues that, "Over the past hundred years, under the influence of a variety of cultural forces, the body has been forced to vacate its long-term residence on the nature side of the nature/culture duality and encouraged to take up residence" (33). In her view, society uses cultural images to regulate and suppress the female body. In fact, female body is disciplined in a such a way as if there is no escape. She reveals that the body is subconsciously (and scarily) exacted and normalized in everyday cultural discourse. Therefore, the female even cannot find out that her body is an outcome of cultural construction.

Similarly, in her *Undoing Gender*, Butler underscores that people's gender has been normatively produced within particular cultural frames. Butler reveals that through cultural intelligibility society/culture regulates one's body and shows the possibility of a livable life (that is, a life that is recognized as having value and legitimacy). Butler underscores that the socializing agencies play the role in disciplining the people's body. In her perception, the body is made acceptable through series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time. For her, "the social norms constitute" our body (2). She exposes that social norms bind the individual's body to acceptable standards of behavior. In her perception, the viability of individual's body is fundamentally dependent on these social norms. Lorber also asserts that an individual's body is controlled by the culture. Therefore, an individual molds her/his body through the manipulation of acts, gestures, appearances, and dress (6). These theorists view that the female's body is trained and shaped and converted into a 'useful body' or an intelligible body.

Female Bodies and Item Dances: Interpreting Nepali Movies

In item dances of Nepali movies, female characters beautify their body. In fact, their body seems as a site of struggle, where they work to keep their daily practice in the service of gender normalization. Being highly concerned with the beauty norms, they put heavy make-up, dress their hair in fashionable way, and wear revealing clothes. Rainer Emig and Antony Rowland underscore that in order to create the image of normative femininity, females are increasingly encouraged by the media to work on and discipline their bodies (6); moreover, they are given "seductive image". Likewise,

Emmanuel Reynaud highlights the ways those are used to objectifying the female body: “she must wear make-up, be deodorized, perfumed, emphasizes her breasts, reduce her appetite, and, without making a single clumsy gesture, she must seem happy, dainty, and original” (402). Reynaud concludes that women are constrained to normative gender identities of an attractive, beautiful, cheerful and delicate person. Therefore, in Nepali item dances, female characters acquire fair complexion, coaled eyes, curled eyelashes, and silky highlighted/colored hair. Their looks create the impression that these women are responsible for their subordination to beauty norms. These female characters are crazily concerned about their looks because they have to get the males’ attention on reel. Likewise, the responsibility of drawing the audiences to the theater is also put in their shoulder. Actually, item dances are kept in the film because “they are mass entertainers” (Roy 2912). In Roy’s perception, in films, item dances are simply added to bring audiences to the theatres.

A Dance on “Talkyo Jawaani”

In the dance on “Talkyo Jawaani,” the actress seems to attract the males through her glittering and youthful beauty. Since society/culture promotes beautiful looks of female, following the norm, the girl in the screen appears beautiful. Her effort on beautifying herself is evident in her makeup painted countenance, flat stomach, and dressed hair confirming Susan Bordo’s view that the female body is trained “in obedience to cultural demands” (267). Likewise, Foucault underscores that our bodies are trained and shaped through regulation (quoted in Bordo 166). Reflecting the toil that she does on remodeling her body/face, camera focuses in her face as well as body parts:



Figure 1. the so-called item girl is acclaiming her beauty

(Source: author’s screen shot) (2:25-4:18)

In this shot, the actress appears stunning while dancing. The shot showcases that she enhances her acquired beauty such as thin waist, dyed hair, red lips, and fair complexion in her dance moves. She proudly announces that after her hard work on her body as well as her performance, ultimately, she gets the result i.e. glittering youth which makes her a center of attraction among the males. Moreover, the males are eager to pay price to buy her beauty. As they offer:

Bisauna mayako bhari
Kinidiula chiffon ko saree
Chahiyema dhana kholera mana
Sardiula e-sewa ma
 Accept my love
 I will buy chiffon's saree for you
 If you need money also
 I will transfer it through e-sewa on your account. (*Dui Rupainyaa*)

Since she is aware of the fact that her exquisiteness has got price value, she puts effort on decorating every body parts. Moreover, the society instructs, inspire, and even force the woman to look beautiful mainly through praise and punishment. In Simon de Beauvoir's view, female's bodies are put under control through prescribing certain fashion for them to follow (quoted in King 34). Therefore, in this dance, the actress meets the males' expectation regarding her beauty then waits for the prize of her labor.

