The construction of 70s femininity, or why Zeenat Aman sings the same song twice

This paper examines how Zeenat Aman helped inaugurate new forms of sexuality and femininity in 1970s Bollywood. Along with redefining the rules of a screen heroine’s identity, Aman also created a range of grey characters such as Sheetal in Manoj Kumar’s *Roti Kapada aur Makaan* (1974) and Sheela in Feroz Khan’s *Qurbani* (1980). These roles became associated with hugely popular songs of the period, lip-synched by Aman, including “Aap jaisa koi,” from *Qurbani*, and “Main naa bhoolunga,” from *Roti Kapada aur Makaan*. This paper explores how these (repeated) song sequences reflect Aman’s positioning within these narratives even as they allow her to reshape her role in innovative ways. In this way, this paper examines how Zeenat Aman deviated from earlier binary models imposed upon Bollywood heroines, pitting heroine against vamp and, in the process, created new modes of femininity and female agency within these films.

Alternately touted as heralding “the 70s look of Westernized, ‘liberated’ young woman in Hindi film” and being “among the first stars to show that good girls could be unashamedly sexual while fulfilling all the requirements to ultimately become wife to the hero,” Zeenat Aman helped inaugurate a new form of sexual politics and femininity in 1970s Bollywood (Jhunjhunwala 22; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 41). Along with “redefin[ing] the rules of a screen heroine’s identity,” Aman also created a range of “grey characters” such as Sheetal in Manoj Kumar’s *Roti Kapada aur Makaan* (1974) and Sheela in Feroz Khan’s *Qurbani* (1980). These roles became associated with hugely popular songs of the period, lip-synched by Aman, including “Aap jaisa koi,” from *Qurbani*, and “Main naa bhoolunga,” from *Roti Kapada aur Makaan* (hereafter *RKM*). Of particular interest is the fact that these two songs – “Aap jaisa koi” and “Main naa bhoolunga” – are presented twice in their respective films, with the repeated performance reconfiguring each film’s ensuing resolution. In tandem with my inquiry into the construction of a 1970s femininity (a la Zeenat), I want to explore how these (repeated) song sequences reflect Aman’s positioning within such a conventional narrative structure even as they allow her to reshape this role in innovative ways. Crucial to this reshaping
effect, I shall argue, is the split between a more conventional politics of gazing, in which Aman functions as an object for scopophilic consumption, and the representation of an “inner view,” in which Aman’s own perspective becomes privileged.³ This paper will examine how Zeenat Aman created new forms of femininity and female agency in these films as well as, in the process, develop a more nuanced understanding of why she sings the same songs twice.

Much has been made of Zeenat Aman’s cosmopolitan antecedents, and I would briefly like to examine these, as well as how they have been deployed to shape the subsequent discourse surrounding Aman (and her “intervention” in 1970s Bollywood cinema). While born in Bombay, some biographies have listed her place of birth as Germany, a country she moved to as a young teenager, following the death of her father (imdb.com). Aman’s mother subsequently remarried a German man named Heinz, obtained German citizenship and resettled there with Zeenat. After spending her teenage years in Germany, Zeenat returned to India, graduating from St. Xavier’s College in Bombay before leaving for California, where she studied on scholarship at USC for a year. Upon returning to India, she began working as a journalist for Femina magazine before turning to modeling. She subsequently competed in and won the Miss Asia-Pacific title in 1970, the first time an Indian woman had done so (imdb.com; Jhunjhunwala 10-11; Wikipedia.com). It was precisely this cosmopolitan pedigree that caught the eye of Dev Anand, who went on to cast her as Jasbir/ Janice in his film, Hare Rama Hare Krishna (1971). Thus Aman’s “chic, westernized manner and cigarette smoking confidence” helped shape her image from the very outset and directly led to her being cast in a role that has subsequently been described as “mark[ing] a distinct shift” in
Bollywood cinema, via which Aman “naturalized the Western look” (Jhunjhunwala 12; Mazumdar 90).

