

‘Reclaiming Individuality’ Changing shade of womanhood in contemporary Hindi cinema: A select study of the Film *Thappaad* (2020)

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Abstract:

Womanhood is a journey that has evolved over a while by encompassing various roles, expectations, and challenges. Society’s perception of women and their role in society has been transformed throughout history. Sometimes society has accepted women’s hopes and desires, and many times it has been rejected what she felt. So in the game of inclusion and exclusion, the shades of womanhood have been changed and challenged dynamically by reflecting societal progress, rejecting stereotypes, and fighting for individuality, equality, and rights. This paper attempts to present the comprehensive picture of the diverse narrative of changing shades of womanhood in Hindi cinema through a case study of the film *Thappaad* (2020) and discusses how the normalization of marital abuse gets challenged in the film.

Keywords: womanhood, society, cinema, equality, stereotypes, marriage, abuse, violence identity and social taboo, etc.

Throughout history, women have faced various forms of exploitation, oppression, and subjugation and got limited opportunities for their growth physically, mentally, financially, socially and culturally, etc. At early ages, women were confined to domestic roles, and deprived of education, opportunities, and rights. But as society evolved, so did the role of woman change. Since the late 19th century, women are fighting for their rights, challenging social norms, and demanding equality. These struggles challenged the persisting shades of womanhood and laid the foundation for changing shades of womanhood by paving the way for significant transformations.

Today’s women embrace the diversity of experiences, perspectives, and identities. They explore a wide range of roles including homemaker, caregiver, entrepreneur and leader, etc. There is a growing recognition in society that women are not only a monolithic entity but a diverse tapestry of individuals with distinct ambitions, talents, and dreams. In recent years,

society has begun to celebrate the unique contributions and challenges faced by women from different cultures, ethnicity, and socio-economic backgrounds. The recognition and appreciation of this diversity make stronger the collective foundation of womanhood, encouraging a more inclusive and equitable society.

Hindi cinema has witnessed a noticeable shift in portraying the different shades of womanhood in recent times. Whereas traditional stereotypes and patriarchal norms have often influenced the representation of women in Indian films, there has been a clear change over the time with a greater emphasis on portraying women as strong, independent, and multi-dimensional characters. In earlier decades, women in Hindi cinema were mostly portrayed in conventional roles as dutiful daughters, virtuous wives, and sacrificing mothers. They were often depicted as timid and obedient, falling in line to societal expectations. Even female film artists were not given solo roles in the industry as recently Priyanka Chopra shares her experience in an interview, “When I did Fashion, people told me that female actors only do solo films like this at the end of their careers, when they want to win awards and because no male hero wants to work with them.”(Entertainment Desk)

In the late 20th century, there was a continuing shift towards more progressive portrayals of women. Films like *Mother India* (1957), *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972), *Mirch Masala* (1987), *Arth* (1982), *Mandi* (1983), *Damini* (1993), depicted women challenging societal norms, fighting for their rights, and exploring their individuality. In the 1970s and 1980s, Actresses like Shabana Azmi, Smita Patil, Deepti Naval and Rekha, challenged the traditional roles and took on characters that were more independent, strong-minded, and assertive. These films undertook social issues and gave voice to women's struggles and aspirations. In an interview Shabana Azmi says, “If we talk about the Hindi film industry, the portrayal of women in cinema has changed a great deal. Back in the 1960s, when you saw a film, it was all about *Main Chup Rahungi*. It was considered a virtue for a woman to remain silent. Today, that won't be ideal at the box office” (Rawal, *Hindustan Times*)

In recent years, there has been a great rise in women-centric cinema that focuses on female characters and their stories. Instead of treating women as ‘objects’ of desire, these films often deal with challenges and complexities of womanhood, try to break stereotypes, and celebrate women's identity. Actresses like Madhuri Dixit, Sridevi, Kajol, Karishma Kapoor, Taboo, Vidya Balan became known for their powerful performances in both commercial and art-house films. Films like *Astitva* (2000), *Chandni Baar* (2001), *Lajja* (2001), *Shakti the Power* (2002), *Marubhoomi* (2003), *Chameli* (2003), *Jago*(2004), *Dor* (2006) have explored themes of self-love, self-discovery, and women's rights. Hindi cinema has embraced different narratives that focus on women's experiences and challenges. It has started portraying women as strong, independent, and striving individuals. They are shown pursuing careers, making their own choices, and questioning traditional gender roles. Where the films like *Queen* (2014), *Piku*(2015), *Pink*(2016), *The Dirty Picture* (2011), and *Neerja* (2016) receive critical acclaim for their realistic and nuanced portrayals of subjects like women's strength, resilience, and determination, breaking away from traditional male-dominated storylines.. Films like *English Vinglish* (2012) and *Tumhari Sulu* (2017) showcase

the journey of women reclaiming their identity and finding their voice. Hindi cinema has also addressed the issue like domestic violence, sexual harassment, and female sexuality in films like *Mardaani* (2014), *Parched* (2015), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2017), and *Dolly Kitty Aur Woh Chamakte Sitare* (2019) by shedding light on these topics and encouraging conversations around them. As Neena Gupta in interview says:

Fabulous or flawed, police officer or thief, the women on our screen have grown from heroines and love interests to so much more. We see determined, driven characters like Kasturi Dogra in *Aranyak. The Fame Game* showed us the story of superstar and a mother who fought all odds to do what was best for her family. Purva from *Yeh Kaali Kaali Ankhein* showed us darkness and desire like never before. Bharti in *Geeli Pucchi* defied years of conditioning by standing up for herself. The *Bombay Begums* and *Bulbbuls* of the world gave us the strength to stand up in the face of adversity. Every single story has been real, relatable, and rousing. Etimes.in)

Moreover, the increasing presence of women filmmakers, writers, and producers in the Indian film industry has led to a broader representation of women's stories and perspectives in cinema, contributing to a more nuanced portrayal of women. The emergence of female directors and producers has also played a vital role in determining the changing shades of womanhood in Hindi cinema. Filmmakers like Pooja Bhatt, Deepa Mehta, Meghna Gulzar, Zoya Akhtar, Gauri Shinde, Reema Kagti, Nandita Das, Ashwiny Iyer Tiwari, and Alankrita Shrivastava have brought unique perspectives to their storytelling, offering a fresh take on women's experiences.

It is important to mention that the changing shades of womanhood in cinema are not limited to Hindi cinema alone but regional film industries, like Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam, and Bengali cinema, have also played a noteworthy role in portraying diverse and empowering female characters in films like *22 Female Kottayam*(2012), *Rani Padmini*(2015), *Magalir Mattum*(2017), *Uyare*(2019), *Biriyaani*(2020), and *Ponmagal Vandhal*(2020), etc. have pushed boundaries and showcased the talent and potential of women in regional cinema.

Reclaiming individuality: *Thappaad* (2020) challenges the normalisation of abuse within marital relationships

In an era where gender equality and the dismantling of societal norms have become a center for discussion, the film *Thappaad* (2020) emerges as a thought-provoking cinematic text. It is a Hindi language film directed by Anubhav Sinha, released in 2020, and starring Taapsee Pannu in the lead role. The film challenges the intuition of marriage which is regarded as a sacred institution; symbolize love, represents commitment and companionship. But in order to maintain this institution, the notion of patience and sacrifice has been propagated particularly for women. *Thappaad* challenges this social norms and gender expectations. It offers an emotional expression of the deeply rooted biases and stereotypes that are stuck within our society. The story revolves around the protagonist Amrita and her perfect life as a devoted housewife and loyal partner to her husband, Vikram. But, everything

begins to shatter when Vikram slaps Amrita in a fit of anger during a party in front of their guests. This incident touched Amrita to the core and forces her to question her own self-worth and the dynamics of marital relationship. At first she tries to dismiss the incident by believing it to be a one-time mistake. But, as she reflects on the incident and does not seek any apology and counsel from her husband and family members, Amrita begins to realize the severity of what happened and starts questioning the societal acceptance of such behaviour.

Amrita decides to take stand for herself and demands an apology from Vikram. However, her decision to seek an apology from her husband challenges the social norms of women's place in a marriage and leads to confrontation from her own family and society. "All this while, she is constantly told by family members, "Bas itni si baat?" which unsurprisingly introduces us to the idea of how normal it is for a man to hit his wife" (Dharni). Amrita faces criticism, judgment, and attempts to suppress her voice, but she remains firm in her pursuit of dignity and self-respect. Throughout the film, 'thappad(slap)' addresses the deep-rooted patriarchal mindset established in Indian society, where a single slap is often considered minor and dismissed as an ordinary incident within a marriage. The narrative delves into the emotional and psychological impact of such incidents on the victim, highlighting the importance of consent, equality, and respect within a relationship. As Amrita takes her fight to the court; the film showcases the legal battle and its wider implications on society by throwing light on the various aspects of a woman's life that are often surpassed by societal expectations, providing a poignant commentary on gender roles, societal pressure, and the need for change. *Thappad* serves as a wake-up call and throws a light on the normalisation of abuse within marital relationships and the often-dismissive attitudes towards such incidents. Vikram's friend Sobodh advises that it is normal to beat your wife as it is called an expression of love.

Sobodh: Matlab koi case banta hai kya Divorce ka? When you are truly in love... I mean truly in love... to thodi bahut maar peet toh expressions...Expression of love hi Sir. Ek Thappad kya mara, divorce chahiye. (Does she have a real case for divorce? When you are truly in love... I mean truly in love...a little physical aggression is an expression of love. He slapped her one and she wants a divorce)
(*Thappad*, 1:20:30- 1:20:39)

By giving voice to the experiences of Amrita and other female characters, the film deals with the social taboo surrounding violence against women and encourages society to break the silence. It boldly challenges the age-old belief of shedding light on the ill-treatment endured by women within marriages.

