

**Semiotics of the Banjara Costume:
Considering its Representation in Film Industry**

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Introduction

The article explores the semiotics of the Banjara costume and its representation in film, as a marker of identity; it looks at how the Banjara costume is used in various films for visual pleasure, or eroticizing to create it as a commodity. The study focuses on the deployment of costume culture of the community in Indian films. A few films are taken here as case study for descriptive analysis. Banjara costume has its own history, culture, social norms and purpose in the particular tribal system. But the nature of its design and visual appeal has often given rise to its de-contextualized use in film, and this has aroused misgivings, particularly among the members of the Banjara community.



Image 1. The Costume of the Heroine in Banjaran

Generally, costume plays a very important role in enhancing characterization in the dramatic arts and in cinema. However, its influence is not restricted only to the screen, that is, it not only enhances the character in a film but it also influences and impacts the social, political

and cultural sphere, and in the psychological life of a person. As film is a glamorous entity and dream world for entertainment lovers, it searches for new things, concepts, content and creativity which will be embraced by its audience. In order to enrich and entertain, the film industry and cultural agents mobilize different cultural motifs and elements to use in creating cultural commodities for sale in the psycho-fancy consumerist marketplace.



Image 2. The Costume of the Heroine in Banjaran

Film and Costume

Film costume is one of the important elements that introduces the characters to the audience and affects them. The categorization in terms of position and social hierarchy, the very basic aspects of gender identity, age and period of the character is deciphered through their costume. According to Louis Giannetti, (2001) “costume is an unusual form of dress, which provides stylized image visually with colours, textures, material substance, and movements based on historical, cultural, and social significance” (p.324,325). Thus we can understand that costume can speak of the characters without any formal language; psychologically, socially and culturally, costume has its own sign and symbol system and through that, it reaches the audience. In order to match with other elements of mise-en scene, the light, texture, colour, style shape of film, costume is particularly used; it is also chosen to enhance the overall mood of the movie and the viewing experience of the audience. The importance of



film costume in coordination with other mise-en-scene elements is to help audience appreciate the film's creativity. Lighting, setting, and costume have tight, inseparable relationship with each other. All these elements project the visual effect on screen and are indispensable in the making of the whole film style. Lighting plays a key role in changing hues, mood, and creating an aesthetic field. Film costume assists in emphasizing the human figurines from its environment and depicts the characters.

Gender and Film

Shakuntala Banaji (2013) in her article titled "Slippery Subjects: Gender, Meaning and the Bollywood Audience", studies the representation of women in Hindi films focusing on how "quite often male viewers of the genre, who are thought to be predominantly as the audience identify with a limited number of sexist and heterosexist discursive positions which are mapped out for them by the film" (493). For her discursive positions are not simply part of units of communication but structures of feeling and thinking expressed through visual and other language which order experience and inflect behaviour and are assumed to be fairly homogenous across individual films and even across entire genres. She says "A significant strand of broadly feminist writing is theoretically wedded to the belief that the media purvey stereotypical sex roles which implicitly become part of viewers' own gender identities. In such accounts, the effects of media stereotypes on human identity are often immediate, monolithic, and almost unbounded" (501). So we see here that viewers do not passively respond to what is on the screen, but actively construct meaning as well as their own identities from what they see on the screen. If what is presented to them on the screen affords visual pleasure at the time of watching, the overall attitude of how women are to be considered as sexual objects, or as commodities for gratification gets reinforced by the way the images are presented to them on the screen. It also becomes a way of constituting their own masculinity vis-à-vis the images that are presented on the screen. As we will see below, this way of viewing has serious implications for how Banjaras, and particularly Banjara women are viewed by society in general.



Image 3. The Costume of the Heroine in Banjara



Image 4. Costume of the Hero in Khal Nayak



Image 5. Costume of the heroine in Khal Nayak



Image 6. The mise-en-scene in Khal Nayak

Banjara Costume in Films

Banjara costume has got a very visible presence in film and media space. The use of Banjara culture, life and visual look-alikes, and costume has been evidenced from 1970's in Indian films. There are movies, which have been made on the life of Banjaras and there are some movies, which used the Banjara culture, costume in some of the scenes only. Other movies use the Banjara costume only in some song sequences to add some visual aesthetic and to create erotic situation either denotatively or connotatively.



Image 7. The costume of the heroine and of the dancers in the choreographed dance sequence in Khal Nayak

The Banjara community is spread throughout the Indian sub-continent. In Indian States they have clans and sub-clans with different names but the name Banjara is commonly used for all the groups. Accordingly, their costume also has a common look, but within the clan and region they have some minor differences in terms of using colours and ornaments. Here what I mean to say is that the presence of Banjara costume in the different language films has some differences and also some parity. Below, I give an overview of four films that deploy the Banjara costume culture. The reasons for selecting these films are how they reference the Banjaras and their social and cultural life in the story, and how they have evoked controversy in terms of usage of their costume, which created debate in media and other platforms. The films chosen for discussion are: *Banjaran* (1991, Hindi), *Khal Nayak* (1993, Hindi (Villain), *Rudaali* (1993, Hindi, Female Weeper), *Kamli* (2006, Telugu).



