

“LA LA LA AMERICA”: A MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF SELECT SONG IN THE HOLLYWOOD MUSICAL *WEST SIDE STORY* (1961)

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ABSTRACT

Though the Hollywood Film Musical is conventionally centred on a heterosexual couple with antithetical attributes and attitudes, they are very often surrounded by supporting actors who join the singing and dancing almost spontaneously. Group singing and dancing had been a structural requirement in the case of backstage musicals that flourished in profusion in the genre's infancy. This article examines a group song from a popular Hollywood Film Musical – *West Side Story* (1961) – to analyse how group songs impinge on the society's dominant ideologies of the times in which they were made. Most of these group songs in conventional Hollywood Musicals are not performed with any overt agitational, mobilization, or political intent in the diegesis, but even then, on the surface level, they seem to challenge the social conventions vis-à-vis class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The article explores how the song “*America*” repudiates or reinforces stereotypes and stimulates a fresh debate on the social commitment of an artistic medium, through multiple modes of filmic communication.

Keywords: Hollywood Film Musical, Multimodality, Diegetic Song, Stereotype, Dominant Ideology

1. INTRODUCTION

Singing is believed to have originated as idiosyncratic expressions of the singer's innate gaiety much ahead of the social need for communicating thoughts. Though the Hollywood Musical is conventionally centred on a heterosexual couple with antithetical attributes and attitudes, they are very often surrounded by supporting actors who join the singing and dancing almost spontaneously. This significant involvement of the community articulates in [Grant \(2012\)](#) view “the genre's typical social thrust” and the narrative space expands to expose a larger social, cultural context (p.44). Group singing and dancing had been a structural requirement in the case of backstage musicals that flourished in profusion in the genre's infancy like *The Broadway Melody* (1929), *Forty Second Street* (1933), and

The Great Ziegfeld (1936). Concomitant with the inception of the other sub-genres like the folk musical, the fairy tale musical, and the rock musical in subsequent decades, group performance became enunciated as a conventional generic ingredient deployed to express a feeling of communal solidarity by their shared participation. In her insightful monograph on the Hollywood Musical, Jane Feuer (1993) cites examples from Arthur Freed's Musicals and postulates that when a large group spontaneously involves in the singing-dancing enterprise, the Musical acquires a folk syntax having been "produced and consumed by the same integrated community" (p.3). Dyer (2002) on a discrete note has observed that the community's collective involvement in Musicals, along with the abundance, energy, intensity, and transparency they offer, necessarily gives rise to utopian sensibilities in the spectators, which according to him is the ideological function of the genre (pp.19 -35). In addition to such artistic and aesthetic functions, group songs in Hollywood Musicals can also mediate certain subtle socio- cultural, existential, and philosophical messages through the tripartite of images, words, and musical styles.

This article examines a group song from a popular Hollywood Film Musical – *West Side Story* (1961) – to analyse how group songs impinge on the society's dominant ideologies of the times in which they were made. Most of these group songs in conventional Hollywood Musicals are not performed with any overt agitational, mobilization, or political intent in the diegesis, but even then, on the surface level, they seem to challenge the social conventions vis-à-vis class, gender, race, and ethnicity. The article explores how the song "America" repudiates or reinforces stereotypes and stimulates a fresh debate on the social commitment of an artistic medium, through multiple modes of filmic communication.

West Side Story, the second highest-grossing film of 1961, was brought to the big screen by director Robert Wise and choreographer Jerome Robbins following its stupendous success as a stage Musical in Broadway and across the globe in 1957. The Musical was adapted from the Shakespearean tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* at a period when Puerto Rican and Latino migration, racial discrimination, immigrant intolerance and violence were rampant in President Eisenhower's America. Set in the 1950s Manhattan, the theme of street gang fights between the brown skinned immigrant Puerto Ricans who call themselves 'Sharks' and the fair skinned Polish Americans named 'Jets,' who were deprived of a prominent profile in the social catalogue, is featured unconventionally by Wise. The choreographed fights and montagic dance sequences set a new trend in editing in Hollywood. The star-crossed love between the American Tony and the immigrant Maria infuriates both the factions and results in a pre- arranged rumble scene which turns fatal for one person from each side. Tony himself is killed by the vengeful Puerto Rican Chino in retaliation and the film ends with Maria's famed accusation at both the gangs: "All of you, you all killed him . . . not with bullets and guns, but with hate." The romance between Puerto Ricans Bernardo (Maria's brother) and Anita (Maria's confidante) forms the backdrop for unravelling the social issue of immigrant life in America and their song "America" challenges the concepts of both integration and discrimination of Puerto Ricans in America. George Chakiris who donned the role of Bernardo and Rita Moreno who excelled as Anita bagged the Best Supporting Actor and the Best Supporting Actress Awards respectively at the Oscars in 1961, while the Musical won eight other Oscars including the Best Picture, the Best Director, and the Best Score Awards.