**Janice/ Jasbir**

Along with being “a trendsetter of sorts,” *Hare Rama Hare Krishna* (hereafter, *HRHK*) launched Aman’s career (Garga 186). Critics have repeatedly claimed that Aman’s performance in this film “ushered in such raw sexuality as never before witnessed on the Indian screen” (Kazmi 235). The film, particularly due to its hit song, “Dum Maro Dum,” was a success and Aman, who lip-synchs the hit song in the film, became “an overnight sensation” (Jhunjhunwala 14). Yet, to return to her “cosmopolitan antecedents,” even while Aman’s “English speech and diction were perfect,” she required a Hindi coach to deliver her dialogue in the film (Jhunjhunwala 14). Precisely for this reason, however, Aman was seen as being “ideally cast” as the “hippy chick who can look both Indian and western” (Dwyer 112). Along with her interesting and, in many ways, path-breaking role in this film, what becomes particularly relevant to the current inquiry is how, from the very outset, Aman (with all her cosmopolitan aura) was associated with a hit song – as Jhunjhunwala notes, “Even today only the first bars of the tune [“Dum Maro Dum”] need play and Zeenat Aman’s face is conjured up in the minds of Hindi movie-watchers all over the world” (12-13).

While it may be Aman’s face that immediately comes to mind when hearing this song, it is her backside that first appears when the song is played in the film. As Fareed Kazmi notes, “The camera lingers lovingly while Zeenat, in her introductory shot…seductively wriggles her hips while wearing a suggestively short dress” (195).
Thus, if this song has become “synonymous with Zeenat Aman’s image,” it is worth exploring how the song functions in relation to both Zeenat’s overall role in the film and, in the process, her (re)construction of Indian femininity in the context of 1970s Bollywood (Jhunjhunwala 13). Aman’s character, Jasbir/Janice) comes of age in what could be called a distinctly modern (read: Western) setting: growing up in Montreal with her brother, Prashant (Dev Anand), her parents divorce while she is still quite young, leaving her to be raised solely by her father (Kishore Sahu), who subsequently takes another wife (Indrani Mukherjee). Making a clean break from her past, Jasbir discards her old identity (“Jasbir”) and becomes Janice, Bollywood’s first hippie chick. Shedding her old identity and clothes, she dons the garb of her new alter ego (“Janice”) and follows the hippie trail to Nepal, where she smokes ganga and practices ‘free love’ at the local commune.4

Yet “she is haunted by a sense of loneliness and restlessness” (Ray and Mukherjee 139), which is addressed early on in the film via Dev Anand’s voiceover to the opening images of Aman (with her back to the camera) dancing by herself to the tune of “Dum Maro Dum”:

> These people whose religion is ganga, opium, hemp, cocaine, LSD, and whose temple is freedom, fun and dance, these people only live from moment to moment for this, lost in the intoxication and stupor to their own folks and their society. These people whom the world knows as hippies, they have no connection with life. Whether they fear or love life, why don’t we ask them? There is Jasbir there, my own Jabsir, whom I have loved very much, my own part, my own blood, Jasbir! Tell me what you want, what is in your heart, why are you like this? Jasbir, hey Jasbir! Jassu!
Throughout this opening sequence Aman, in a short red dress, continues dancing with her back turned to the camera. There is a brief shot towards the end of her face in close up, smiling blissfully behind oversized tinted glasses while her lips move as if singing. As Anand, his voice increasingly agitated, calls out her name repeatedly, her tinted glasses fly off and fall to the ground, followed by a match on action shot of another pair of glasses on the ground, accompanied by an offscreen woman’s voice continuing the repeated calling of Jasbir’s name. The camera pulls backs to reveal the young Jasbir, kicking her glasses and refusing to drink her milk while her nanny reprimands her. Anand subsequently freezes the image of the young Jasbir while continuing his voiceover, noting that no one ever asked her what she wanted from life. The next time we see her, following the ensuing dissolution of her parents’ marriage and the break-up of her family, the transformation is complete: she is now Janice, again wearing tinted glasses and selling hippie garb from a bus with her boyfriend in Nepal.

Thus, in what became a staple in the representation of this “new woman” of Bollywood, Aman is introduced via a song sequence, which is reprised at a later point in the narrative, further associating her with its sentiment (of simultaneous pleasure and isolation). As in the opening sequences, though she is surrounded by others, Janice remains essentially alone, dancing by herself or, to extend the metaphor, to her own tune. In playing the female protagonist of HRHK, Aman established herself both as “an iconic figure of the seventies” – what Manas Ray and Madhuja Mukerjee call “a child-woman caught in a whirlpool of ‘wrong’ notions and right ‘traditions’” – and, thus, as a woman incapable of reconciling the twin elements to her identity or, put another way, as a
woman unable to come to terms with her (severed) past (139). In an echo of the typical scenario facing the figure of the “vamp” in popular Hindi cinema, “the guitar-playing, beer-guzzling, cigarette-puffing” Janice kills herself at the end of the film even as her family, reunited in their attempt to regain their “Jassu,” arrives in Kathmandu and desperately entreats her to return to them (Ray and Mukherjee 139).

