

Gender Stereotypes and Women's Representation in Bodo Item Songs: A Visual and Textual Analysis

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Abstract

This study explores gender stereotypes and women's representation in Bodo item songs through a visual and textual analysis. Bodo cinema, a significant part of Assam's regional film industry, has seen a rise in the popularity of item songs in recent years. These songs, often defined by seductive visuals and suggestive lyrics, serve as entertainment but also reflect deep-seated societal norms. The research examines four prominent Bodo item songs from 2022 to 2024, analyzing their lyrics and visuals to identify recurring themes such as body shaming, objectification, materialism, and the portrayal of stereotypical gender roles. The study finds that women are often depicted as passive, objectified figures, with their worth reduced to physical appearance and the fulfillment of male desires. Themes of consent, sexuality and the glorification of alcohol are also prevalent, further reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. Through a critical lens, this study highlights how these songs perpetuate harmful stereotypes and offer a narrow view of femininity, which can affect societal perceptions of gender roles. The paper calls for a more inclusive and empowering representation of women in media, advocating for the challenge of these stereotypes to foster a more equitable cinematic landscape. The findings contribute to the ongoing discourse on gender dynamics in regional cinemas and their impact on cultural narratives.

Keywords: Bodo item songs, women's representation, gender stereotypes, visual analysis, textual analysis

1. Introduction

Bodo cinema has emerged from the Bodo ethnic community in Assam, India, and has evolved into a significant component of Indian regional cinema. The origin of Bodo cinema can be traced from various arts such as drama, theatre and bhaona. However, the roots of Bodo filmmaking can be traced back to the 1980s, when amateur productions began to take shape that primarily focused on cultural themes and local issues. The year 1984 marks as the beginning of the Bodo cinema history with the picture named "Daina". It is the first Bodo documentary film which was directed by Amor Hazarika, an Assamese artist and a filmmaker, written by Kamal Kumar Brahma and the music was composed by the legendary singer, lyricist, musician, poet and actor Dr Bhupen Hazarika and produced by Bodo Film Society from Kokrajhar district (Brahma, 2011). The movie name can be written or pronounced as Daina (Brahma, 2011) or Dina. It is a regional language short film which depicts the superstitious belief of black magic that is prevalent in Bodo community or society.

Conversely, in the year 1986, the release of “Alayaron” (English translation: The Dawn), directed by Jwngdao Bodosa, marked the debut of Bodo cinema as a formal feature film industry. The production was initially characterized by low-budget productions. Bodo cinema gained momentum in the early 2000s with the advent of more professional filmmaking approaches. Before the release of this movie people had no idea what feature film meant. The director also won a prestigious award known as Rajat Kamal Award in 1986 for his movie and established himself as a successful producer, director, choreographer and scriptwriter (Daimary & Dey, 2018). Filmmakers started to explore contemporary social issues related to the Bodo community, reflecting their aspirations and challenges. Notable films like "Dau Huduni Methai," "Ganja Pagla," "Rwda" and many more gained significant popularity among Bodo audiences, contributing to the growth and identity of Bodo cinema.

At present, Bodo cinema has notable filmmakers like Rajni Basumatary and Riya Brahma, who have made substantial contributions to its development. Rajni Basumatary, known for films like "Wild Swans" (Gorai Pakhri) and "Jwlwi - The Seed" has won many national and international awards for her movie. Her movie often shows the portrayal of Bodo culture and its narratives. She has received the best film award at the Kolkata International Film Festival, 2023 and the best director award at Sailadhar Baruah Film Awards, 2023 for her “Wild Swans” movie. This film was first premiered in Vancouver International Film Festival, 2023 (BIFFES, 2023). Whereas, Riya Brahma is known for her high-budget productions and music albums, she had successfully bridged commercial success with cultural preservation, often filming in exotic locations for movies like "Rwda," "Onnai," and "Gwtar." Riya Brahma produces Bodo item songs, along with romantic and party songs.

These filmmakers have not only elevated the technical and narrative standards of Bodo cinema but have also expanded its reach beyond regional boundaries. On screen, they continue to explore diverse themes while nurturing local talent and promoting Bodo language and traditions. With increasing recognition and support, Bodo cinema is gaining popularity on digital platforms for wider dissemination and continuing to enrich the cultural economy of Bodos.

2. Review of literature

Kamble (2022) studied on the portrayal of women in Bollywood item songs reveals a strong focus on the male gaze and patriarchal ideologies that govern cinematic representations. Laura Mulvey’s seminal work on the male gaze (1975) provides a foundational framework in this study, which argues that women in cinema are often objectified and reduced to passive objects for male pleasure. In particular, item songs have been critiqued as a site of sexual commodification, where women's bodies are used in textual context explicitly with objectified suggestive lyrics and seductive performances. This literature shows the glorification of patriarchy and the dominance of upper caste male members. However, the visual and textual representation of women in Indian songs serves as a key analysis of the study.

