



A Slap against Stereotypes: Gender Construction in *Thappad* (2020)

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Abstract: In recent years, the Indian film industry has produced numerous movies that tackle pressing gender issues, shedding light on women's independence, sexual assault, and empowerment. This research paper examines the portrayal of gender issues in the Indian film industry, focusing on the 2020 Bollywood film "Thappad," directed by Anubhav Sinha and starring Taapsee Pannu. Recent years have seen a surge in films that address pressing gender issues, highlighting themes of women's independence, sexual assault, and empowerment. Movies such as "Queen," "Pink," "Hidden Figures," "Bandit Queen," and "Begum Jaan" have depicted these themes through narratives that showcase women's struggles and triumphs. "Thappad" stands out for its poignant exploration of domestic abuse and gender dynamics. The film centers on a single slap that shatters the seemingly perfect life of the protagonist, Amrita, and delves into the broader ramifications of this act on her and the women around her. By presenting the experiences of characters from diverse backgrounds, "Thappad" exposes the pervasive nature of domestic violence and challenges societal norms that undermine women's independence and self-respect. This paper argues that the film's powerful message and nuanced portrayal contribute significantly to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in contemporary cinema.

Key Terms - Domestic violence, Dreams, Gender Dynamics, Female Empowerment, Freedom, Individuality.

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent times, many movies based on gender issues have been produced. These movies deal with a variety of issues such as women's independence (*Queen*), sexual assaults (*Pink*), and female empowerment (*Hidden Figures*). *Bandit Queen* and *Begum Jaan* are two such movies that address multiple issues, where the women's bodies tell stories of their own. In 2020, the movie *Thappad*, directed by Anubhav Sinha and starring Taapsee Pannu, was an acclaimed success in Bollywood before the start of the pandemic.

The trailer of *Thappad* is an interesting watch. It starts with a happy couple and shows the daily life of Amrita, played by Taapsee Pannu. Two minutes into this serene life of a loving couple, a slap (thappad) disrupts everything. The husband slaps the wife during a party. Following this, the trailer spirals down, showing most witnesses denying they saw anything and family members advising the girl to forget the incident. The iconic scene follows where Amrita plans to file for divorce, all for that one slap which her husband, Vikram, claims happened unconsciously.

II. Analysis

The movie *Thappad* revolves around the ramifications of that one night. The perfect facade of Amrita's life breaks down, juxtaposed with the lives of five other women—her mother, her mother-in-law, her maid, her brother's girlfriend, and her lawyer. These women have one thing in common: their lives are intertwined with the men who are their husbands and boyfriends, each harbouring egotistical notions. Among these characters, the role of Shivani, played by Dia Mirza, stands out and will be discussed later.

The movie opens with Amrita's soon-to-be sister-in-law, Swati, eating an orange candy while riding on a pavilion seat, with Amrita's brother Ankur visibly irritated. The scene shifts to Netra Jaisingh, the lawyer, enjoying her ride with an unnamed chef who reveals the triple life Netra leads. He questions who the real Netra is, and throughout the movie, he remains a likeable character who is named only at the very end. At the end of the drive, they stop to have an orange candy each. The next scene shows Amrita's parents having a heart-to-heart conversation, sharing an orange candy offered by the man to his wife. The following scene features Shivani, Amrita's neighbour, with her daughter, happily conversing while holding an orange candy, and the only scene where the male figure is absent. The final scene is of Sunita, Amrita's maid, sitting on the pavilion seat of her husband's cycle, eating her candy. She pours out her heart to her husband, who, clearly agitated, threatens to make her walk home. When she reaches home on foot, her husband tries to molest her.

The main character, Amrita, is the only one not shown having a candy, setting the movie's premise. The candy or ice cream represents fleeting moments of happiness. While eating it, one enjoys a blissful moment, but once it's over, reality returns. These characters show how they have been living in a bubble of make-believe happiness, which bursts when Amrita refuses to compromise after the slap. They start to realize how they are subjugated under the guise of marriage, losing their individuality, freedom, and dreams.

The women in this movie come from varied backgrounds—upper class, lower class, and working-class—showing that domestic abuse transcends class boundaries. Netra and Sunita represent working women who experience suppression, irrespective of their education. Swati, seen as a modern woman, also undergoes emotional anguish due to Ankur's actions. The men remain indifferent, portraying a belief in their right to dominate women. Vikram, who never apologizes to Amrita, embodies this attitude. Sunita's husband, who abuses her, asks, "*Kyun? Tanneemaranetanhiki license chahiyye?*" which translates to "Do I need a license to hit you?" This attitude reduces women to objects to be used and controlled by men.

The belief that economically independent women are not prone to domestic violence is debunked in this movie. Netra, a successful lawyer, experiences subtle domestic violence, caught between male egoism and family honour. The burden of upholding family honour typically falls on women.