One might say, then, that even as Aman ushered in a radically new type of heroine to Bollywood via her breakthrough performance in HRHK, she was also made to suffer for it, at least within the story. The important role of the recurring song also becomes apparent in this first feature, as Aman takes her own life (via an overdose of pills) when her brother sings the same song he sang to her when they were children (“Phoolon ka Taaron ka”). Apparently overwhelmed by the repressed recollections this song brings about, Janice, who in many ways is defined by her association with (another) song, comes to her tragic end via the reenactment of a long forgotten melody. In this way, the film seems to suggest the incompatibility of these two roles (via their corresponding songs) as her long-lost brother (and director of the film), in his attempt to remind her of who she once was, pushes her to the point of no return.

Aman went on to play another successful role soon after, in Yaadon Ki Baraat (1973), which directly references the popularity of HRHK in one of its first songs. When Aman’s character, Sunita, attends a concert early on in the film (again wearing a short red dress), the singer (Tariq) invites her to join him on stage and, after singing the song, “Aap ke Kamare Mein,” together, the guitar-playing singer segues into “Dum Maro Dum,” as Zeenat/ Sunita reprises this now-famous song’s opening lyrics and the young people in attendance sway along to the tune. Even as Yaadon Ki Baraat similarly employs the
repeated use of a song as a key element of the plot (in this case, the title song, which unites the three brothers separated as children), it is for a different song, again ‘sung’ (i.e., lip-synched) by Aman’s character, that the film gained its greatest fame. This song, “Chura liya hai tumne jo dil ko,” sung by Asha Bhosle, has been called “the main merit” of the film and simultaneously acknowledges Aman’s association with the “disco era” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 420). In this song sequence Aman, sporting a white bellbottomed outfit, guitar and sparkling, oversized hoop earrings, ‘sings’ to the young man, Vijay (Vijay Arora), who has come to her house for a party, as the rest of the guests look on. In this way, Aman again demonstrates how she “could play the modern sort of woman, very different to the old style actresses of Bollywood” (Bose 304). Furthermore, Aman’s performance as a new type of Bollywood heroine is again directly linked to a popular song, and it is via the performance of this song – openly declaring her love for a man she has just met before her assembled guests – that she arguably “violat[ed] several moral codes advocated by earlier melodramas to control female sexuality” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 41).

Sheetal

It was in the following year’s Roti Kapada aur Makaan (RKM), however, that these aspects of Aman’s persona became most evident. In this film, directed by Manoj Kumar, Zeenat plays Sheetal, a young woman with grand aspirations and the girlfriend of Bharat (Manoj Kumar), a young man who is having difficulty attaining a job. These issues are addressed early on in the film via a conversation in a gazebo, in which Bharat and Sheetal
take shelter from the rain. After asking Bharat when he will be able to acquire employment, Sheetal goes on to describe her dreams:

Sheetal: Bharat, I’m telling the truth. When, four years ago, you received this engineering degree, ever since then I’ve been having this dream that you will land a nice job. Then we won’t have to stand in bus lines, we’ll have a car, too. We’ll have a huge, beautiful house. We’ll have wardrobes full of different clothes, I’ll wear the finest jewelry and then, sitting on a plane, we will fly the skies.

Bharat [snapping his fingers in her face]: Hey, high flying queen.
Sheetal: Why, don’t you like my dreams?
Bharat: When I like you, I like everything that you like.

Hearing these words, Sheetal jumps out of the gazebo into the pouring rain, crying out, “Oh! I could die for that,” and inviting Bharat to join her. When he demurs, pointing out that he will get drenched and that he has a job interview in half an hour, Sheetal interrupts him via the first song sequence, “Hai Hai Yeh Majboori.” In this classic “wet sari” song sequence, Aman (as Sheetal) cavorts and sings in the rain, while Bharat remains standing under cover of the gazebo, gazing on ruefully as he clutches his rolled up diploma.