Kapoor (2018) identifies key characteristics of item songs in Hindi films, including the portrayal of women in skimpy clothing, degrading lyrics and suggestive dance moves that highlight their body parts inappropriately. Similarly, Dwivedi (2017) highlights the sexual objectification of women in Bollywood item songs, pointing out how these songs often feature explicit lyrics that focus on body parts. The study also compares woman’s body to intoxicating substances or food, and promotes an idealization of fair skin.

While numerous studies have explored Bollywood item songs, research on Bodo item songs remains scarce. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate the gender dynamics within the blooming regional cinema,

song and other entertainment industries.

3. Objectives of the study

The specific objectives are:

- To examine how females are represented and stereotyped in Bodo item songs.
- To analyse the visual representation of women in Bodo item songs.
- To analyse the textual representation of women in Bodo item songs.

4. Methodology

Research design: In this research, a qualitative method has been used and content analysis is used as a research design.

Data Collection: The data collected in this study are from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources are the songs from YouTube and the secondary sources are journals, books and other e-resources.

Sampling: The research analysed four Bodo item songs that are available on social media platform, i.e. YouTube. Currently, there are only four item Bodo item songs (2022-2024) that are popular on YouTube and have more than 1 lakh viewers. The time frame of the selection of song is from 2022-2024. This time frame 2022-2024 is selected, because 2022 is the year when the Bodo item songs had gained a massive popularity through online platforms. However, these songs are identified as item songs on the basis of search keyword “item songs” in the YouTube video description.

Table 1: List of selected songs with its singer name and views in YouTube

Title of the song	Lyricist/ Singer	YouTube views
Dodere Dodere (2022)	Swmkhwr and Gitashree Ramchiary	3,58,000
Megonni Nwjraro (2023)	Tajim Narzary and Mithinga Narzary	7,55,000
De Ludw (2023)	Dharani	1.5 Million
Ajwli Ang (2024)	Nizara Brahma Choudhury	1,94,839

Table 2: English Translation of the songs

Title of the song	Translation in English
Dodere Dodere	Decent
Megonni Nwjraro	Blink of my eyes
De Ludw	Pour
Ajwli Ang	Teenager

Theoretical Framework: Based on Kamble and Biswal’s (2022) study on “Portrayal of Women in Bollywood songs,” this current study has adopted the two factors of representation of women in item songs: visual and textual analysis. After the content analysis i.e. visual and textual analysis of all the item song, it is found that these songs lyrics and visuals comprises of ten themes those are Body Shaming, Objectification, Materialism, Promotion of alcohol and tobacco products, Stereotypical Gender roles, Obscene language, Sexuality, Absence of Consent, Modernization and Fusion.

5. Findings

The portrayal of women in item numbers is often subjected to a dual gaze, one from the camera crew and production team during filming and another from the digital audience consuming the content online or offline. These sequences are typically catered for the pleasure purpose, primarily for a male audience. The camera's focus and movement are directed by this gaze, emphasizing elements like colored lights, tight and revealing costumes, props and attractive stage designs (Booth, 2007).

Concept of Bar: A counter at which food or especially, alcoholic beverages are served (Merriam Webster Dictionary). The setting of all the selected item songs is inside the bar, with imagery of men surrounding women. The concept of drinking in Bodo community has been engraved since time immemorial. In ancient days, Bodo women prepare rice beer at home and serve or sell the beer to the people and it is seen as a means to earn livelihood. The concept of item songs has emerged in the Bodo film industry through the Hindi movies or songs. Hence, people of Bodo community accepted the concept of bar and since then it has been a very popular place where mostly men do their gatherings.

5.1. Visual Analysis:

“Dodere Dodere”: The scene of the song started with the camera focusing on the dancer’s hips and being surrounded by men and women, which tends to give a seductive look after the hero arrives at the bar. The portrayal suggests materialism, objectification and sexuality within a performance. It often reflects women as a materialistic representation, where women are depicted in a way that emphasis their physical attributes. There is a scene in the song, where a man touches women without their consent, which raises important considerations about boundaries. Such depictions can be viewed through different lenses. Whereas, the seductive gaze of men or women and physical contact could also imply the absence of consent.