2. METHODOLOGY

Multimodality is a technique of analysis rather than a theory. The concept is broadly based on the notions of 'sign', 'signifier' and 'signified' which were simultaneously formulated by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the American philosopher Charles Peirce and termed 'Semiology' and 'Semiotics' respectively. While the former focussed on the arbitrary and substitutive nature of language in different linguistic situations, the latter suggested the existence of 'iconic', 'symbolic' and 'indexical' categories of signs in different social contexts. Taking cues from the linguistic models suggested by Saussure, Peirce and Halliday, the concept of sign system was applied to several disciplines which led to the emergence of Social Semiotics, Cultural Semiotics, Musical Semiotics, Visual Semiotics and so on. Even a thought was considered a sign and every form of communication came to be looked upon as a reaffirmation of the sign system. In general, the wave of ideas initiated by Saussure and Peirce led the thinking world to discard the concept of 'monomodality' or 'unimodality' and paved way for a multimodal approach in all disciplines of communication as varied as music, social behaviour, films, advertisements, and literary texts. [Bauldry and Thibault \(2010\)](#), the early practitioners of Multimodal approach call it a "multipurpose toolkit" which "invites us to reassess many older assumptions and prejudices" and practices and at the same time, "opens up new fields of enquiry and understanding" (p.xv).

Multimodality recognises that communication happens through 'modes' defined by [Jewitt \(2009\)](#) as "a set of resources organised to realise meanings" (p.21). It is the cultural shaping of a material in order to carry meanings, developed in the course of social interaction of people and which is easily conveyed to and understood by them. Multimodality asserts equality among the various modes. The superiority of the 'spectacle' over the 'aural' in films or of description over graphics in textbooks has been questioned by practitioners of multimodal enquiry like [Jewitt \(2009\)](#) in whose words "language is ...only ever one mode nestled among a multimodal ensemble of modes" (p.15). [Chion \(1994\)](#) speaks of a specific perceptual mode of reception called *audio-vision* in films and similar media which address the eye and ear simultaneously and where the effect on the two remains inseparable. In a multimodal form of social media like film, the formal elements like setting, costumes, actors, lighting, music, and cinematography form the semiotic modes which synthesize to unravel the deeper, social message in the filmmaker's mind. The five channels of filmic communication suggested by [Metz \(1974\)](#) could also be thought of as 'modes' of expression and the exclusive systems within each mode to signify meanings, like the rising and falling notes in music or the play between light and shadow in the image, as 'signs' or meaning potential. [Altman \(1987\)](#) calls such semiotic resources as the semantic building blocks and the social message or outcome as the syntactic element in the communication process.

2.1. OBSERVATIONS

After cautioning Maria against having anything to do with Tony and sending her to bed, Bernardo and his lover Anita proceed upstairs to the rooftop which is termed 'TECHO' as indicated on a scribbling on the wall. Their Puerto Rican friends have already gathered there, making good use of the concealment upstairs to cuddle up to their loved ones. As the altercation between Bernardo and Anita on Maria's freedom to choose her lover gets ignited, the women hook up with one another to express their feelings about the new land uninhibitedly and everyone watches as Anita effortlessly advances from speech to song and from walk to dance. The men

and the women enter into a musical dialectic on the merits and demerits of life in America supplemented by contrasting dance styles which is consummated with a climactic couple dance that demonstrates the replacement of antagonism with a romantic entente.

