

Iyer, Usha. (2020). Dancing women: Choreographing corporeal histories of Hindi cinema

By Iyer, Usha

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A Book Review by

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Each time I dine at an Indian restaurant in Canada, I am served the familiar beats of Bollywood music in addition to the food. During such times I find myself revisiting fond memories of watching and singing along to these songs with friends and family while also recalling the dance moves and costumes of actors. The effortless mobility of these songs (i.e., through both our recalled memories and the vast proliferation of media technology) makes it a quintessential part of Hindi cinema and Indian entertainment at large. Despite several film critics viewing these song and dance sequences as an “extraneous construction of the real” (Dudrah & Desai, 2008: 11), they nonetheless play a crucial role in influencing spectatorial desire, forging collectives based on shared taste in entertainment and configuring the dancing body as an integral element within Hindi cinema.

A large body of scholarship (much of it critical) has evaluated the significance of the song and dance sequences within the larger narrative of the film. These works have explored the ideological implications of these musicals such as how they influence middle-class desire, and the role played by these songs in determining the success/failure of the film (Dudrah & Desai, 2008: 11). While such scholarship mainly focuses on the cinematic narrative and the factors that influence the politics of spectatorship, it seldom evaluates the numerous material and ideological factors that shape these song and dance sequences. Within this context Usha Iyer’s book *Dancing women: Choreographing corporeal histories of Hindi cinema* serves as a powerful resource as the book’s sustained attention in creating a different history of the Bollywood musical genre—one which is focussed on materiality, industrial practices and multiple economies of production (Iyer, 2020: 6)—enriches the existing (and ever-growing) scholarship on Hindi cinema.

Dancing Women demonstrates how the musical and dance numbers in Bollywood films are much more than mere pieces of cinematic entertainment. Reflecting upon the histories that have shaped Bollywood’s dance numbers, Iyer’s work presents them as palimpsestic texts which bear traces of colonial history, ever-changing legal policy, and the numerous forms of invisible labour, performed by tawaifs, devadasis, background dancers, choreographers and playback singers. The book’s title invokes its specific focus on female dance and how it shapes the perception, sexuality and stardom of dancing actresses in Bollywood cinema. Arguing that there was an underlying expectation on female actresses to be good dancers, which resulted in women being the primary performers of dance in Hindi cinema until the late 1990’s, Iyer’s central focus is studying the role played by gender in influencing spectatorship (7). While this aspect is echoed throughout the book, it is most profound in Chapter 2, which describes how the intricacies of space, architecture and performance style co-mingle to shape the social connotations of different dance movements, which in turn influence the public perception of dancing actresses. The chapter explores how various “production numbers serve as the impulse for a range of exceptional construction of

bodies, movements and spaces”—for example, the sexualized nature of the cabaret dance form— and how these dances are in turn influenced by classical and folk dances (60).

One of the major strengths of the book lies in its effectiveness in generating a dance-centred taxonomy. This enables us to identify the inherent differences between dance numbers and locate their specific function within cinematic texts. In Chapter 1, a clear distinction is drawn between the “narrative number” and the “production number.” Using relevant examples, the chapter demonstrates how the former, which comprises of dancing that is “integrated into the narrative in terms of the lyrical content of the song” (34), differs from the production number which is mostly focussed on the display of dancing bodies. The latter, she argues, solely emphasizes “spectacle over narrative” and “performance over characterization” (35). Moreover, the chapter introduces other key terms such as “song picturization”—the process of adding visuals to a song which may or may not include a dance sequence (45), and “dance musicalization”—a process wherein a desired dance vocabulary influences the composition of a song (46), which further helps reveal the intricate nuances of these song and dance numbers. Iyer’s lexicon demonstrates how the dancing body is crucial in understanding how ideologies and spectatorial desire shape Hindi cinema. Furthermore, her apt usage of terminologies makes us recognize how multiple bodies (i.e. the role of singers, background dancers, etc.) interact together to produce the dancing body, thereby allowing for a multitude of methodological approaches to study the song and dance sequences and the affective responses viewers have whilst listening to these songs (57).

The book does an excellent job at highlighting the unseen labour of numerous dancing actresses and other members of the dancing crew—such as the choreographers and back-up dancers. This aspect is highlighted both in Chapter 3 and Chapter 5. In the former, Iyer explores the star text of actresses Azurie and Sadhona Bose— two prominent actresses from the 1930’s who are currently invisible from the official archive. Tracing their individual journeys in Hindi cinema, this chapter presents how they forged new mobilities in dance during the late colonial period and how their individual star-texts reflect the “nationalist appropriation of dance as a key cultural form” (95). While the cinematic image of Sadhona Bose was influenced by her position in society as an upper-class woman, Azurie’s Eurasian background influenced her exotic screen image. This difference highlights the nationalistic anxiety of re-defining Indian womanhood wherein a clear binary was created between the cultured lady who took care of the spiritual development of the Indian household, and the sexualized vamp who occupied the public sphere. Moreover, the chapter draws our attention to the numerous invisible bodies that continue to influence the present-day construction of the star image. Keeping in tune with the book’s approach towards unveiling the role played by unseen bodies, Chapter 5 unpacks the unseen labour of choreographer Saroj Khan and how she influenced Madhuri Dixit’s dance career. The chapter provides insights into the role played by collaboration, rehearsal, etc.—things that otherwise miss the spectator’s understanding of the dancing actress.

Dancing Women is a must read for anyone who is interested in learning more about Bollywood cinema. Through its extensive usage of photographs and a companion website which contains several clips of the dance numbers examined in the book, *Dancing Women* provides a holistic understanding of Indian film dance.

References

Dudrah, Rajinder & Desai, Jigna. (2008). Introduction. In Rajinder Dudrah and Jigna Desai (Eds.) *The Bollywood reader* (pp. 1-18). Glasgow: McGraw Hill-Open University Press.

About the Reviewer

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