Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

VOLUME 17
NUMBER 2
JULY 2019
ISSN 1474-6689

South Asian Popular Culture

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

ISSN: 1474-6689 (Print) 1474-6697 (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsap20>

Tum Toh Mohammed Rafi Nikle: The song sequence in contemporary Hindi cinema

Aakshi Magazine

To cite this article: Aakshi Magazine (2019) Tum Toh Mohammed Rafi Nikle: The song sequence in contemporary Hindi cinema, South Asian Popular Culture, 17:2, 133-144, DOI: [10.1080/14746689.2019.1613786](https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1613786)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14746689.2019.1613786>

Published online: 22 May 2019.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 83

View related articles [↗](#)

View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Tum Toh Mohammed Rafi Nikle: The song sequence in contemporary Hindi cinema

Aakshi Magazine

Department of Film Studies, University of St Andrews, St. Andrews, UK

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the song sequence as a narrative device in contemporary Hindi cinema. It does this through an analysis of select song sequences from six films – *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*, *Tumhari Sulu*, *Dangal*, *Highway*, *Tamasha* and *Udta Punjab*. These songs play an essential role in the film narratives, and the article discusses them through a focus on song picturization, song lyrics and the absence of lip-synchronization. The broader context of my inquiry are the changes in the role of the film song in recent years marking both continuities as well as discontinuities with the established song tradition of Hindi cinema. I argue that even as a realist aesthetic is changing the form of the song sequence, the song scene continues to be a complex mechanism of storytelling in contemporary Hindi films.

KEYWORDS

Bollywood song and dance;
song lyrics; lip
synchronization

Introduction

In an episode of the popular chat show *Koffee with Karan*, contemporary Hindi film directors Zoya Akhtar, Imtiaz Ali and Kabir Khan discussed the process of directing song sequences ('Season 5, Episode 7'). Akhtar and Ali both voiced a dilemma – though they loved songs, they had difficulty shooting them. Akhtar did not know what to do with lip-synched songs, going so far as to say that shooting a song in one of her earlier films 'traumatized' her ('Season 5, Episode 7'). She explained her problem by saying that she feels the need to do something that is more 'organic' to the film than a song sequence. Ali, whose films like *Rockstar* (2011) and *Jab We Met* (2007) had many popular and well-appreciated songs, said that in retrospect he finds many of his song sequences 'difficult to digest' ('Season 5, Episode 7'). At the same time, he said that he loves songs and 'cannot do without them' because 'there are many things you can say in a song that you cannot say in dialogue'. He explained further, 'poetry is philosophical, conversational and personal which dialogues cannot be' ('Season 5, Episode 7').

This short discussion in the hour-long program is significant in the context of this article as I explore the changing role of the song sequence in some contemporary films from 'New Bollywood' by taking six recent films as examples.¹ My interest is in understanding the song sequence as a narrative device, and in doing this, I approach the song from the perspective of song lyrics and picturization. My approach is not a musicological one, though a musical study can only add more value to our

understanding of the song. I approach the song from a film studies perspective. To do this, I have chosen some recent song sequences which demonstrate an engagement with the narrative. The songs are from the films *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (Karan Johar, 2016), *Tumhari Sulu* (Suresh Triveni, 2017), *Dangal* (Nitesh Tiwari, 2015), *Tamasha* (Imtiaz Ali, 2015), *Highway* (Imtiaz Ali, 2014) and *Uda Punjab* (Abhishek Chaubey, 2016).

In popular parlance, the presence of a song is seen as a shorthand for a film being 'commercial' and its absence is seen as meaning that the film is an example of 'serious' cinema. Over the years scholars from different disciplines – mainly film studies, musicology, ethnomusicology – have shown that the song had a more complex role to play in the history of Hindi cinema than this public perception allows for. In this article I focus on some very recent developments in popular Hindi cinema's engagement with song sequences, reflecting on some of the scholarly arguments made about the existing tradition of song picturization of Hindi cinema. My overall argument is about the complex and nuanced engagement of 'New Bollywood' with the song sequence as a narrative tool. I look at both the changes and the constants in the usage of the song in Hindi cinema. The sections that follow explore the following issues – continuities in the film song form, realism and fantasy in the song sequence, changes in the language of the song's lyrics and the absence of lip-synchronization in song picturization.