The image: As Anita begins the song remembering her homeland Puerto Rico, her eyes and voice mockingly resonate with patriotic fervour and pride, which soon turns haughty expressing disrespect and disdain for the ugly land and its nasty people. Waving her arms around, she makes a dramatic enactment of how they are always troubled by hurricanes and are always steaming to pay back the money they owe, and she scornfully thrusts out her hips in rhythm to the music hinting at the people there who unconcernedly and continuously engage in activities that increase the land's population. Her friends stand behind her in twos and threes, enjoying her take on the hapless Puerto Ricans. Anita's unswerving stare continues at Bernardo as she expresses her affection for Manhattan, pointing firmly to the floor where they stand. Reaching the end of the song's intro, the pace and tone of the song becomes intense, and the timbre of her voice becomes harder in conjunction with her explicit visual reference to the act of copulation. She refers to the Puerto Rican folk dances by bending back her body, lifting the rich folds of her skirt, and hauling out one leg, extending an erotic invite to her beau, and titillating the lustful young natives around her. This rhythm is caught by the others; the women charge up the song by clapping their hands, followed by stichomythic singing as the men and women team up on opposite sides. The camera initially concurs with the men to view the women from their side, turning the singing-dancing women into a spectacle. Anita and her intriguing coterie do not look into the camera; instead, their gaze is fixed on the men positioned beside the camera, who apparently enjoy the show and taunt them to spice up the confrontation.

In the following sequence, Anita and three other women sing three lines of the first verse one after the other animatedly and vigorously which is logically contended by Bernardo in the fourth line, which he sings facing his own clan and not the women. Stichomythia continues between Anita and Bernardo and between Rosalio and Chino in which the women argue vehemently in favour of America and are mocked by the men. In the first three lines of the next verse, the women continue to worship America with open arms, invoking splendid images of the American myth of success namely skyscrapers, Cadillacs, and industries, but they are confronted by Bernardo and his friends who underscore the pathetic plight of the immigrants with a symbolic tableau. In this reverse shot, one of the men jumps up and is synchronously held by Bernardo and his troop who crowd together, cramming within the camera frame to indicate the lack of adequate space for 'foreigners' in America. The cohort rearranges their positions once again with men and women on opposite sides and Anita and Bernardo moving to the centre, standing back-to-back, the former throwing about her arms to indicate the new space they could acquire in America and the latter hitting back hinting that door are more likely to be slammed on their faces. He moves closer to Anita and with a sniggering smile, suggests that she needs to get rid of her poor accent in order to get tenancy. As they proceed to the next choral reprise, Anita moves towards the men in a couple of bold strides glorifying America and is driven back by the rhythmic march of Bernardo and two others denouncing the new country in the second line of the chorus. Anita and four others stomp off towards the men singing the third line again praising the land but are hurtled back by the powerful legion of the men. The instrumental 'bridge' that follows the second chorus halts the lyrical progression, providing time and space for the two contesting groups to perform dances in piquant counterpoint to each other. Amidst loud cheering, Bernardo and two men in tow do a few brisk steps inspired

by the traditional Ballet, Jetè-ing, pirouetting, holding their arms high above and arching their feet and sometimes tap dancing and winding it up beckoning Anita. The latter on the other hand improvises on the Puerto Rican folkloric Bomba and Plena dances; in a joyful spirit, she lifts the multilayered skirt, thrusts out her legs one after the other at a great height facing the men, twirls and brings the raised skirt down forcefully and rhythmically first facing the women and then repeats it looking straight at the men who are enchanted by the performance.

This is followed by the non-lexical vocables “la la la America” uttering which two pairs of men enact the first steps of foxtrot performed in ballrooms. After two steps, the duo gives a feigned slap on one another’s face to coincide with the word “America.” The couple dance step is repeated following which each one pretends to kick the back of the other, again precisely at “America.” After each phrase, the two pairs turn towards the women gesturing with their hands that this is what America is all about. Once the ‘bridge’ is over, Anita and her friend Consuelo begin the next verse in praise of America, holding the edges of their skirts high and holding each other’s hands but their argument is countered by Bernardo and his friends on an equal footing. In the last verse, Bernardo walks close behind Anita, followed by his gang, attempting to convince her of the ‘grime’ and ‘crime’ in America but Anita guffaws his words away and adds the last line holding his arm, outwitting him, and deflating his fighting spirit. Anita and her four friends then shove the men towards one side and perform a sequence which incorporates traditional dances of Puerto Rico and Spain like Bomba and Fandango. Accompanied by a full non-diegetic orchestra, the cheerful women perform a lively, fast-paced dance, twirl their skirts displaying their long legs, shake their bellies, bend their bodies backward and hurl their legs, and pirouette synchronously much to the delight of the onlookers. Bernardo intervenes and stands facing the other men to begin the last verse stating his decision to go back to San Juan, which is ridiculed immediately by Anita. Bernardo signals to the men and removes his overcoat and they all chase away the women who were clapping hands in synchrony with the beat of the song and Anita who was also mimicking animal sounds in a derogatory way.