Image 8. The Khal Nayak heroine's costume in the foreground



Image 9. The costume of the heroine in Rudali

Discussion

The films provide us with primary information on the usage of cultural codes for creating visual pleasure. Through the construction of denotative meaning the films help to engage the audience, particularly by their aesthetic visual appeal. Connotative meaning creation is a by-product of denotation through which it provides psychological satisfaction. With reference to the film *Banjaran* as the title of the film suggests, the story of the film is woven around the Banjara but the traditional costume and culture that are used to portray as the Banjara in this film, is mainly through the supporting characters. The main character's (heroine) costume has been designed only to be a little evocative in look of the Banjaras. The fabric of the costume seems silky and light weight in nature. By showing the heroine's costume in light and bright colour she has been elevated from her surrounding characters and props. Symbolically she has been created as a 'commodity' by using cultural code of the Banjara. As the Banjara costume in general contains heavy cloth with dark warm colours and heavily decorated with mirror chips and colourful embroidery work, it looks more traditional than glamorous.



Image 10.a The costume of the hero and heroine in Rudaali

The title of the film indicates that *Khal Nayak* is supposed to be a villain but, he is ultimately the hero of this film. In the title song, the hero's mistress performs erotic dance in a fantasy



Image 10.b. The costume of the hero and heroine in Rudaali



Image 11. The costume of the heroine and of the supporting character in Kamli



Image 12. The Kamli heroine's transformed costume

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kind of world; the elements used to create the characters, costume, prop, lighting and setting are based on western style of erotic paintings. It is a good example of portraying women's body in the song sequence as an erotic visual spectacle, where the woman's body is tantalizingly offered for the view and consumption of the spectator. In the sequence of the song 'Choli-Ke-Piche-Kya Hai' the traditional look of the Banjara costume is used to give an exotic and erotic appearance to the characters in general and the female character in particular. The Banjara costume in the song shows the changes and manipulation of the costume in creating different meanings. For example, the heroine (Madhuri Dixit) draws the spectator's attention to the exhibited body of the heroine, through hand gestures and facial expressions which indicate to the viewer where and what to see. Another example from the same dance scene shows the heroine's back and front portion of the body without the covering veil. In the Banjara tradition though the blouse does not cover the back and below the shoulder, those portions are covered by the veil. Denotatively the Banjara costume and musicians enriched the scenes, but in connotation their culture has been used virtually as a commodity; the 'bodies' are given the look of the Banjaran for enhancing the fame and glamour of the actresses in the film.

Both the songs of the film 'Naayak...nahee, khal nayak...hai...tum' (you are not a hero..you are the villain) title song, and the most glamorous and much-debated song 'Choli-ke-piche-kya-hai' have been made as a specific valuable visual 'commodity' to sell the film in the market, by using the ethnic cultural elements, like colourful Banjara costume and the erotic fantasy painting elements of Boris which are used in costume and in set design. Renowned film actresses wore the costume denotative of a particular culture, and displayed it on their bodies. The visual elements and the overall mise-en-scene of the song scene were created to attract, evoke and offer a warm look and feel. In this film (*Khal Nayak*) the costume code of the hero (Sanjay Dutt) also changes, to portray him as somewhat different from the rest, giving him a Gypsy kind of look and the heroine's costume elements are matched as that of the Banjaran.

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Through the film *Rudaali*, a particular community's social, traditional and cultural life is painted beautifully on the canvas of the moving image. The story, visualization of the elements in it and the usage of the language of the community supported the film. Throughout the film, two elements go hand in hand: one is visual treatment of the shots and scenes, and the other element is the story of *Rudaali*, as it creates emotional empathy for the viewers. The element that adds beauty and aesthetic richness in the film is the traditional costume of the Banjara, and the way the film has been constructed as a piece of art. Throughout the film, Banjara costume is shown in contrast to other people's costume which plays a major role in 'visual communication' of the subject and its concern. The colourful costume and culture of the marginalized community has been taken as a text for 'cultural production' and treated as a 'commodity' that can be circulated out of its social and other contextual moorings. Even while it is a story of hardship, the visual spectacle sublimates and satisfies our senses, so that what remains with us is a rich overwhelming visual sensory experience.