Continuity in the use of film song

Ae Dil Hai Mushkil is a love story revolving around the complications of the friendship between its two characters, Ayaan and Alizeh. Ayaan (Ranbir Kapoor) sees their relationship as romantic, while for Alizeh (Anushka Sharma) it is platonic, as she is in love with Ali (Fawad Khan). The song 'Channa Mereya' is located in the diegesis during her wedding to Ali. It is preceded, however, by a dance number at the wedding called 'Cutie Pie'. Though the song's words are of a playful nature, its picturization shows Ayaan trying to cope with Alizeh's marriage. This is done in an ironic, tongue in cheek manner embodied by Ranbir Kapoor's comic performance of his grief. The lyrics of the song, in Hindi, Punjabi and English, add to this ironic tone as they speak of a woman who breaks all hearts without a care in the world. The song that I am interested in is the one that immediately follows – 'Channa Mereya' (My beloved). I mention the first song here because the juxtaposition of the two songs, one after the other, separated by just two dialogues, marks a transition from a contemporary dance number with an ironic tone of the kind we would not have seen earlier, to a sad song that follows in the long-standing tradition of Hindi cinema's solo song sequences. The former is not lip-synched, except for a brief while when Ali looks straight into the camera, while the latter is entirely lip-synched.

The two dialogues that separate the songs are one in which Ayaan talks to himself in a mirror, and the other by Alizeh where she mockingly asks him why he looks like he is losing control. His answer takes the form of the song, thus making the song integral to the film's narrative, as a crucial detail is narrated solely through the sequence. This is because in 'Channa Mereya' Ayaan expresses his feelings for Alizeh for the first time in front of her. The preceding dance number has already built this up for the film's audience, but in the film's narrative, Alizeh realizes this only during the song. On hearing both the grief in his voice and

the meaning of the words he is singing, she immediately knows what he is feeling, referencing an earlier conversation between the two about the necessity of pain for making music meaningful. In this way, the picturization acknowledges the importance of both the aural as well as the lyrics in conveying meaning in a Hindi film song sequence. Moreover, its importance to the narrative makes the song an example of what Gregory Booth has called a 'music scene' which are 'carefully framed components of much larger narrative structures that highlight specific narrative and/or emotional moments.' (127)

The song lasts for just about 2 min after which Alizeh drags him into a room leading to a confrontation between them. Significantly, the first thing she says to him is that he turned out to be like Mohammed Rafi after all ('*Tum toh Mohammed Rafi nikle*'). This again references that earlier conversation, where she had told him that Rafi was known only for singing sad songs ('*Woh gate kam aur rote zyada the*'). The song itself is a throwback to the sad song of the male hero of the era Rafi belongs to, centered on its *mukhda* or refrain 'Channa Mereya'. Exploring the male sad song of the 1950s, Aarti Wani writes that unlike their female counterparts, 'heroes singing solo songs of love's loss... continues to occupy "public" or open spaces for their mourning work' (127). However, even in public spaces, just like the Hindi film heroines, they too explore an interior space in 'so public a manner', she notes (127).

In the lip-synched 'Channa Mereya' Ayaan expresses his feelings in a relatively public space – the courtyard of Alizeh's wedding. The public-ness of this place is in contrast to the privacy of the small room Alizeh drags him to at the end of the sequence, shutting the door behind them, leading to a confrontation that ends with their temporary separation in the film's narrative. Ayaan's sorrow, which was hidden from the characters in the film through the preceding dance number, finds an expression in the course of the brief song. Wani has analyzed the male sad song as also being a 'site of feminization' (130). This becomes literally embodied in Kapoor's performance, as it has a touch of the feminine to it, added to by his appearance, his *mehendi* tattooed hands and the manner in which he drapes the cloth of his *pagdi*, reminiscent of a female *dupatta*.