The men then perform a callisthenic dance sequence simulating the voyage to San Juan leaving the women behind who complement with appropriate actions, bidding them a tearful farewell. Towards the end, the tempo of the song increases, and the men clap hands and stomp their feet synchronously while the group of women join them twirling their skirts and clapping their hands and both the groups sway from side to side in a uniform manner. In a quick movement, the men turn towards the women forming a mirror image and continue to clap their hands. In the next beat, the men briskly traverse through the rows of women, evading them and the dancers emerge as two groups on either side of the floor. As the concluding orchestral ensemble repeats the ‘bridge’ music heard earlier with a heightened tempo, the two groups dance complementing each other, spinning, leaping, jumping, and clapping hands reminiscent of the traditional Spanish dances like Fandango and Jota Aragonesa. In the ultimate climactic phrase, the upward surge in the melody, tempo, intensity, and shrillness of the orchestral score is matched by the smooth integration of the two groups wherein the men and women throw out their arms forward and their heads backwards and run to each other forming a couple ready for the ballroom dance. The women do a quick spin and are hip lifted by the men in the last stroke as they all shout ‘Ola!’ Anita holds her left hand high, and the exultant women smile ahead at the camera as if they had been performing before an audience while the jubilant men ‘freeze’ gazing up at the women.

The words: Bernardo’s disgust at his sister’s new love interest in an American youth is countered by Anita’s plea that women are supposed to be free in America.

He dismisses her emotional rhetoric in support of the new country and jests "She's given up Puerto Rico and she is queer for Uncle Sam!" This leads to a stichomythic rendering of the song "America" by Anita, Bernardo, and their friends in groups and in solos, which [Paredes \(2014\)](#) terms the "playful call-and- undercutting response pattern" (p.344). In the intro of the song, Anita mockingly mentions Puerto Rico as her "heart's devotion," but immediately curses it saying "let it sink back in the ocean" with a harsh timbre in her voice that symbolises an intense feeling of rejection. In the short phrases that follow, she mentions the reason for her disdain: "always the hurricane blowing/ always the population growing." The natural calamities that frequently erode the land leave the people in perpetual penury, 'steaming' and suffering. Anita boldly states that she likes Manhattan much more than her native land and in her vibrant state, beckons her boyfriend with a sexual innuendo "Smoke on your pipe and put that in!" This is followed by the women's chorus echoing Anita's sentiments towards America for "everything's free in America" but Bernardo adds that it entails a small fee too. Anita is enchanted by the possibility of purchasing things on credit in America, but Bernardo quips that their foreign identity would have already caused a hike in the price in advance. Anita's friend Rosalio opines that she hopes to get a washing machine for herself but Chino wonders aloud whether she will have anything much in this new land to clean using it. In the chorus that follows, Anita, Rosalio, and Teresita visualise the images of progress and prosperity in America with the mention of skyscrapers, Cadillac cars, and industrial boom while Bernardo and his companions conclude the chorus reminding that in spite of all such economic markers in America, life for an immigrant is not all rosy; occasionally even twelve persons are forced to stay in a single room in that prosperous country. Anita and Bernardo sing alternate lines of the next verse, the former hopeful of buying a terrace apartment with lots of space while the latter reminds her of her immigrant status that will lead to doors being slammed on her face. Her native accent will only result in condescension and humiliation, in Bernardo's opinion. Anita and her friends feel that their future is bright and prospective in America whereas the men affirm that it is so only for the White citizens and for those who can fight for their survival in the new land. In the penultimate verse, Anita and Consuelo disclose how free they feel in America where one could live with pride and choose any vocation of one's choice. The men quickly retort that freedom and pride are the sole privilege of those who stay on their own side and stoop down to wait tables or polish shoes. Bernardo moves closer to Anita and her friends and tries to convince them that the organized crime and filth in the immigrant side of America make it a terrible time for them to stay there but Anita invalidates all his arguments by stating that he forgets that his sweetheart Anita is also in America. In the last verse, Bernardo articulates his desire to return to his home in San Juan, and Anita tells him that she could find him the right boat to reach there. She adds that contrary to his anticipation, there will not be any of his friends or kin there to cheer his homecoming because all his countrymen would have moved to America by then.