A Dance on "Bechi Dinthe yo Jawaani"

Likewise, in the dance on "Bechi Dinthe yo Jawaani," the actress Priyanka Karki exposes her effort on beautifying her body. She highlights her beauty in her thrilling dance move. She knows that in that social milieu, woman is rewarded for having an intelligible body; so, she offers the males to put price in her beauty: "*Bechi dinthe yo jawaani kinne koi bhaidie*" ("I would have sold this youth, if there was somebody who would buy it"). She declares that she is ready to sell her youthful body, if someone is ready to pay the price. To beautify her body, she has worked hard on it. Her effort reflects on her skinny figure, scanty outfits, and seductive expressions. As Bordo rightly argues that "through a set of practical rules and regulations the living body is trained, shaped, obeys, responds" to make it intelligible (181). In fact, "the body-what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body-is a medium of culture" (165). She further points out that body is a surface "on which the

central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed” (165). The girl follows the beauty standard set by the patriarchal society by maintaining skinny figure.

Similarly, she seems to learn various dance moves as she presents mesmerizing dance. Her dance exhibits par excellent technical perfection with hypnotic beauty that seduces as well as satisfies males. Furthermore, to look beautiful while dancing, she molds her body in a certain way because in Haraway’s view to get attractive looks, “natural bodies are trained” following social norms and practices (155). Therefore, now, she asks reward for fitting to the socially prescribed beauty standard:



Figure 2. The so-called item girl tries to seduce the males

(Author’s screene shot)

2:11-3:40

In this shot, as well as throughout the dance camera mostly give a sensuous view of the revealed body parts of the actress. The shot exposes that while dancing, the actress attempts to appear lustful by raising her hands upwards so that her breasts get uplifted. Likewise, her posture highlights her waist through the gap between her blowse and skirt. She makes that posture because the authority asks her to do so. The director/choreographer/producer of the film instructs as well as compels her to appear enchanting, lustful, seductive and the like. In Foucault’s perception, bodily processes and operations are the object of applications of power. He views that body movement as well as performance is the act of controlling through power. Foucault underscores

that the modality of control “implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result and is exercised according to a codification that partitions as closely as possible time, space, movement” (136). So, under the guidance of patriarchal values, along with director’s/producer’s interest that obligates for sexualization and commodification of female bodies, in this item dance, the actress constructs desirable body and presents it for males. The purpose of pulling audience to the film hall is also a pertinent reason that presents woman as an alluring object in this item song. As a result, the film maker, the authorized person of the film, forces the actress to beautify her body and to present it in strikingly beautiful way.

A Dance on “Blast Hunewaala Jawaani”

In item dance on “Blast Hunewaala Jawaani,” with the help of lyrics, dance moves, makeup, and costume, female character constructs her personality that of a seductress. In order to seduce men, she seems to have unbelievably slim body with mounting breast, may be through surgery or dress-up. Butler emphasizes on the constructed nature of gender: “Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core of substance, but produce this on the surface of the body” Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally are constructed, “...in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured” (185). She suggests that gendered reality is fabricated as an interior essence. In the dance, it is evident that actress’s beauty is not a natural one. Actually, through cosmetics and costume, she has created the plastic beauty. In this item dance, the actress appears spectacularly beautiful even though her beauty is artificial one because only plastic beauty is on demand and saleable in the market.

In the dance, on “Blast Hunewaala Jawaani,” the actress announces that she successfully meets the socially set beauty standard. Therefore, people praise her beauty associating her to various objects. She reveals:

*Kio bhanchhan malaai chndramukhni,
Koi bhanchhan malaai suryamukhin,
Ma hun asali jwalamukhin
Taama, pittal, mabhitra chha asala sunakhaani
Blaasta hune waalaa chha mero Jawaani
Someone calls me moon
Someone calls me sun*

But actually, I am a volcano
 Carrying pure mines of precious metals copper, brass, and gold
 My youthfulness is going to blast. (*Looteraa*)

She claims that people are fan of her beauty. They compare her countenance to the sun and the moon. Since her face is as bright as sun, they call her sunshine. Likewise, they call her moon when they find her countenance as attractive as lunar. Furthermore, she acknowledges herself that she is a volcano. Within her, there are various mines of valuable metals like copper, brass, and pure gold. Therefore, she is beautiful enough to lure the man.