A 'realistic' song sequence in *Tumhari Sulu*

A significant aspect of the picturization of 'Channa Mereya' can help us reflect on contemporary filmmakers' interpretation of being 'realistic' when it comes to song picturization. Right before the song, we hear the diegetic screech of a microphone, followed by Ayaan picking up the microphone kept near him. This is a small detail, but it shows the film's needs to make the staging of the song sequence as realistic as possible, even when it is lip-synched. Ayaan lip-syncs the song, but he does this into a mike, the source of which is established in the moments prior to the song. In this context, we can recall here that in the *Koffee with Karan* episode, Johar (who is the director of this film) said that today everyone wants to do songs in a 'clever way', while Imtiaz Ali explained that when using lip-synched songs, you need a 'tactic'. In the song 'Chor Bazaar' from Ali's *Love Aaj Kal* (2009), this tactic can be seen in the beginning of the sequence as its protagonists first dance to the *mukhda* of the song already playing at a wedding *baraat*. Only after it has been established that the song is playing in the wedding band, do they start singing it.

While these 'tactics' are an interpretation of realism in its empirical, literal form, they underplay the rich legacy of the Hindi film's engagement with the social context and the 'real' world, in which the song too played an important role. In its long history, the Hindi film song sequence has been in touch with its social context, reflecting the complex relationship between melodrama and the real world context. Scholars working on post-Independence Indian cinema write about the social engagement of the Indian popular film in terms of 'a'moral and utopian realism' (Sarkar 69). This was not empirical realism for it was 'a matter not of representing accurately what the nation was, but of imagining what it should be, keeping faith in that imagination, and working toward that ideal' (69). I would argue that the song sequence plays an important role in this engagement of the Hindi film form with the social context as we see in the song's imagination a negotiation between how reality is and what it should be like.

In the interpretation of scholarship on melodrama, the form is not seen as being far removed from the 'real' in the way that popular criticism would like to believe. In one of the most influential texts on it by Peter Brooks, in the Post-French revolution context of the collapse of the Sacred, melodrama was interpreted as an engagement with reality, and not an escape from it (9). In the specific context of Hindi cinema, Ira Bhaskar has argued that the song sequence was central to the Indian melodramatic form, and developed as the 'language of the ineffable' with an ability to articulate the contradictions of the transition to modernity. It was able to express the 'desires that exceed the abilities of individuals for realization' during the moment of transition to modernity (163–164). This means the song made sense to its listeners as it fulfilled a certain function in its relationship to the social context of their everyday lives. In a recent argument, Manishita Dass has used Foucault's idea of heterotopia to coin her own term 'cinetopia' to refer to this relationship between the song sequence and reality (4). Dass makes her argument particularly about the Indian People Theatre Association's neglected role and 'the city street as a site of social critique and utopian fantasy' in the song sequences of the 1950s. I would argue that the argument has value beyond this particular song type and era (4).

An interesting play between fantasy and reality is in the song 'Ban Ja Tu Meri Rani' from *Tumhari Sulu*. Picturized on the film's protagonists, Sulu (Vidya Balan) and Ashok (Manav Kaul), in the domestic space of their home, the song is preceded by a radio-style *farmaish* (dedication). This can be seen as a realist device, making space for the love song sequence that is to follow, so that it makes logical sense in the narrative. The use of the radio as a device to do this is in keeping with the film's story about Sulu's foray into being a radio jockey. However, the language of the *farmaish* pitches itself as a fantasy. Unlike a real radio *farmaish*, it refers only to the film's protagonists Ashok and Sulu, and then mentions that 'things are going to heat up'. Like with 'Chor Bazaarī', the lip-synchronization starts after the song has already played on the soundtrack, with Ashok matching his deliberately Hindi film style dance to the song's tune, the deliberateness of it being underlined by Sulu's laughter. It is not a seamless lip-synchronization either as later in the sequence, Sulu also sings along to the male voice.

The song sequence, thus, is the couple's fantasy, but is choreographed in a way that makes the place of the fantasy in the film believable. It is not picturized in a utopian space far away from the everyday world of the narrative like the 'dream sequence' songs

predominant in the 1990s and earlier. Instead, the fantasy is very much a part of the everyday domestic mise-en-scène of the film. The picturization makes use of props from the domestic setting of the house – kneading of flour in the kitchen, a swing in the balcony on which Sulu often naps, and finally their bedroom. The ending of the song is even more interesting, as their song gets interrupted by the doorbell, an aural everyday symbol.