2.2. ANALYSIS

At a fundamental level, the song is sung by two groups within the Puerto Rican population in the film, who are divided by their gender as well as their attitudes, which forms the basic semantic principle that propels a Musical forward in [Altman \(1987\)](#) view. Interestingly, in the original stage version, this antiphonal singing is featured among an all women gathering, with Anita on one side and Rosalio and her friends on the other, criticizing her. This is one of the "most noticeably altered sections" in the Hollywood adaptation in [Woller \(2010\)](#) analysis as it occasions a

gendered debate between the male and the female Sharks on the theme of immigration and changes the dynamics of the song (p.68). In the song "America" in the film, the male and the female singers refer to several aspects of their socio-political existence in an unfriendly land, like money, shelter, work, consumerism, language, gender, nationalism, race, ethnicity and roots, abundance, and poverty. Anita and her coterie exude optimism and pride in having come to America where everything is OK and bright whereas Bernardo and his companions find the ways of the new land invidious and discriminatory towards Latinos. The women are enamoured by the practices of material consumption and instant gratification in America which they lacked back home in San Juan, and which prompt them to ignore the instances of unfair price hikes and ignominy. But the men are discouraged by the lack of suitable jobs, adequate space, and acceptance, which they had aspired for, on their way to America. If it is the imagined possibility of making free choices and of occupying terrace apartments that lures the women, the men are put off by the harsh reality of segregation and discrimination that they encounter in their daily life. This musical war of words occurs immediately after the first meeting between Tony and Maria and acts as a foil to their mutual exchange of love through the romantic duet "Tonight." Bernardo had already warned her to "stay on her own side" and had forbidden her from falling in love with an American. Anita's song "America" continues this same conflict between Bernardo and his starry-eyed sister Maria where race takes the centre stage and Anita endeavours to convince him that in America, everyone is free to think beyond racial and economic differences. Barry Grant (2012) has noted that the film's apparent deviation from a Utopian universe to one of real social conflicts, street gang warfare, and bloodshed made the reviewer Albert Johnson remark in 1962 that "the neorealist musical is about to be born" (p.100). *West Side Story* is hence one of the earliest attempts at undercutting the idyllic and unreal settings of a conventional Depression-era Film Musical and emphasising the realistic worldly conditions of injustices, by evoking the collective memories of the spectators and even threatening the stylistic nature of the Musical per se. In Paredes (2014) view this film exemplifies the Golden Age Musicals that are characterised by Wagnerian attempts to "integrate and unify their various structural elements [score, lyrics, book, and choreography] into one cohesive and total work" (p.340). *West Side Story*, that earned critical recognition, the second highest box office collection that year, and ten Oscars including the Best Picture award, set a new paradigm in the history of Film Musicals. Fantasy is replaced by folksiness and a sad story is integrated with a lot of delightful music and exuberant dance sequences which are inextricable from the narrative. It paved way for grander Musicals like *Oliver* (1968), *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), and *Les Miserables* (2012) which are deeply rooted in social tragedies.

2.3. SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS

On a syntactic level, the song can be analysed based on the rules of Folk Musicals enumerated by Altman (1987) in his major treatise on American Musicals.

- 1) "Song is no longer perceived as a cultural response mediated by society's institutions . . . but as an entirely natural response to one's own position in life"

(p.306). "America" results entirely as a natural response by Anita towards the racial frustration exhibited by her lover Bernardo that was triggered by Maria's developing inter-racial love interest. The unpremeditated song therefore becomes participatory and transforms the ritualistic genre of Film Musical to incorporate a

folk format that is inspired by a set of natural impulses which the entire community may share.

2) The normal routine activity slides into rhythmic singing and dancing by characters who are not performers by profession like Fred Astaire or Ginger Rogers. Anita, Bernardo, and their companions are not professional performers, but they have rhythm in their genetic makeup, and they glide into timed steps, digging deep into folk dances of ancient origin, which dominate their cultural heritage. Clapping their hands synchronically, the performers rely on the traditional Flamenco, Fandango, and Bomba dances to give expression to their natural feelings in a beautiful and noble manner, taking the audience along with them.