This sequence is coded as taking place in the private sphere (the intimate couple caught alone in the rain) yet the framing splits the subject and mode of identification to bifurcate the viewing experience, coming closer to what Lalitha Gopalan refers to as “cinema of attractions…and scopophilia” (109). This doubling of modes of address is mirrored in Aman’s conflation of vamp and heroine characteristics that had previously been diametrically opposed and only began to be combined in the 1970s (Kasbekar 300-301). Sheetal’s materialistic aspirations (which become a recurring theme in the film) typify this conflation – though in love with Bharat (metonym for India), she also wants
more out of life, e.g., a car, a big house, wardrobes full of clothing, etc. – and in this way, i.e., via her materialistic aspirations, she simultaneously embodies the “new woman” of Bollywood and functions as a hyperbolized echo of the sentiment underlying the film’s title, championing basic needs (i.e., bread, clothing, housing) in a time of economic uncertainty. That she herself becomes an object (read: attraction) for the camera’s gaze in the song sequence’s visualization of her (materialistic) fantasies could thus be seen as an apt reflection of both her (self-)commoditization and the film’s larger critique of such predilections (embodied, aptly enough, in the figure of the “new woman”).

It is via the ensuing song sequence – “Main naa bhoolunga” (I Won’t Forget) – and its subsequent role in the film’s narrative, that these apparently conflicting (though ultimately resolved) tendencies are most vividly on display. Before singing the song for the first time with Bharat (as part of a televised broadcast and as a way of making some money), Sheetal has been given a ring by Bharat for her birthday, featuring an image of a Hindu god. Wearing this ring, Sheetal tells Bharat, “Today, let’s sing such a song that everybody will remember.” The sequence begins in the recording studio, where Bharat and Sheetal are filmed by the television crew, before moving into a fantasy sequence (via a transition shot through the shiny hub of a BMW car wheel) which is again coded as a private fantasy yet features moments of direct (i.e., public) address, primarily by Aman. In this fantasy sequence, Sheetal and Bharat enjoy all of Sheetal’s previously professed desires – new car, new house, and multiple colorful costumes – and even partake in an imagined wedding ceremony before the sequence returns to the recording studio. This fantasy’s disjunction from the world of the narrative is further reinforced in the following scene when Sheetal’s new boss, Mr. Mohan (Shashi Kapoor), points out that she has only
worn two outfits in the past ten days and offers to purchase some new clothes for her. When Sheetal initially objects, Mohan interjects by noting that, as an employee, she is under the company’s (and thus his) purview and that, furthermore, she should not argue over such “little things.”

Thus begins Sheetal’s gradual transformation or, put another way, her relationship with Mohan initiates the actualization of her materialistic desires. When she meets Bharat one day after work, sporting a new outfit and matching flower in her hair (both provided by Mr. Mohan), she asks him what he thinks of her new appearance. “Flowers look better on plants,” Bharat coolly replies. Sheetal responds by telling him that she sometimes wishes he were more like Mr. Mohan and, in response to Bharat’s ensuing question (“Then what would happen?”), adds, “Then all my dream would have been fulfilled. Life wouldn’t have passed waiting in line for buses. If you were Mr. Mohan, then life would have sped by in big fast cars.” In a continuation of this trajectory of desire, Sheetal misses her date with Bharat the following day (to celebrate the fourth anniversary of their first encounter), in order to accompany Mohan on a business meeting. Later than evening when Bharat stands waiting with another man at the bus stop, he sees Sheetal leaving with Mohan in the latter’s ‘fast car’. When the other man says, “Looks like the bus has come,” Bharat replies, “And it looks like I’ve missed it.” Sheetal, after apologizing for missing their date the next day, excitedly informs Bharat that she will soon be going to America with Mr. Mohan. This sequence is followed by a cut to a plane flying overhead while Bharat intones, in voiceover, “Sheetal went to America with Mr. Mohan and I began to feel she was slowly drifting away from me.”
Upon returning to India, Sheetal and Mohan announce their engagement and have a party. However Sheetal is unable to remove Bharat’s ring from her finger, try as she may, and finally extends her hand to Mohan before all the assembled guests, telling him, “Cut it off.” Mohan demurs, noting the image of the Hindu god on the ring even as he states, “It’s only a ring,” slipping his ring on her other hand’s finger. Thus wearing both men’s rings, Sheetal, the “new woman,” proceeds to clink champagne glasses, only to drop hers when Bharat, singing a somber song, appears on the television. Breaking her glass, Sheetal takes a new one yet, even as she drinks, seems conflicted. Compounding Sheetal’s indecision is a flashback sequence, featuring images of Sheetal together with Bharat, following which Mohan finally switches the television off, thus abruptly ending Bharat’s dolorous song. Yet in an ironic follow-up to this, Mohan proceeds to whistle Bharat’s tune while smiling and twirling Sheetal around in his arms in slow motion, even as the grim undertone of the song’s melody continues to play, thus bracketing this moment and calling attention to the artificiality of its frivolity.