I want to, therefore, draw our attention here to a fascinating interplay between fantasy and realism in the song picturization. On the one hand, the song is self-consciously constructed as a film song. Yet because of the radio style dedication at the beginning, and the delayed lip-synchronization, the sequence also underlines that it is different from a film song in the playback singer-actor tradition. In that context, apart from the radio *farmaish*, another detail preceding the song is relevant. At the beginning of the song, Ashok sends their son out of the house on an errand, to ensure that they can get some privacy. This very real issue – of not finding privacy in middle-lower middle-class homes – makes way for the staging of what is a fantasy song number. As already mentioned, the contents of the *farmaish* that marks the beginning of the song make it clear that the song is their fantasy. The doorbell, however, that leads to an abrupt ending of the song is completely realistic and diegetic (it is possibly the son who is back). The sequence thus shows this back and forth between reality and fantasy. Drawing on Dass' argument, I would argue that this too is a 'heterotopic engagement' with reality, in a manner that is distinct from the literal use of the microphone in 'Channa Mereya'.

Realism in language

In her extensive study of the Hindi film song, [Anna Morcom](#) recounts that Aditya Chopra had a 'heated debate' with *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge's* lyricist Anand Bakshi over the now classic song 'Tujhe Dekha Toh Yeh Jaana Sanam' (47). Bakshi, trained in the older tradition of songwriting, wanted to use *shayari* (poetry), while Chopra was clear that he wanted to keep the language more 'colloquial'. Chopra's argument was that since his characters do not speak to each other in poetry in the film, they should not do so in the song either. In fact, [Morcom](#) writes that Chopra himself wrote the first two lines of the song, giving Bakshi the brief to continue the rest in the same tone (47).

This brings me to a significant characteristic of film songs that has undergone a change over the years – the language of the lyrics. The change is drastic when compared to the poetic language of the 1950s and 1960s, which was associated with Urdu *shayari* (poetry), but is one that had already begun in the 1990s as indicated by the above anecdote.

Since the 1990s, this colloquial nature has expanded even more to now include a consistency with the spoken language of the characters in the film. In the interviews I conducted with some contemporary lyricists working in the Bombay film industry like Swanand Kirkire, Raj Shekhar and Varun Grover, a common issue that came up was that unlike earlier times, where a character could suddenly turn poetic in the course of a song, they usually write in keeping with the spoken language and personality of the characters. As an example, is the song 'Hanikarak Bapu' (Harmful Father) from the film *Dangal*.

Based on the real-life Phogat sisters, *Dangal* is the story of two female wrestlers, Geeta and Babita, who fulfill the aspirations of their wrestler father who had a failed

career in his time. In this song sequence, we see the two young girls getting trained for wrestling by their father. In an interview, the song's lyricist Amitabh Bhattacharya recounts that the brief given to him for the song was that the kids are getting trained, but they feel they have no choice in it (BollywoodHungama.com). The song had to show their point of view, but it had to do so 'not in a serious way' (BollywoodHungama.com). In the song's lyrics, Bhattacharya does this by using words like 'hanikarak' or harmful, and phrases like 'torture hai ghana' (This is extreme torture). The words of the song express the idea that the father is 'hanikarak' or harmful for the health of the two kids. The choice of the word 'hanikarak' is imaginative, and helps strike a balance between conveying the feelings of the kids, without making it too serious as it is a word that is otherwise used only in the context of health and medicine. (The anti-smoking commercials that are played before Hindi films in Indian cinema halls use the word to talk about smoking). In another interview, Bhattacharya explains the language he uses in his songs saying, 'My source material is everyday, conversational grammar, *bol-chaal ki bhaasha*.' (reelscroll.co.in)

This is very evident in the words of this song, making it a good example of a realism in language.² The song uses the same spoken language as the dialogues of the film, mixed with some English words like 'discipline' and 'torture'. It also keeps in mind the age of the characters, evident in lines like 'aanson ki pichkari'. The song's words, thus, creatively make use of the space of the song to get their point across, while being in character.