3) "One of the lovers represents the stability of the earth, the other energy and movement" (p.307). Anita and the rest of the women opt for the prosperity and infrastructure promised by America and do not wish to return to their native country whereas Bernardo and his friends are dissatisfied with the docile, shadow-like existence offered to the migrant population in America and they wish to live a more lively, socially visible life in their own land. Altman identifies three levels of stability that the heroines stand for in Folk Musicals: financial, physical, and emotional. Anita and her friends appear contented with the meagre income they earn as assistants at the tailoring shop whereas the men are unhappy doing menial jobs like polishing shoes and wish to expand their financial horizon. The former group is pleased to settle down in America once and forever to make their dreams come true, but the latter ones want to leave this land in search of greener pastures. In this return journey, the men are willing to leave their sweethearts behind jeopardising the romantic relationships and dismantling the emotional attachments with ease since they are in search of better comforts.

4) "The creation of a couple is parallel and simultaneous to the formation of a community" (p.309). Through this stichomythic song, the romance between Anita and Bernardo and the resultant merging of their contrasting attitudes become symbolic of the establishment of the Puerto Rican community in the busy city of Manhattan. The lovers are always accompanied by other members of this community and the conjoining of two hearts is reflected in the parallel resolution among the conflicting immigrants which can be witnessed in the community dance performance and its culmination. Anita's folkloric dance full of vivacity and impulsiveness along with the men's balletic strides bringing in formal discipline converge towards the end of the song wherein the dancers form enthusiastic couples establishing a climactic posture of unity subsuming their differences graphically.

5) The wandering male is tamed by the civilized female to lead to marriage that consecrates the community and authorizes the transformation of chaos into cosmos and of untamed land into civilization. It is the excess energy and verve of Anita's dance that set the wheels in motion and her idea of assimilation superimposes over Bernardo's grouse against discrimination. This leads to affirmation of their mutual romance and of the taming of Bernardo's wanderlust and the final hidden message is that he is going to stay back in America for his sweetheart.

2.4. LYRICAL ANALYSIS

The words uttered by Anita and her gang underscore the concept of assimilation into the cultural melange of the new land, a sort of remythification of the American melting pot, whereas the words sung by Bernardo and his group demythify the American dream, highlighting the experiences of segregation that the

aliens face in American society simply because they are not 'all white' and have got a terrible accent. While the women present the positive aspects of the "land of the free, home of the brave" worshipped in the American National Anthem, the men narrate instances of disgrace and disenchantment that urge them to return to their native land though imbued with poverty, natural calamities, and zero opportunities. The references to 'room,' 'doors,' 'new housing,' and 'terrace apartment' metonymically associate with the fight for urban space and territorialisation that the non-Americans had to constantly wage.

During the verbal duel just before "America," Bernard tries to explain how they had come to America, like children believing in a bright future that the new land promises, and Anita and Consuelo interrupt him, and complete his words condescendingly that they had come with their hearts and arms open. Towards the end of the song, Anita states, "You forget I'm in America" to foreground her conviction that it is in America that Bernardo will find favourable situations to run a secure family life with her. In the last line the suggestion that entire villages will have moved into America ascertains that Puerto Ricans have migrated en masse from their uninhabitable land in search of better prospects like every other migrant population. The lines also reinforce the American myth of family and community and the American dream of material success which the Film Musical has categorically exhorted during its heyday. Visually, the performance of the song in the confined space of the Techo reinforces the motif of 'entrapment' that permeates the atmosphere of the film from the beginning: abstract image of black vertical lines with varying background colours during the musical overture, the fenced prologue dance, and the ensuing scenes of gang rivalry on the narrow alleys. The exuberant choreography by Jerome Robbins also projects the idea of segregation as the men and women stay in separate groups and display distinctly different styles of dance, one traditional and the other modern. The men execute a graceful mix of Balletic steps to tease the women while the more intense, native Puerto Rican dances like Bomba and Plena, and the Spanish Flamenco are employed by Anita and her team to subvert their impoverished native experience and praise the new land of promises and dreams. As cited by [Paredes \(2014\)](#), "Anita sings of assimilation while dancing its undoing" (p.334). Nature supersedes culture here and she has no escape from the folkloric styles of dance ingrained within her through generations, however much she tries. Anita suggests the 'Thesis' of blending with the dominant culture through her pronounced dance styles and subtle sexual innuendos; Bernardo puts forth the 'Anti-theses of segregation with his Balletic enactment of being beaten up in Manhattan and returning to San Juan and in the final 'Synthesis,' the dancers visually bury their differences and embrace the fashionable ballroom dance with a climactic hip lift with great élan and solidarity to reach a thematic consensus. As noted by [Grant \(2012\)](#), "... the Puerto Ricans inflect their dancing with Flamenco steps, but also other dance styles to reflect at once their own identity and the American melting pot that the women invoke so positively in the song's lyrics" (p.106). The song also has a combination of unusual rhythms in fast pace that reminds of Spanish music on the one hand and Latin cross- rhythms on the other. It alternates between a compound 6/8 beat and a simple 3/4 beat, and the dancers move around in high tempo spreading excitement even among the audience. Anita's colourful dress with multiple layers of cloth that rise and fall in tune with her thrusts and turns makes her stand out among the group of Shark women on the rooftop and makes [Paredes \(2014\)](#) remark that she is "the character in the best dress executing the best dance moves" in the Musical (p.341). It is also striking that women who were mute workers in the tailoring shop muster courage and experience total liberty to sing at the top of their voices, dance to their heart's content, and express their innermost