“Megonni Nwjraro”: This song mostly shows the masculinity of men as strong, dominant and assertive in nature. They are portrayed as powerful and heroic in this song. Whereas, women in this song are represented as pleasers or passive which shows accommodating to men, where their role is to please or satisfy others, particularly men. There are certain scenes in this song where men are touching women without their consent and forcing the women to dance alongside them. In most of the item songs, there are always many men and one woman dynamic, whether it is in Bollywood or any other regional item songs and also a dance catering to men’s fantasies with a seductive dance. In this song, women are shown in the scene as objects of desire, such as materialistic ones and are often seen engaging in sexually driven fantasies. Additionally, women were also seen enjoying the unwanted touch of men, which is a concerning issue as it may normalize romanticized and non consensual physical contact. The non-consensual touch by men can lead to serious issues in real world contexts.

“De Ludw”: The scene of bottle dancing by women and its revealing nature hinted at women as materialistic beings that carry a form of seduction, expression and celebration. The scene where three women dance while boys have visual pleasure suggested a potential performance where women’s movements are observed by men, suggesting themes of objectification within a cultural or traditional framework. Additionally, there is a scene in the second half of the song where a woman is shown pouring rice beer on the men around them. It indicates stereotypical gender roles where women are stereotyped for offering wine or beer to men. Accompanying heavy inhaling sounds by women indicates elements of sensory engagement or consumption that are often associated with sexuality. The act of pouring beer into the mouths of men also symbolises hospitality and a fusion within certain cultural contexts.

“Ajwli Ang”: This opening scene of this item song is showing the actor enjoying wine and engaging with the show or actress who is a bar dancer. This item song comprises of glorifying alcoholism, seductive and cultural fusion. In the scene, a man gazes at a bottle of wine. The moment is cleverly shown with his view of the women around him which suggests that the intoxicant of the wine shows the presence of the women. The comparison of wine and women emphasizes both the temptation and enjoyment found in each by creating a parallel indulgence of wine and the charm of femininity. The outfits of the dancer are revealing, emphasizing a sense of seduction. However, as the scene progresses, the women transition into traditional attire, symbolizing a return to cultural roots and values as they accompany the men. This shift highlights the contrast between contemporary expressions of femininity and traditional expectations within the culture.

5.2. Textual analysis:

"Dodere Dodere": In this song, the focus shifts to beauty and desirability. The women declare their own beauty and refer to themselves as "Dodere" (English: Decent), implying a sense of adornment and affection. The comparison of their chest to the districts of Chirang and Udalguri in Bodoland adds a regional context that is possibly indicating pride in local identity and at the same time materialising herself. The offer to "give you love" and the promise to fulfill dreams through a romantic partnership suggested a willingness to be desired and affectionate. Also, there is a lyric where women compare their figures to Bollywood celebrities, which further enhances the theme of beauty and allure in popular culture.

"Megonni Nwjraro": In this song, the lyrics are about admiration and appreciation for women's beauty. It appreciates the moment of acknowledging and celebrating another person's attractiveness. The lyrics in this song contrast with the previous ones by focusing on external beauty observed from the singer's perspective, possibly indicating a moment of humility or recognition of others' qualities.

"De Ludw": The lyric of this song focuses on the physical attributes and confidence of women. It emphasises the women's thin waist and broad chest, highlighting a sense of pride in their physical appearance. The lines "I neither have shame nor am scared of anyone" and comparing her beauty with others show a strong self-assurance and perhaps defiance against societal norms. The lyrics of being "the one with good looks" and the invitation to "just cuddle me" by the women suggested a readiness to embrace attention and admiration based on physical attractiveness.

“Ajwli Ang”: The whole song is about the woman who loves a man and proposes him with her dance. The lyrics "Come and touch me up like a monsoon wind to my drought heart" suggest a woman's longing for emotional and physical connection. However, this portrayal can reinforce negative stereotypes of women as overly dependent on men for fulfillment. It presents women as passive seekers of validation.

6. Discussions and Conclusions

Body Shaming: The act of criticizing or mocking someone's physical appearance which are often focused on perceived flaws or differences from societal standards. In the context of the songs and scenes in this study the body shaming is evident when women's physical attributes, such as their size, shape or specific features are emphasized or objectified for male pleasure. These portrayals can reinforce unrealistic beauty standards and negatively impact self-esteem that leads to harmful judgments about individuals based on their appearance rather than their capabilities.

Objectification: The theme of objectification in these songs is evident through the portrayal of women

as mere physical entities whose worth is determined by their appearance or their ability to entertain and please men. Women are often reduced to their physical attributes, such as their body, clothing or gestures, with little regard for their individuality or autonomy. Scenes emphasizing seductive dances, revealing clothing and non-consensual interactions depict women as objects for male gaze and desire. These portrayals reinforce traditional gender roles, where women are seen as passive, materialistic or just decorative, while men's desires and dominance are centered. This objectification perpetuates harmful stereotypes and normalizes unequal power dynamics between men and women.