Significantly, even though unlike 'Channa Mereya' the song is not lip-synched, it too expresses the internal perspective of the characters, in this case, the two young children's aversion to wrestling which they are not doing out of choice. The encapsulation of this sentiment by the song adds depth to the film narrative, reflecting a comment made by Ravi Vasudevan about the ability of song sequences in commercial cinema 'to expresses a desiring and divided subjectivity' ('[Shifting Codes](#)', 117). This is because even in a film that celebrates the two wrestlers as they emerge victorious, the fact that wrestling begins for them as something forced on them, finds an expression in the words and picturization of the song sequence. Incidentally this was a criticism against the film by some commentators, as the film led to a debate about the patriarchal manner in which it narrated the story of the two female wrestlers.³ In this context, it is significant that the song sequence captures this sentiment, perhaps even making way for this criticism in the reading and interpretations of the film. Though this might seem like a break when it comes to the language of the lyrics, at an ideological level, this ability of the song sequence to open up what can be seen as transgressive pleasures, in conflict with the overall neatness of the narrative itself, is a legacy of the use of song sequences from the past. Vasudevan, for instance, has written about pleasure in the Hindi film of the 1950s having a 'double articulation' ("[The Melodramatic Mode](#)", 49). This double articulation includes the 'pleasure of the ending' which signifies narrative closure as well as the 'pleasures of transgression'. Songs open up the film narratives to the latter function of the pleasure of transgression. In 'Hanikarak Bapu' we find a similar usage of the song, giving us hints to read the film differently, if we might wish to, transgressing the overarching ideology of the film.

Absence of lip-synchronization

A significant characteristic of the picturization of the Hindi film song has been lip synchronization. Since the introduction of playback singing in 1935, song sequences have (though often with many exceptions over the years) followed the logic of actors in the film lip-syncing the voice of the playback singer. As Neepa Majumdar has argued, this made Hindi film song sequences a ‘unique star vehicle, simultaneously drawing upon two different star texts, those of the singer and the actor’ (167).

Majumdar also writes about the primacy of the aural over the image in Hindi cinema in the initial years, which she says can be seen in the Indian term ‘song picturization’ which indicated a ‘tendency toward defining the image in the terms set out by the song’ (167). However, by the 1990s this had changed to a point where the aural voice was no longer associated with a stardom of its own and it found its own identity (178). The three songs that I analyze below reflect this as in all of them there is not only an absence of the lip-sync, but also the absence of a singer-actor association. I am interested here in understanding what this change means for the song’s role in the narrative.

The first song is ‘Sooha Saha’ from *Highway*. *Highway* is the story of its upper class female character, Veera Tripathi (Alia Bhat), who discovers freedom when she gets abducted by some criminals led by Mahabir Bhatti (Randeep Hooda). During the course of the film, Veera and Mahabir discover that though they are on different sides of the class divide, they have both faced oppression, thus bringing the themes of gender and class oppression together.

The song ‘Sooha Saha’ recounts Bhatti’s childhood trauma, but unlike the three song sequences analyzed above, does not do so by a direct correlation between the lyrics of the song and its picturization. The song begins as a *lori* that Veera hums for Bhatti, provoking a flashback as Bhatti remembers his traumatic childhood when he used to witness his mother being subject to emotional and physical violence. The lyrics of the song are of a mother singing to a child about her love for him, as reflected by its *mukhda*, ‘Sooha saha amma ka’ (Mother’s red rabbit). However, the picturization of the song shows Bhatti driving his truck, superimposed by a flashback about his childhood with his mother. A third set of visuals are of Veera singing the song. The lyrics do not recount the violence and sadness that the images show. The superimposition of the song on the images of Bhatti’s childhood, along with Veera singing the song in the present, comes together to create Bhatti’s point of view. It articulates the idea that Veera is reminding him of the love and safety of his mother.

Bhatti is a character who does not talk about his inner feelings, unlike Veera who blurts out in an early moment the sexual abuse she went through as a child. For a reticent male character caught up in a cycle of violent masculinity, the song becomes the outlet to explore his back story, his feelings and desire for tenderness. This context is central to the bond that the two come to share in the film’s narrative as it explains their attraction to each other. The song also contextualizes Bhatti’s anger and contempt towards the rich and privileged. While this could have been done by making Bhatti sing his feelings in the form of a lip-synced song like ‘Channa Mereya’, it is done instead by the superimposition of a song whose lyrics have nothing to do with the trauma that is recounted in the sequence. For an inward character like Bhatti, this narrative choice is in sync with his character traits. Thus,

while the purpose of the song is to explore his interiority, the manner in which this is done is consistent with his character.