Figure 3. item girl is exhibiting her beauty

(Source: author's screen shot)

0:23-2:55

This shot focuses on the dance that starts with a montage of the actress's body. It focuses on her slender hands, blouse with her skirt, her backside, her thighs, and her breast. Each focus of the camera, confirms her effort on beautifying her body. The shot reveals that through sexy dance moves she is inviting the males around her to gratify their sexual desire. Woman is obligated to prioritize male's desire of consuming woman's body because man wants woman's body in most attractive form. In the society, woman's body is a "direct locus of social control" (Bourdieu 94). Bourdieu

highlights that body is a text of culture; therefore, culture makes body through “table manners and toilet habits, through seemingly trivial routines, rules, and practices” (94). So, in this item dance to rejoice the males’ desire, the actress showcases the so-called feminine beauty that she acquires through makeup, dress, and costumes.

A Dance on “Thamel Bazaar”

Likewise, in the dance on “Thamel Bazaar,” the actress creates the impression of overtly glamorized woman who intends to seduce the males by whom she is surrounded with. Since women are bound to look glamorous, in this dance, the girl seems to be guided by the belief that she needs to beautify herself for getting reward from the males. Butler suggests to understand the stylization of the body as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self (191). Butler argues that gender is created through surficial inscription on the body. Therefore, when she makes her entry in the bar, she looks dazzling, proving that she has inscribed beauty in her body. She has ultra-thin and shinning body consisting of the parts such as bust, waist, and hips that seem to follow the measures set by the beauty industries confirming that “Hourglass figure, emphasizing breasts, and hips against wasp waist, is an intelligible symbolic form of sexualized ideal of femininity” (Bordo 181). The girl makes sex appeal by exposing her sensuous body:



Figure 4.
 (Source: author’s screen shot)
 1:00-2:32

In this shot, the camera focuses the dance moves of the actress in which she looks sexually appealing. Through close-up shot, her cleavage, waist, and hips have been highlighted. In the long and short shots, she exposes her body parts that provoke the lustful gestures of men present there. Her activities confirm Bordo's claim that woman disciplines her body while "pursuing conservative feminine behavior" (179). In this dance, following conservative feminine behavior such as to put makeup, to keep/maintain a so-called perfect physique, and to wear stunning clothes, the actress presents herself as an epitome of feminine beauty. Under pressure of maintaining the beauty standard, she pays special attention to maintain her look. Then, she asks for her reward for meeting the beauty standard:

*Laijaau ghumaana malaai thamel bazaara tyaausi chadaudai
laidiulaa chokho piyaara*
let me take to roam around Thamel Bazar by taxi
then, I will give you pure love. (*Loot 2*)

In this dance, the girl is sure about her craze among the males. She knows that males are ready to pay price for her beauty. The director portrays her as a girl whose wish gets fulfilled for being comely.

A Dance on "Laali Joban Kaalo Kesh"

Similarly, the dance on "Laali Joban Kaalo Kesh," depicts the actress Gauri Malla as an item girl who acclaims herself beautiful. She is happy and satisfied for meeting the criteria of looking beautiful. To become beautiful, a girl needs to be young with rosy cheeks, which is taken as a sign of being healthy and happy, and black hair, confirming that "the body operates as a metaphor for culture" (Bordo 165). Likewise, to look attractive, she should be tall enough. When the girl/actress notice that she possesses these all, in extreme happiness, she starts dancing in the following song:

*Laali joban kaalo kesh, bhayo sataaune
Phariya chhoto bhaechha maile ke garne?*
Having black hair and rosy cheeks, I am now young and beautiful
Since I am taller now, my dress has also become short for me, what should I do?
(*Sarraswati*)

In the dance on this song, though the girl is happy for acquiring beauty and youthfulness, but for her, this becomes problematic too as all the men looks at her with sinful eyes and greedy heart. Likewise, she reveals that she is unable to protect herself

from covetous sight of males; therefore, she needs someone else to shield her from such danger. In fact, woman's beauty is associated with the attributes such as innocence, submissiveness, and fragility. A huge, strong, and assertive woman is not regarded beautiful. Bordo points out that in some culture, female sexuality is viewed as "so inextricably conjoined with passivity" (268). So, exhibiting her innocence, she confirms her beauty. Moreover, she admits that her beauty is surficial and transitory:

Taajaa taajaa phala khaau natra botamai kuhinchha

Paani pardai kheta ropa natra paani sukhinchha

Have fruit while it is fresh otherwise it will rot in tree

Cultivate your field while it's raining otherwise the water gets dried up.