In keeping with the dynamics of this film, Sheetal’s subsequent return to Bharat comes via a song sequence – a reprise of the earlier “Main naa bhoolunga.” This sequence also further illuminates the simultaneous deployment of both privately and publicly coded modes of representing Sheetal, in which there is a shift from depicting her as the object of men’s gazes to the enactment of her own “inner view.” This reprised sequence also illuminates the triangular nature of Sheetal’s desire, even as this triangle’s embodiment in this song sequence allows for Sheetal to deviate in some ways from the typical position afforded to the woman in such a structuring, i.e., one in which she
functions primarily as an object of exchange between the two men, to instead manifest attributes associated with the previously noted “new woman” (Kasbekar; Sedgwick).

The (re)enactment of “Main naa bhoolunga” (which, in turn, leads to Sheetal’s return to Bharat) comes at a party at which Bharat is also present. Mohan introduces Sheetal as his fiancée who, in turn, is addressed by one of her old friends from the recording studio days (where the song was originally ‘sung’). When this man chastises Sheetal for failing to recognize either him or Bharat, Mohan realizes that Sheetal and Bharat knew each other previously. Mohan encourages Sheetal to sing a song with her old ‘friend’ but she replies that she has “forgotten everything.” Bharat then agrees to sing by himself and, after glimpsing his old ring still on Sheetal’s finger, begins “Main naa bhoolunga” for the second time. While Bharat sings, Sheetal steps away from Mohan and slips into the bathroom. From here there is a cut to Sheetal inside this private sphere, which features a mural of a woman struggling in a body of water. Sheetal leans against the shut door and cries, covering her face with both hands (bedecked by both men’s rings), the camera cutting from her to the image of the suffering woman in the painting as she pounds her fist against the wall. She gazes at her reflection in the bathroom mirror (below the mural of the anguished woman), then dries her eyes. There is a cut back to the outer (public) realm, where Mohan and Bharat are both shown looking off-camera in separate shots, followed by a cut to Sheetal, who reemerges, calm and dry-eyed, from the bathroom.

Bharat resumes singing while Mohan and Sheetal hold hands and listen. Then, as Bharat comes to the end of his lyric, the camera zooms in on Sheetal’s and Mohan’s enjoined hands as Sheetal lets go of Mohan’s grip. The camera pans from Mohan’s
confused expression back to Sheetal’s face as she finally begins to ‘sing’ her lyrics to the song. As Bharat subsequently joins Sheetal in singing the song, the camera pulls back to present the three – Bharat, Sheetal and Mohan – standing in a loose triangular formation with Mohan, now by himself, in the background and Sheetal and Bharat occupying the foreground. The camera further emphasizes this triangulated structure by engaging in a series of whip pans from Sheetal to Mohan to Bharat (with Mohan always appearing between the other two) and, as Bharat and Sheetal conclude the song with their backs now turned to Mohan, this latter figure leaves the gathering with a confused expression on his face. Thus, even as Sheetal moves from one man to another, she does not merely function as an object in this exchange but rather, via her ‘departure’ from the song’s (public) setting (and the ensuing depiction of her inner turmoil), emphasizes her own subjective agency in this process, choosing to act on her own inclinations rather than in direct accordance with the desires of either man (who, in many ways, become sidelined in the process).

Sheetal subsequently breaks off her engagement to Mohan and, when Mohan asks her why she failed to marry the one she loved and still loves, Sheetal replies, “That was my mistake.” Mohan’s subsequent rejoinder – “Not a mistake, call it a sin!” – as well as Sheetal’s acceptance of his point illuminates the religiously inflected paradigm at play here, and also foreshadows her subsequent fate. Though she now remorsefully concludes, “I considered wealth to be more precious than love, and blackened the Taj Mahal of my dreams,” this realization comes too late, a point Sheetal also acknowledges when Mohan offers to take her back to Bharat, replying, “I know that this is not possible now.” Indeed, though Sheetal is temporarily reunited with Bharat, she is subsequently gunned down
while helping him evade the police and, in accordance with the role whose fate she now
resigns herself to, conceals her gunshot wound from Bharat until it is too late, at which
point, even as “Main naa bhoolunga” is again repeated on the soundtrack, she smiles and
tells Bharat to go on, only crying (and dying) after he leaves.