The second song which uses a similar structure is 'Heer Toh Badi Sad Hai' (Heer is very sad) from *Tamasha*. The song is in the tradition of what Vasudevan has called a 'narrational song' which is 'enacted by a source other than any of the fictional characters, and sometimes in a space separated from theirs' (*The Melodramatic Public*, 123). It also continues with the tradition of Hindi film heroines finding a space in the narrative to express their interior feelings during the song sequences. However, not only is 'Heer toh Badi Sad Hai' not lip-synched, it is also not sung by a female singer. This raises some pertinent questions about what that means for the narrative meaning of the song in the film.

The song's words have a tongue-in-cheek, ironic tone, even when expressing a sentiment that could have been sorrow for its character Tara (Deepika Padukone).⁴ In the publicity for the film, the song was promoted as the 'Happy Sad Song'. *Tamasha* is the story of Ved (Ranbir Kapoor) and Tara who meet on a trip to Corsica where he is pretending to be a different person than who he actually is back home. Ved and Tara decide not to reveal their real names to each other, or to exchange addresses and get in touch after the trip. The song is from Tara's perspective on her return from the trip. Though they had decided not to keep in touch, the song reveals that she cannot get Ved out her mind even as the years pass by.

Apart from Tara, the sequence is also picturized on four male folk singers who find space in the *mise-en-scène* in an extra diegetic placement.⁵ While Tara is shown living her life in the city – rejecting the advances of men at a party, dancing alone, celebrating her birthday alone, walking around looking distressed – they lip sync the song expressing her actual feelings. Using the Heer metaphor from the folk Heer-Ranjha story, the song's words are playful – she is 'very sad' the song tells us, but also that she is probably 'utter mad'. This leads to a distancing effect from what could have been expressed as sorrow. There is a touch of the everyday and colloquial in the song's Hinglish words, with lines like 'pressure cooker dimag' (her mind has become like a pressure cooker). Like 'Sooha Saha', in this song too, the lyrics and picturization are not in a direct relationship with each other. Though they do express sorrow, they do so in a playful manner, while the body language of the actor Deepika Padukone conveys seriousness which the lyrics lack. Thus, while the song's words have a mocking tone, the images of the song are in contrast. The choreography and performance of the actor, therefore, addresses a gap in the lyrical meaning, establishing the subjectivity of the character's experience in the film's narrative.

Considering that the film is entirely the male protagonist Ved's story, it is significant that even though the song sequence is picturized on Tara, the aural voice is not hers. Tara's entire life outside of who she is when she meets Ved is narrated and condensed to this 4-min song sequence sung by a male voice, with the lyrics working as an outsider's comment on her feelings. The song begins with her leaving Ved after coming back from Corsica, and ends with her going to Delhi where she will meet Ved again. It, therefore, works as a shorthand, to move things ahead in the narrative, but we do not get to know anything about her life otherwise. Within this male dominant narrative, however, the song sequence does open up a brief space for her, which otherwise she does not have in the narrative of the film centered on Ved's discovery of himself.

The third song sequence that works in a similar manner in the disjunct between lyrics and picturization is 'Da Da Dasse' (*Uda Punjab*). *Uda Punjab* traces the impact of the

drug mafia on the lives of 4 characters, each of whose story highlights the complexity of the theme. Alia Bhatt's character Pinky is one of them. The song sequence 'Da Da Dasse' is a brief 2-min sequence, but one which changes her character's trajectory in the film. It is located at a moment when she is getting ready to sell the bag of drugs she has accidentally found, not knowing that it is going to end in tragedy for her. The narration of the moment when she is getting ready, in anticipation of her journey and hopeful of what it might bring for her, takes the form of the song sequence. This makes it her point of view, articulating what that journey means for her. We see her getting dressed and feeling attractive, sitting in an auto smiling to herself, then taking a bus where a police patrol makes her scared. On finally reaching the place she realizes that she is probably in a mess, at which point the song ends.

During the song, we see the expression of her desire to escape and create a better future for herself, though that is not how the song ends. This is shown through her eyeing billboards in the city, about a world that is far outside her reach, but which her journey is an attempt at reaching towards. The song sequence thus, becomes a key to her inner world and creates a space of hope within the narrative for her. The lyrics of the song mention 'dar' (fear), creating the effect of a sense of foreboding, indicating this is a dangerous journey. The *mukhda* 'Dar Da Da Dasse' emphasises this sense of danger. Similar to the picturization of the previous song, here too the actor's sense of hope is in contrast to the lyrics of the song. Together this underlines her courage as well as the danger the journey poses to her.