Through the film *Kamli*, the director wants to convey the message to the community members of the Banjara that they too are stakeholders of the society, particularly the kinds of rapid transformation that we are seeing today in the form of urbanization. It also depicts the fast eroding tradition and costume culture of the Banjara. The reasons for this seem to be poverty, lack of interest in age old traditional costume as it is not convenient in the new workplaces of the Banjaras. Through the heroine's character in *Kamli*, the film tries to glamorize the visual appearance of the film. E.g. apart from the heroine none of the Banjara women characters are given importance in terms of costume and culture. Instead, *Kamli* is highlighted as the icon of costume culture of the Banjara women with its rich embroidery and colour value for cultural content producers and consumers. Nevertheless, the film denotes the problems faced by the Banjara women at workplaces, shops from the outsiders and sometimes from within the community, including an alcoholic husband. Nandita Das as Banjara woman (*Kamli*) in traditional Banjara costume evokes sympathy. But at the connotative level, what gained prominence was the 'cultural commodity' that was created

through Kamli's character, through the colourful costume that added beauty to the body of Nandita Das. Though issues of rural people migrating to urban areas, desire for male child, selling of girl child, foeticide, alcoholism, sexual harassment and male domination etc. exist throughout all communities and regions, the film focuses on the Banjaras. It is a good attempt that the film takes up social issues and brings it to public, but, without 'Nandita Das' as 'Kamli' and her attire of Banjara women, the film perhaps wouldn't have attracted such attention.



Implications for the Banjara Community

The present article is an attempt to understand the implications of what is taking place in the Banjara community as the traditional costume design is becoming widely spread and circulated in the market as a commodity product. On the other side, it is their old traditional way of attire that has value for its artistic construction and traditional skills involved in it. But, wearing those old-fashioned dresses in the present context is making the new generation feel like strangers in front of other community people, and naturally there is a confusion arising among the younger community members. At the same time, the very presence of the Banjara costume in film and fashion is compelling them to see themselves in new light.

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Hence this study is to understand the conditions and complexities that are aroused in the community. How do the elderly people respond to these new trends and how does the younger generation imitate what they see on screen and in the world of fashion as they struggle for their identity in the modern sphere?

Apart from the Banjara community, other communities, societies and fields are also, undergoing changes due to modernisation and globalisation process. The changes are indicative of how the Banjara costume culture has come under the lenses of cultural industry. This ethnic community because of their unique costume style and culture has been recognised as one of the sources for cultural production. So, being a commodity product source, the Banjara costume has been moving from local to national and to international consumer space. At the same time, the effects of globalization have made them to realise and restructure their costume culture in order to keep their identity and survive with respect and dignity in the mainstream society. Therefore, these issues which are discussed above are researched, synthesized, organised, and arranged to throw light on the community people of the Banjaras and other communities who have remained on the margins of academic discourse. The Banjaras is one case study to trace the larger process. My attempt is to provide knowledge and understanding about the Banjara and their costume culture to the outer world. In turn, the Banjaras will also understand what is happening to their costume culture and learn to respond to those changes taking place within the community and in other mainstream society members.

Conclusion

Costume generally is an area of great interest to humankind, in the virtual world of film and in the glamour world of fashion, but its relation to the changing cultural sphere and its significance to the Indian Banjaras generally, and the Banjara women in particular, is perhaps the least talked about by researchers and scholars. Costume that is often associated with a particular community invariably gets linked to tradition and morality. The dynamism in relation to its expression particularly in the form of the dress-life of Banjara youth has not been systematically studied. Particularly Banjara women's costume is widely visible in films



and fashion industry but in real life, that too among the members of the community, it has been eroding drastically. The presence of the Banjara costume in culture industry has an angle of cultural commodification; it plays the role of catalyst to affiliate Banjaras with their costume culture and becomes a rallying point or marker of identity in political associations. Moral codes in the community are based on traditional and culturally acceptable factors regarding what is decent or indecent in their social domain. The present study attempted to assess the significance of traditional systems regarding clothing and adornment of the Banjaras, and its deployment in the glamorous world of films. It looked at the way the Banjara costume has moved beyond the boundaries of the community into the wider socio-cultural realm, as a starting point in order to understand how this kind of appropriation is impacting the Banjara community.

At the end, we can say that tremendous changes have occurred in the historical trends of clothing and fashion among Banjaras in general over the centuries and Banjara youth in particular in recent times. The changes are coming about through the a-contextual deployment of Banjara costume in cinema and in fashion industry. While the Banjara costume in cinema offers the scope of turning a scene into a visual spectacle, it is also at the same time working to trivialize, eroticize and sexualize the Banjara women. In fashion industry, many international players today are interested in Banjara costume, and have employed the traditional costume-makers from among the Banjara community. Even as Banjara costume is becoming visible in these high-worlds of film and fashion, they are largely disappearing from the community, even as the community is adapting itself to new lifestyle and modes of living. The costume in this scenario only serves an empty symbolic function.

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Filmography

Kamli (Telugu)-2006 dir. K.N.T. Sastry

Banjaran (Hindi)- 1991 dir. Harmesh Malhotra

Khal Nayak (Hindi)- 1993 dir. Subhash Ghai

Rudaali (Hindi)-1993 dir. Kalpana Lajmi

Note: I have taken the accompanying film images from the Youtube film clips in print screen format. Since the Youtube media content is considered as an open source, I have not taken any personal permission from the concerned. However I extend my sincere thanks and acknowledgments to them for the material used in this article.

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