(*Sarraswati*)

The actress admits that she is not able to take control over her body. Rather, regarding the male as a true owner of her body, she offers her body to him. She even warns him to consume her body while it is fresh and youthful as both freshness and youthfulness are transitory. Guided by the belief that man has authority over woman's body, she is ready to handover herself to a man.

These item dances reveal that the society prescribes a fixed clothing and hair style for individual's gender; therefore, the female characters of Nepali item dances are constrained to the socially prescribed fashion. Consequently, they try to follow that fashion. Judith Lorber points out: "Throughout their lives, individuals learn what is expected, see what is expected, act and react in expected ways, and thus simultaneously construct and maintain their gender" (1). Through the actresses' choice of fashion, the film exposes that they accept the means such as cultural symbols, signs codes and other inscriptions on the body, by which power and ideology are made to signify gender. Through their clothing, hairstyle, get and gesture, the female actresses construct the so-called feminine beauty. Judith Lorber claims that men and women can "enact the behavior" through the manipulation of acts, gestures, appearance, and dress (6). The makers of these item dances unravel that gender is superficial features created by society.

Nepali filmmakers seem to be reluctant to communicate diverse roles played by women in Nepali society. Therefore, they assign the female characters, particularly in item dances, to the roles of alluring seductress, captivating dancer, and ideal beauty. These actresses pass the rules of becoming desired female to the audience directly

through bodily discourse. Bordo exposes that the films and advertisements create “images that tell us what clothes, body shape, facial expression, movements and behavior are required” to become an intelligible woman (Bordo 170). The body that is presented in movies represents our cultural conceptions of the body, norms of beauty, models of health, and so forth. The rules of feminine beauty are transmitted through standardized visual images of movies and television.

Some of the item dances promote slender body that influence thousands of audiences to embody these images. Bordo discloses that the wrong representation of female body in movies and advertisement resulted in negative influence to the females. Inclined towards slender body types of their ideal actresses, “they suffer from eating disorder, exercise compulsions, and continual self-scrutiny and self-castigation” (184). Likewise, “Representations of Women and Girls in Nepal’s Cinema” reveals the negative impact of cinema, which present unrealistic image of woman, on young girls: “cinema defined a perfect body as one with almond shaped eyes, black hair and a body that looks pleasurable to men” (Bordo 45). In fact, through item dances, the film makers portray female bodies in specific manner and build pressure on women and affect their psychological wellbeing. These item dances suggest to view our body as a site of struggle, where we must work to keep our daily practice in the service of gender domination, docility, and gender normalization.

Conclusion

In item dances of Nepali movies, female characters seem concerned about their image. They beautify themselves to seduce the males. To attract the male customer, they put heavy make-up, dress their hair in fashionable way, and wear revealing clothes. In the case of Item dances of Nepali movies, it is evident that the majority of the female characters have sexual connotations which objectify women with the profane use of metaphors. Through the dances, they disclose that their body is a saleable object. Moreover, the male can own their body by paying a good price. These female characters showcase their beauty through their gait and gesture as well as thrilling dance move. Through par excellent technical perfection with hypnotic beauty, these female characters seduce as well as satisfy males. Furthermore, to look beautiful while dancing, they shape their body in a certain form because through attractive looks they want the approval of males’ gaze.

These item dances reveal that inculcation of gender norms guides them to prioritize on physical appearance. Therefore, they put their effort on beautifying their body, following the socially set beauty standard. Their toil on polishing their look reflects on their unnaturally skinny or hour glass body, excessively fair complexion, dyed hair, and revealing clothes. These female actresses seem desperate to get the males' attention. Thus, they try to appear as enchantress, captivating, and sometimes seductress because they are guided by the belief that only an intelligible woman can draw the male's consideration. Through their activities they have been normalizing disrespectful and sexist behavior towards women. Likewise, they have been promoting the use offensive language to females and inappropriate touch and gaze of the males to females. Likewise, the role of item dances is noteworthy in constructing ideologies that objectify women. Due to the time constrain, this paper has been delimited to the study of five item dances of Nepali films through the perspective of gender theory. The item dance of Nepali films can be studied from the perspective of Marxist theory, Cultural Study, and Sociological Study as well.

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