Materialism: The theme of materialization in these songs refers to the portrayal of women as objects whose value is tied to their physical appearance, possessions, or ability to attract men through material wealth. Women are often depicted as being attracted to men based on their material status, such as wealth or possessions. This reduces their worth to superficial traits or commodities, reinforcing societal expectations that women should be defined by their external allure or role in serving male desires. It also critiques or exaggerates these gender dynamics, emphasizing a materialistic and transactional view of relationships.

Promotion of alcohol and tobacco products: The theme of promoting alcohol and tobacco products in these songs is evident through various scenes where consumption and indulgence are glorified. In "Ajwli Ang," characters are shown enjoying wine or alcohol in social settings, emphasizing its association with pleasure and masculinity. The act of pouring wine or rice beer in "De Ludw" further symbolizes hospitality and leisure, with women serving men in traditional roles. These scenes suggest that alcohol is a symbol of status and enjoyment, often reinforcing cultural stereotypes and linking it to seduction or celebration. The portrayal of alcohol consumption glamorizes its use in social contexts.

Stereotypical Gender roles: The theme of stereotypical gender roles is evident in these songs, where women are often portrayed in passive, submissive roles while men are depicted as dominant or active. In "De Ludw," women are shown serving men, pouring drinks and performing seductively; reinforcing the notion those women's roles revolve around pleasing men. Additionally, in "Ajwli Ang", the transition from revealing attire to traditional clothing symbolizes a shift from modern expressions of femininity to traditional gender norms.

Obscene language: The theme of stereotypical obscene language is evident in several of these songs, where explicit references to physical appearance, sexuality and objectification are central. Lyrics and visuals frequently emphasize women's bodies in a sexually provocative manner, such as comparing women's figures to desirable material possessions or physical attributes. Additionally, the language used in the selected item songs often objectifies women, reducing them to their physical allure or the satisfaction they provide to men, which aligns with the use of crude or objectifying language.

Sexuality: The theme of sexuality in these songs reflects a broader cultural portrayal of women as objects of male desire, often emphasizing physical attributes and suggestive behavior. Sexuality is frequently depicted as a performative act meant to entertain or satisfy male pleasure, overshadowing genuine emotional connection and mutual respect. Scenes of revealing clothing, seductive gestures and non-consensual interactions normalize the objectification of women, reducing their roles to mere objects of attraction. Additionally, the use of alcohol, provocative dances and material wealth as symbols of power further complicates healthy expressions of sexuality, associating sexual appeal with external factors rather than emotional intimacy. These portrayals not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes about gender roles and relationships but also risk normalizing disrespectful behaviors, such as unwanted physical contact.

Absence of Consent: The theme of the absence of consent is prevalent in several scenes where physical contact and actions occur without the explicit agreement of the women involved. In songs like "Dodere Dodere" and "Megonni Nwjraro," men are shown touching women without their consent, highlighting an important issue about boundaries and personal autonomy. These interactions can normalize non-consensual behavior, suggesting a disregard for women's agency and reinforcing harmful stereotypes. The portrayal of women enjoying unwanted touch or being forced into actions like dancing also perpetuates the idea that consent is not always necessary in relationships or social interactions, which can have real-world consequences.

Modernization: The theme of modernization is evident in several songs, where contemporary elements such as luxury and modern influences are highlighted. In "Ajwli Ang," the blending of alcohol consumption and seductive behavior indicates the influence of modern leisure culture. These portrayals show a shift from traditional values to contemporary values which prioritize modernization or Bollywood.

Fusion: The theme of fusion in these selected songs reflects the blending of modern and traditional elements that can be often seen in the portrayal of femininity and social dynamics. In songs like "Ajwli Ang", the comparison of seductive behavior with the transition to traditional attire symbolizes the clash between contemporary desires and cultural heritage. Similarly, in "De Ludw," the act of pouring rice beer and the sensual performances suggest a fusion of traditional gender roles with modern expressions of sexuality. The use of alcohol, fashion and seductive dances further emphasizes this blending while highlighting the integration of modern cultural influences within traditional settings.

Overall, all the selected songs serve entertainment purposes, but they also reflect complex societal norms and expectations regarding gender, sexuality and identity. This visual and textual analysis highlights the importance of critically examining media representations to promote more inclusive and respectful portrayals of gender. However, this study concludes that there is a need for the media to challenge stereotypes of women as well as men which will contribute to a more empowering and equitable landscape for all genders.

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