Thus, even as Aman’s character straddles the divide between vamp and heroine,
she, like the vamps of previous films, is ultimately punished for her decadent ways,
signaling both the lingering presence of this older binary logic and its religiously
inflected morality. As she dies, Sheetal is referred to as “the Sita of [Bharat’s] life.”
Sheetal however disavows this parallel, stating that “Sita stands by her man even when he
is exiled in the forest. I deserted him when he went through difficult times.” In the
process, Sheetal paradoxically resigns herself to the morality associated with this
(repudiated) figure and, thus, to the necessity of her own demise. While one can point to
Aman’s role in RKM as a decided break from previous female roles, in which the heroine
was entirely pure (and purely devoted to the film’s protagonist), this film also signals a
return to the narrative of the earlier HRHK, in which Aman’s character, Janice, also has
to die because of her excessive deviation from the (proper) role of the (upright) heroine.
These films, then, simultaneously reveal Bollywood’s willingness to entertain (as
plausible) the figure of the “new woman,” replete with her independence (from a male
counterpart) and interest in pleasure, self-fulfillment and material gain (or, indeed, self-
fulfillment through material gain), even as they (ultimately) censure her for embodying
these very characteristics. It is in the following film, Feroz Khan’s Qurbani, then, that we
see a further reformulation of the role of the Bollywood heroine and a deviation from the
older narrative order in which such radical reformulations, while paradoxically indulged


within individual segments of the film (most notably, in song sequences), were ultimately discredited.

Sheela

Qurbani (1980), a “hugely successful action movie,” was made even more famous by its song, “Aap jaisa koi,” sung by the Pakistani-British singer Nazia Hassan and featured twice in the film, lip-synched in both instances by Aman’s character, Sheela, a nightclub dancer (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 448). In this film, again featuring a triangular romantic structure in which Aman’s character is desired by two different men, several of the previously addressed components of the Bollywood film are significantly reworked. As with HRHK, Aman’s character is introduced via a song – the first rendition of “Aap jaisa koi” – which she ‘sings’ at a nightclub. In the first version of this hit song, Aman appears in a sexy red outfit with her back again turned to the camera (and the internal nightclub audience), before turning around to ‘sing’ the song. Rather than direct address, the sequence features several shot/ reverse shots between Sheela and Feroz Khan’s character, Rajesh, who appears in the nightclub for this first enactment. Indeed, the first instance of a direct address by Aman comes halfway through the (four-minute) song sequence, via a heart-shaped frame (within a frame), in which Aman looks directly at the camera and winks as she sings.7

Following this sequence formally introducing Sheela, she leaves the nightclub with Rajesh and, on their way out, she is briefly detained by several of her fans who pay her compliments while Rajesh grows increasingly impatient. When one such fan, a man with a particularly large moustache, stops Sheela, placing his hand on her and
commenting on how sexy she is, Rajesh grabs the man by his moustache and tells him to leave. When Rajesh says goodnight to Sheela in the following shot at her door, he tells her, “No more dancing in the nightclub from now on,” while Sheela looks at him demurely, with only the hint of a smile on her lips. Unfortunately Rajesh, a jewel thief, is subsequently arrested and sent to jail, and so Sheela resumes her career as a nightclub dancer, performing the second rendition of “Aap jaisa koi” for the second man to come into her life, Amar (Vinod Khanna).

In the second version of this song, which is half as long, Sheela wears a figure-hugging yellow outfit and engages in much more direct address than in the first rendition. Furthermore, while this second version also features several shot/reverse shots between Khanna and Aman, in this instance these looks – or, more precisely, Aman’s looks offscreen at Khanna – are interpellated into the direct address. Thus, at the level of gazes, one could say that while Sheela is much more the direct (private) object of Rajesh’s gaze in the first version, the second time around she is not only on display for Amar but also, via the overlapping of shot/reverse shot and direct address, for us, the film’s external audience.\(^8\) Zeenat’s dancing in both versions is “poor,” as Dwyer notes, “but the camera, clothes and movements all emphasise her curvaceous body” (196). All of these elements seem to frame Sheela as a vamp figure, “dressed in a shimmering tight-fitting gown,” while “perform[ing] a cabaret number…at a night club, to seduce” both the internal male protagonist(s) and, by extension, the audience (Kasbekar 300) – as Jhunjhunwala notes, “No vamp has gyrated as seductively as Zeenat Aman to the ‘Aap jaisa koi’ number in Qurbani” (22-23).