Exploring the centrality of the song to the Indian melodramatic form, Bhaskar, as mentioned earlier in the article, has argued that the song becomes 'the language of the ineffable' (163). Focusing on the films released in the first decade after independence, she argues that the song sequence became a space where the subjectivity of the characters gets expressed where 'conventional language is inadequate to express the stress of emotion' (168). In analyzing the song 'Jisse Tu Kabool Kar Le' (*Devdas*, 1955), for instance, she writes that for the character Chandramukhi, the song 'exteriorizes and amplifies the interiority of her character, making intelligible the emotion that the world outside would rather ignore or repress' (168). In the songs quoted above, each song is a means to explore the ineffable vis-a-vis the narrative of the films. In the three examples, the characters are either reticent in the film's narrative (Bhatti in *Highway*), the film narrative does not explore them sufficiently (Tara in *Tamasha*), or the song explores a different side of the character than the predominant part of the film (Pinky in *Udta Punjab*). Therefore, in each film, the song sequence conveys a significant aspect of the character's experience or personality which is otherwise, for different reasons in each film, not explored in the diegesis. Instead of exploring it as a dialogue, it is done in the form of a song sequence, marking a continuity from the song's use in the Hindi melodramatic form.

Conclusion

In the article, I have analyzed six song sequences from contemporary films from 'New Bollywood' to understand their relationship to the film's narrative, marking both continuities as well as discontinuities with the way songs have been used in Hindi cinema in the past. In each film, the absence of these song sequences would have meant

a gap in the film narratives, thus making the songs crucial to the diegesis. This is more apparent in the case of some films, for instance, the song sequences in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*, *Tamasha* and *Highway*. For others it is not true to the same degree – the songs in *Tumhari Sulu*, *Dangal* and *Udta Punjab*. I would argue that this indicates that the song is not disappearing from Hindi film narratives as many film-makers are making an effort to incorporate it into their narratives, making use of the ability of the song sequence to explore the subjectivity of the characters.

There have, however, been changes in the song sequence's picturization and language. Some of these changes are in continuity with the way songs were used earlier, for instance, songs still help express interiority of the character. But there is also now an attempt at a more seamless inclusion into the film's narratives – the use of the mike in *Ae Dil Hai Mushkil*, the folk singers in *Tamasha* as the source of the song's singing voice, the mention of the *lori* in *Highway* before the song begins, are indicative of this. There are changes also in the spoken language of the songs, having become colloquial and more specific to the film's diegetic world, which reflects changes in the language of Hindi films in general.

Many of these changes, including the absence of the lip-sync, have to do with the desire to have a realist aesthetic that we see emerging in Hindi cinema. These changes, therefore, can be located as a question of the changing form of Hindi cinema. If we go back to the *Koffee with Karan* episode, the question of song sequences came up in that conversation precisely because the film-makers were discussing what they called the changing 'sensibilities' of 'commercial' Hindi cinema in recent years. One way for them to articulate this change was to discuss their engagement with the song sequence, for long seen as an evidence of the 'masala' Hindi film. However, a closer look at the use of songs in many contemporary films today, as this article has done, indicates a more complex engagement with the song, and its linkages to the film narratives. Even the film *Masaan* (Neeraj Ghaywan, 2016), which won accolades at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival, and which did not deploy the tropes we associate with a Hindi mainstream film, had a song sequence – 'Tu Kisi Rail Si'. The song sequence was not lip-synched, but it was a variation on the Hindi film love song, which established the protagonists' love for each other, though it was picturized in the midst of an everyday crowded public space.

Taking very recent films as examples, in this article I have pointed at a change that is still happening for contemporary Hindi cinema's engagement with the song sequence is in a state of flux. The desire to have a song sequence, perhaps, can be contextualized within cinephilia, as indicated by the sentiment that both Imtiaz Ali and Zoya Akhtar express in the *Koffee with Karan* episode when they say that they love songs, even if they often do not know how to use them. As long as they keep trying, we will continue to see interesting engagements with the film song, like in the examples discussed in the article.

Notes

1. Sangita Gopal terms the Hindi cinema of the period starting from the 1990s as 'New Bollywood' (14). She distinguishes 'New Bollywood' from what she calls the 'Classic

period' (1947–70) on the one hand, and the period of the 'Masala film' of the 1970s, on the other.