Society's notion of female independence is flawed. Society/family wants women to be independent but doesn't provide the space needed for true independence. No society truly wants a woman to be completely independent without any dependency on men. This is evident in Vikram's attitude towards their neighbour, Shivani Fonseca, a single mother. Vikram mockingly remarks, "Did Shivani buy a new car? What kind of work does she do?" This reflects a common attitude in a male-dominated society. Shivani, capable of purchasing a new

vehicle (an SUV, seen as masculine), breaks stereotypes. Though her job is never mentioned, she is shown as successful and a wonderful mother who gives her daughter freedom with reasonable restrictions. Unlike other characters, Shivani enjoys a crisis-free life. She tells her daughter that her father never hit her, contrasting sharply with other women's experiences.

Vikram appears to be a perfect husband but is a typical dominating male who doesn't like to see his wife as independent and successful. He refuses to let Amrita learn to drive, but by the end of the movie, as the divorce progresses, we see Amrita driving on her own. This echoes Virginia Woolf's story of Judith Shakespeare, where Woolf states that a woman can never be free to follow her passion as long as she is tied to family duties. A woman, when young, is controlled by her father, when married by her husband, and when widowed by her son. Amrita's father, a progressive man, overlooks his wife's freedom while encouraging his daughter. Once out of the marriage, Amrita follows her passion for dancing, which her father supports but Vikram dismisses.

Marriage demands significant sacrifices from women. This is highlighted in the movie when Amrita's father tells her, "Your mother spent her life making others happy. Making Kachori for Vikram, Tehri for me, and Pasta for Karan. Mothers have no choice other than making others happy." This reflects the reality of many mothers who put themselves last.

Amrita's life takes a sudden turn when Vikram slaps her during a party. Despite being surrounded by family and friends, no one stands up for her, except for Swati, who is stopped by Amrita's mother to avoid clashes with Vikram's family. For Amrita, the slap wasn't just a physical assault but an encroachment on her self-respect. This one slap makes Amrita question her value and identity, reminding her of all her sacrifices.

Amrita decides to leave her husband to protect her self-respect. Vikram is more concerned about what people will say than about hurting his wife's emotions. He never apologizes to Amrita, focusing on family dignity instead. He says, "You know how bad I feel, you know what I'm going through. If you want to make this a big deal, then go." No one acknowledges Vikram's wrongdoing, and his lack of apology prevents Amrita from moving on. When Vikram discusses his lack of recognition at work, Amrita decides to leave a relationship where she isn't valued.

Amrita's actions prompt other characters to reassess their life choices. Her father, Sachin Sandhu, realizes he never truly asked if his wife, Sandhya, was happy. Due to Amrita's actions, Sandhya confronts Sachin, revealing her sacrifices. At the end of the movie, Sachin encourages Sandhya to pursue her passion for singing.

Ankur Sandhu represents a young male perspective, forcing Amrita to return to Vikram and stating that it's acceptable for a man to slap his wife. When Ankur tells Swati to leave the house, Sachin slaps him and questions if this is what he taught his son. Sachin becomes the sympathetic male supporting women.

Vikram sends a legal notice to Amrita, demanding she return to her marital home and threatening to involve the police. Amrita, from a middle-class family, fears court cases and police involvement. Vikram wants Amrita to fulfil her marital duties but doesn't do so himself. Amrita discusses the notice with Netra Jaisingh, an acclaimed lawyer.

Dialogue:

Netra Jaisingh: “Every relationship is flawed. So best mend it.” Amrita Sabharwal: “If you need to mend it, it means it's broken.” Netra Jaisingh: “So, just one slap then?”

Amrita Sabharwal: “Just a slap, but... he cannot slap me.”

The crux of the movie is this one slap. Amrita's repeated assertion, “he cannot slap me,” emphasizes that the action of slapping, whether by husband, father, or son, is humiliating and asserts dominance. Netra Jaisingh gains the confidence to divorce her chauvinistic husband, realizing that women are made weak by society.

The most striking change is seen in Sunita, the maid. Initially, she accepts domestic abuse as normal but decides to retaliate by the end. This change empowers her, making the movie impactful.

III. Conclusion

“Thappad” is a powerful exploration of domestic abuse and the societal norms that perpetuate the subjugation of women. The film effectively uses the motif of the orange candy to symbolize fleeting happiness, contrasting it with the harsh reality faced by the women in the story. Amrita's refusal to accept her husband's slap acts as a catalyst for change, not only for herself but also for the other women around her. Each character's journey reflects the varied experiences of women across different social strata, highlighting that domestic abuse transcends class boundaries.

The film dismantles the myth that economic independence shields women from domestic violence, as seen in Netra's and Sunita's stories. It critiques the societal and familial structures that limit true female independence, showing how deeply ingrained patriarchy affects women's lives. Vikram's character epitomizes male entitlement and the societal expectation for women to conform and sacrifice their happiness for family honour.

In conclusion, “Thappad” serves as a poignant call for introspection and societal change, urging viewers to question and challenge the norms that perpetuate injustices against women. Through Amrita's journey of reclaiming her identity and self-respect, the film delivers a hopeful message that women have the agency and strength to stand up against oppression. It emphasizes the fundamental importance of respect and equality in relationships, advocating for a society where no woman should endure violence or compromise her dignity. “Thappad” not only exposes the harsh realities of domestic abuse but also inspires a collective effort towards creating a more just and equitable world for all.

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