Yet there are also significant deviations from the previous articulations of this
figure. To begin with, Sheela is not just relegated to this (vamp) setting but, indeed, operates beyond it as well. Whereas the vamp was “an outsider” and “a home breaker,” Sheela, while embodying several vamp attributes (e.g., an unrestrained sexuality and ‘Westernness’), is not coded as a vamp figure but rather as a heroine (Mazumdar 86, 90). Similarly, whereas the nightclub was formerly coded as “an illicit landscape,” in which the dancer performed for her “customers,” the nightclub setting of *Qurbani* is more benign, featuring “a backing group…who seem to have no idea how to mime playing their instruments” and, rather than an underworldly ‘clientele’ (with this term’s implicit associations with prostitution), the occupants of *Qurbani*’s nightclub could more accurately be described as Sheela’s fans who dance along (rather than remaining seated, an element again associated with the earlier paradigm of [illicit] dancer and [paying] client) while smiling and waving their arms (Mazumdar 86, 88; Dwyer 196).

Furthermore, whereas some theorists have argued that such “mandatory cabaret sequences” violated the recipe of classical cinema, where voyeurism is mediated through the gaze of another (internal character), Sheela’s twin performances of “Aap jaisa koi” illuminate the differing ways in which she engages the look(s) of both internal and external audiences (Prasad qtd. in Mazumdar 87-88). Rather than being a case of either one or another (i.e., the look of classical cinema or that of direct address), in Sheela’s case both forms are utilized, at times, within the same number. All of this is to illuminate how such sweeping formulations (of such sequences’ placement in Bollywood films and their internal structure, as well as their coding of this [vamp] figure) are disrupted or, indeed, made redundant via Aman’s performance in films such as *Qurbani*. 
Thus even as Aman reworks the previous Bollywood premise, in which the vamp is opposed to the heroine, she simultaneously avoids the fate meted out to her previous enactments of such a hybrid role (e.g., Janice in *HRHK* or Sunita in *RKM*). In defying this binary (and the fate normally allotted to those who attempt to do so), Aman (as Sheela) embodies a new type of femininity in Bollywood which, in turn, reflects a shift in the make-up of other elements of the Bollywood film formerly associated with the vamp figure (e.g., the decadence of the nightclub). Via Aman’s performance as Sheela, the heroine could now be said to occupy the space of the vamp which, in turn, undermined several older boundaries regarding the display of female sexuality (Mazumdar 90).

Indeed, to employ the current lexicon, one could point to Aman as the first “item girl” who also played the heroine (or, conversely, one of the first heroines who also doubled as an “item girl”). Via her performances in these films – *HRHK*, *Yaadon ki Baraat*, *RKM*, and *Qurbani* – one can also chart the evolving role of the “new woman” in Bollywood during the 1970s, when the construction of femininity was gradually liberated from the stifling binary model that previously regulated on-screen desire and forced actresses to either (entirely) embody the heroine or a woman comfortable in her own sexuality.

Whereas the repetition of the songs in *HRHK* and *RKM* illuminated Aman’s characters’ inability to fully sever ties with this binary model (and the fate it afforded those who transgressed), her repetition of “Aap jaisa koi” signals her decision to continue her career as a nightclub dancer (despite Rajesh’s injunction) and, in the process, to fulfill her own desires. Rather than functioning as mere renditions, Aman’s repeated songs reflect her agency in the unfolding stories and become a way for her, via playback, to express this agency. In this manner, Zeenat Aman has helped pave the way for more recent Indian
actresses such as Kareena Kapoor, Aishwarya Rai, and Katrina Kaif who have “blurred the identities of a heroine and a seductress…in recent years” (Amin 112). This legacy itself becomes a way of charting Aman’s inextricable link with the films of the 1970s and their ensuing reformulations of the Indian heroine. If Zeenat Aman, as Amitabh Bachchan has claimed, “epitomized” the “greater sociological changes that were beginning to emerge in [India]” during the 1970s, then her “instant acceptance by audiences,” as well as the continuing success of those actresses who, following in her footsteps, have successfully merged previously dichotomized identities, are testaments to both Aman’s constitution of a new feminine subjectivity and the enduring legacy of the 1970s, particularly in its revamping of female sexuality (qtd in Jhunjhunwala 20).