feelings uninhibitedly in the 'Techo,' the rooftop, in the presence of the male counterparts. The 'Techo' doubles up as a 'Carnavalesque' space— an unofficial realm—for the young Puerto Ricans to dispense with every shred of pretension and self-restraint. The hegemonic patriarchal hierarchy is overturned during the brief rendezvous as the women under the artful leadership of Anita emerge from the side lines to render voice and bodily representation to their innermost thoughts on racial integration. Bernardo who had sharply forbidden his sister from finding her own voice abandons his racial and male chauvinisms to encourage Anita's freedom of expression. Like the unruly communication that happens in a marketplace among the motley crowd in a Bakhtinian carnivalesque scenario, there is no set pattern or norm for communication in the Techo and both the sexes are rendered on an equal footing. Moreover, grotesque imagery of body parts that defined carnivalesque is here typified by the images of copulation repeatedly manifested in the dance sequences. Such carnivalesque practices seen here inadvertently unsettle the ideology of male dominance but do not subvert the imperialist idea of assimilation. Instead, the stichomythic singing pattern, the upbeat Spanish rhythm, the visual blending of the two genders in the last shot, and the eclectic choreography emphasise the concept of assimilation and the song "America" proffers a musical melting pot in synchrony with the ethnic melting pot that America stands for. In [Hecht \(2011\)](#) view, the film endorses the need to abandon one's ethnic differences in order to achieve success in America. He affirms that "*West Side Story*, paradoxically given its dominant themes of opposing intolerance, is itself intolerant of clinging to one's ethnic identity in the face of assimilation," a revelation that is aptly acknowledged by Anita in the song "America" (p.31). In spite of the vicious criticisms levelled against the discriminatory approach to non-whites in America, the song is ultimately a paean to the American values of liberty and equality. The song also epitomises the consumerist culture by emphasising the country's material progress that lures citizens from every other nation to move towards New York and establish their own territories there.

2.5. CINEMATOGRAPHY

The mise-en-scene of the song undergoes a gradual transformation as the song progresses. At the beginning of the song, we see an overcrowded and closed frame with too many Puerto Rican men and women vying for space, symbolising the limited resources available to the immigrants in Puerto Rico and in the United States. During the song, the Puerto Ricans form groups, take sides, and dance and sing in pairs or in smaller groups. The mise-en-scene is slowly uncluttered with the sequential patterning of the dancing groups and the song ends with only five pairs of men and women seen in the closing high angled shot which frames them like a staged spectacle. Moreover, in the beginning, the Shark men and women remain fixed to a place, either sitting or standing, while only Anita keeps moving around, swaying, and circumambulating the Techo, epitomizing and spreading around a great deal of passion and verve. Eventually she charges up the others with her electric exuberance and the group and couple dances towards the end of the song are proof that she also 'assimilates' them to think positively about life in America. The systematic alignment of the dancing bodies in the mise-en-scene and its spatial expansion illustrate the themes of assimilation and development that Anita's lyrics categorically champion.