2. In that context, it is interesting that at the beginning of the song, there is a line which reworks the lyric of the song, 'Gairon Pe Karam Apno Pe Sitam' written by Sahir Ludhianvi from the 1968 film *Ankhen* (Ramanand Sagar).
3. See <https://www.dailyo.in/arts/dangal-aamir-khan-haryana-women-wrestlers-india-sexism-patriarchy/story/1/14824.html>, <https://thewire.in/film/dangal-feminist-patriarchal>.
4. 'Cutie Pie' also had a similar ironic, tongue in cheek tone. This creates a distance from the grief of the characters.
5. The song 'Emotional Atyachar' from *Dev D* (Anurag Kashyap, 2009) used a similar tactic of a two member brass band lip-syncing the song which was otherwise picturized on the two main protagonists of the film.

Acknowledgments

This article was first presented at the South Asian Popular Culture conference held in Birmingham City University in June 2017. I would like to thank the organizers, Rajinder Dudrah and Gita Rajan, as well as the participants at the conference for the rich and engaging two days of discussions and presentations.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Aakshi Magazine is a PhD candidate in Film Studies at the University of St Andrews. Her thesis focuses on the Hindi film song of the 1950s.

Works cited

- "Amitabh Bhattacharya's Exclusive on Composing Haanikarak Bapu for Dangal". Online video clip. BollywoodHungama.com. YouTube. 17 Nov. 2016. Web. 20 Aug. 2016.
- Booth, Gregory. "Religion, Gossip, Narrative Conventions and the Construction of Meaning in Hindi Film Songs." *Popular Music* 19.2 (2000): 125–45. doi: [10.1017/S0261143000000088](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143000000088).
- Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama and the Mode of Excess*. Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Bhaskar, Ira. "Emotion, Subjectivity, and the Limits of Desire: Melodrama and Modernity in Bombay Cinema, 1940s–50s." *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*. Ed. Christine Gledhill. Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012. 161–76.
- Dass, Manishita. "Cinetopia: Leftist Street Theatre and the Musical Production of the Metropolis in 1950s Bombay Cinema." *Positions: Asia Critique* 25.101–24 (2017). doi: [10.1215/10679847-3710353](https://doi.org/10.1215/10679847-3710353).
- Foucault, Michel. "Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias." *Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité*. October (1984) 3–4.
- "Film Lyricist Amitabh Bhattacharya: 'If We Write What We Find in Everyday Usage, It Creates a Connection'." thereel.scroll.in 22 Dec. 2015. Web. 20 Aug. 2016.
- Gopal, Sangita. *Conjugations Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- "Koffee with Karan Season 5 Episode 17." www.hotstar.com. 26 Feb. 2016. Web. 20 Aug. 2016.

- Majumdar, Neepa. "The Embodied Voice: Song Sequences and Stardom in Popular Hindi Cinema". *Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music*. Eds. Pamela Robertson Wojick and Arthur Knight. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001. 161–81.
- Morcom, Ana. *Hindi Film Songs and the Cinema*. London: Ashgate, 2007.
- Sarkar, Bhaskar. *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Vasudevan, Ravi. "Shifting Codes, Dissolving Identities: The Hindi Social Film of the 1950s as Popular Culture." *Making Meaning in Indian Cinema*. Ed. Ravi Vasudevan. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000. 99–122.
- Vasudevan, Ravi. "The Melodramatic Mode and the Commercial Hindi Cinema: Notes on Film History, Narrative and Performance in the 1950s." *Screen* 30.3 (1989): 29–50. doi: [10.1093/screen/30.3.29](https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/30.3.29).
- Vasudevan, Ravi. *The Melodramatic Public: Film Form and Spectatorship in Indian Cinema*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.
- Wani, Aarti. *Fantasy of Modernity Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

Filmography

- Ae Dil Hai Mushkil* (Karan Johar, 2016)
- Dangal* (Nitesh Tiwari, 2016)
- Highway* (Imtiaz Ali, 2014)
- Love Aaj Kal* (Imtiaz Ali, 2009)
- Masaan* (Neeraj Ghaywan, 2015)
- Tamasha* (Imtiaz Ali, 2015)
- Tumhari Sulu* (Suresh Triveni, 2017)
- Uda Punjab* (Abhishek Chaubey, 2016)