Notes

1. One can gauge Aman’s new form of femininity and sexuality in Bollywood by comparing her screen presence with those of some of her more well-known predecessors. For instance, one of the earliest female stars in Indian cinema, Nargis, whose performances were considered “authentic to a degree unprecedented in Indian cinema” during her time (1940s-50s), was “often presented as the femme fatale doomed to destruction by her beauty” (Rajadhyaksha and Willemen 161); at the same time, in a classic film such as Awara (1951), the role of the westernized proto-vamp is played not by Nargis, who is portrayed as “simple, sari-clad, and incorruptible,” but by another actress (Kasbekar 300). On the other hand Bollywood’s classic vamp, Helen, “provided the antithesis to the ideal [Indian] woman’s embodiment of chastity,” but was regulated to only playing the role of sexually promiscuous Other in Hindi films, never appearing as the heroine and usually being punished (for her sexual promiscuity) with death (Kasbekar 298). Meanwhile Mumtaz, “another firebrand actress who walked the seductive route” and was “already bridging the traditional-western divide” in the 1960s, turned down the role ultimately given to Aman in Hare Rama, Hare Krishna (1971), that of the “hippie-chick,” Janice, choosing instead to play the more traditional heroine/love interest, despite this role’s lesser importance (Amin 105, 110; Jhunjhunwala 13).

2. While the repeated song sequence is not unique to Aman’s films but, indeed, somewhat of a staple of popular Hindi cinema, such a repetition typically functions as either a recognition device, i.e., as a way of revealing the true identity of a character and/or the hidden relationship between two or more characters, or as a form of reprise, i.e., the iteration of an earlier theme conveyed in the first enactment of the song. Aman’s repeated songs, on the other hand, deviate from this standard model in some interesting ways, as we shall see below.
3. As a film scholar, I am particularly interested in coming to terms with the cinematic techniques employed in these films and how they, in turn, adhere to and deviate from a conventional politics of gazing in which, as Laura Mulvey has famously noted, the woman traditionally functions on two levels: “as erotic object for the characters within the screen story, and as erotic object for the spectator” (719). It is particularly with regard to what Mulvey calls the woman’s “to-be-looked-at-ness” in the conventionally coded context of (voyeuristic) cinema that I would like to (re)consider the representation of Zeenat Aman in some of these song sequences (719). Indeed, one of my aims in this paper is to deconstruct what at times has been the assumption of either absolute adherence to or deviation from these codes, particularly in the context of Indian cinema and particularly in the timeframe of the 1970s, a period which saw not only the advent of psychoanalytic film theory but also, in the Indian context, a new, at times unconventional form of popular cinema and, with it, the unconventional “new woman” of this cinema, e.g., Zeenat Aman.

4. The homonym of Janus is worth noting in relation to Aman’s dual identity/ transformation in this film as, in many ways, a part of her remains looking back at her older self (Jasbir), even as her other persona (Janice) insistently moves in the opposite direction. This “split” is a key factor shaping her identity, as we shall see below.

5. As Kasbekar notes, “The vamp provided the antithesis to the ideal woman’s embodiment of chastity, by her demonstrations of uncontrolled female lust and wantonness” (298). Aman’s roles in the 1970s, e.g., in RKM, can be seen as typifying what Kasbekar goes on to call “the new woman,” a modern, independent woman who was “willing to execute the erotic dance performances that used to be the raison d’être of the seductress” (301).

6. This transformation subsequently comes to an end via the second iteration of “Main naa bhoolunga,” which commences her rehabilitation.

7. The only other time that she engages in direct address in this first version is briefly near the very end of the song.

8. That is to say, the audience is interpellated much more into Amar’s point of view than we are in Rajesh’s the first time around.

9. Another way of putting this would be that Sheela’s displays of sexuality are not limited to certain spaces, e.g., those of the nightclub, but, rather, featured throughout the film.

10. Whereas in the previous two films it was Aman’s character who died at the end, in Qurbani it is one of the two men, Amar, who dies at the conclusion.

11. It is worth noting that in the recent film, Dum Maaro Dum (2011), the actress who appears in the remixed and recreated version of this song, Deepika Padukone, only appears in this song, i.e., she merely functions as an “item girl,” unlike Aman who both performed such a “risqué” song (in the original HRHK) and played a key role in the film story.

References


**Filmography**