2.6. FUNCTIONAL ANALYSIS

In terms of its narrative function, the song becomes a welcome distraction for Bernardo from the racial frustration instigated by Maria and it also serves as pleasurable recreation for Anita that brings her closer to her beau. The men and women are weld together momentarily into an exaltation on the basis of heterosexual attraction clearly visualised by the dance sequence. Yet this heterosexual utopia is, as [Dyer \(2002\)](#) would say, “fully at ease with a woman taking centre stage,” as the song tilts towards a woman-centric expression of oomph and irrepressible energy (p.113). The co-ordination between the music, the choreography, the performer, the camera work, and the editing give the impression that the number fundamentally belongs to Anita. She moves around utilising every inch of the Techo space, not standing still even for a second, converting the private space of the Techo into a kind of ‘Soberao’ of the Bomba dance with dancers taking the centre and the spectators and musicians standing around the circular space. In [Sotomayor-Power \(2015\)](#) view, the creation of this space is ultimately “a claiming of territory,” “a simultaneous distancing from the “outside world,” and “a gathering of creative and communal energies” (p.709). Anita creates this folkloric space on the roof top locating a territory for the immigrants to express themselves freely, away from the ‘Others’ in the host country, garnering their creativity as well as communal unity through the contrapuntal song and traditional dance. Anita, named by [Woller \(2010\)](#) as the “Hispanic spitfire,” initiates the song to express her feelings about America freely, counter attacking Bernardo’s disgust and contempt with an equally powerful rhetoric (p.64). She leads the dance sequences, motivating the onlookers, both men and women, to turn into dancers and participate along with her in communicating to one another. The choreography foregrounds her and the camera tracks her movements even while Bernardo is presenting the argument. The forceful acts of throwing her raised skirt down and thrusting her head back and her leg forward repeatedly showcase Anita as a ‘sexual spectacle’ and a woman desirous of enchanting men, especially Bernardo. In [Dyer \(2002\)](#) words, “a woman is heterosexually desirable because she fiercely desires” and her exuberant dance steps exude her desire as well as desirability (p.112). Anita’s image as a sexual being does not downplay her as a transgressor for a male voyeur. Instead, the typical representation as a sensuous woman also seeks to subvert it by exuding tremendous strength of character during the song and in different narrative situations to follow.

3. CONCLUSION

The article has analysed the song “America” in the Hollywood Musical *West Side Story* from the perspective of multimodality. The visual and lyrical modes have been explored frame by frame and multiple meanings have been elicited, which throw light on the relevance and uniqueness of this song. Consequentially, “America” emerges as an amalgamation of male and female erotic energies, of belonging (to a new world order) and longing (to return to one’s roots), of personal space (on the rooftop) and lack of it (in the American society), of Ballet (aristocratic) and Flamenco (quotidian), of prosperity (in America) and poverty (in Puerto Rico), and of hope (embodied by Anita) and disappointment (embodied by Bernardo). It is Anita’s personal panache and zing that enlivens the participants of the soiree in both the Techo and the cinema hall and permeates the ambience of the Musical with the discourse of happiness and heterosexual harmony. While the song “America” portrays, in [Negrón-Muntaner \(2000\)](#) words, “an ambivalent picture of life in the United States, with all its oppression and promise,” it needs to be noted that the film

also triggered a volley of diatribes from native Puerto Ricans predominantly for stereotyping them and for reinforcing discrimination, geographically, politically, socially, and emotionally (p.93). In [Sanchez \(1994\)](#) observation, the film was extolled by the American audience more for its "political and ideological nucleus" that underpinned racial assimilation, than as a film that presented an alternative standpoint (p.59). Anita's supremacy in "America" reinforced the myth of immigration to the U.S. and in [Sanchez \(1994\)](#) view, the Latino who donned the role of Anita on screen, Rita Moreno, was awarded the Oscar in lieu of the characters despise for her autochthonous culture and for echoing the dominant ideology of total assimilation. Sanchez' and Negron's strictures have also dealt with racial stereotyping, casting, gendering, and music fusion in *West Side Story*, but they unequivocally admit "(t)here is no doubt that the song 'America' and its choreography constitute one of the most rhythmic, energetic, and vital hits in the history of musical comedy" [Sanchez \(1994\)](#) 60. The song is another rare occasion in the history of the Musical where a marginalized group becomes actively seen and heard above the white, capitalist, male perspective that dominates Hollywood; but in the end, it is the same dominant ideology that prevails.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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