One of the social perceptions that normalises abusive behaviour and that is instrumental in keeping women in abusive relationships is the idea that abuse is a part of life and marriage. Many women were reluctant to seek help for abuse because of discourses that suggest that if you chose to marry the abuser, you must deal with the accompanying difficulties, as aptly captured by the idiom, "You made your bed, lie in

it". The normalisation of abuse as an expected element of marriage which serves to maintain the family at all costs.... (Core)

By deconstructing societal expectations and questioning the value of women's sacrifices within marriage, *Thappad* serves as a powerful critique of the perception that women must tolerate mistreatment in the name of preserving the institution of marriage. The institution of marriage has long been a foundation of society, shaping cultures and providing a structure for relationships. However, this belief that women must endure ill-treatment to protect this institution is deeply faulty and harmful. It is necessary to challenge this assumption and recognize the importance of nurturing healthy, impartial relationships based on mutual respect and dignity. Aishwarya Dharni writes in her article in *Indian times*:

Domestic violence is an extremely dark truth of our society; from the poor to the rich, no one is excluded from this evil practice that goes on behind closed doors. The fact that our men do not find it to be a problem is scary because these are the same men who are our fathers, the same men we will marry, the same men who will be our sons. The fire that ignited in every woman when we heard Amrita say "Just a slap? *Par nahi maar sakta*" could not outshine the patriarchal beliefs that our society swears by. For men, it was more of a '*Baat ka batangad banane wala hisaab*' and what infuriates me even more is that if they are okay with it happening on a screen, they must be doing it to the women in their own lives because, like I said before, "*Itni si baat?*"(Dharni *Indian times*)

The film boldly deals with patriarchal norms and expectations that limit women's preferences and enable inequality. Amrita's decision to file for divorce, despite societal pressure to maintain the purity of marriage, is a significant act of rebelliousness in the institution of marriage. Amrita's revolt in the film represents a broader call for women to recover their individuality and break free themselves from the suffocating expectations imposed upon them as Manisha Karki says, "The question in the film is not about the 'Thappad' that just happened by mistake but it about why did that mistake happen?". As Amrita seeks justice for the slap, her lawyer Netra told her that one slap can be reason for legal fight.

Netra: So just one slap? That's unusual, Amrita . Kafi logon ko unreasonable bhi lag sakta hai. (So just one slap? That's unusual. People may think you're unreasonable.)

Amrita: Un logo ko usne mujhe thappad mara ye unresoanble nhi lag sakta. Khud ki respect nhi kar pa rahi hoon....even khush thi uske dreamsme uski life me participate kerke. But shayad is sab me apne aap ko aisa bana liya jisko Thappad mara ja sakta ho, ye unreasonable nhi hai....Nahin maar sakta. Ek Thappad bhi nahin maar sakta.
(Don't those people think slapping is unreasonable? I can't respect myself anymore.I was happy to be a part of his dreams and his life. But, along the way...I might have become the kind of person someone slaps. Isn't that unreasonable? He can't slap. Can't even one slap)

Netra: Kya chahti ho? (What do you want?)

Amrita: Khush rehna chahti hun. Jab main bolun ki khush hun to jhooth na bol rahi houn(I want to be happy. when I say I am happy I would not be lying) (*Thappad*, 1:04:54-1:05:53)

Amrita challenges not only her husband's actions but also the entire system that normalizes such behaviour. She realizes that her worth as a person does not weaken because of her marital status but as a human, she deserves to be treated with dignity, respect, and equality. *Thappad* critiques the notion that women must endure exploitation and ill-treatment in the name of preserving the institution of marriage. As Amitra's mother says to her husband:

Sandhaya : Bus yahi sunna reh gaya tha ..beti divorce karegi. Jane kya galti ki humne Hamne to padha likha ke bada kiya achche ghar mein shaadi ki. Ab tumhari zimmedaari hai. Tumhara ghar hai. Sambhalo. Ghar samet ke rakhne ke liyeaurat ko bradasht karna padta hai. Man maarna padta hai.(1:09:22-1:09:57)

(I never thought we'd see the day a daughter of our sget divorced. Where did we go wrong? Weraised her, educated her....Married her into a good family.Now it is her responsibility, her home. So look after it. Women have to learn tolerance to keep the family together. One has to suppress one's feelings.)

It challenges the deeply embedded gender roles that place the burden of surrender, sacrifice, and compromise only on women, thereby holding them back from pursuing their dreams and aspirations. The film also highlights the importance of empathy and support a woman needs while infostering change. Amrita's journey is marked by encounters with individuals who offer her encouragement and acceptance. Be it her lawyer friend Netra, Amrita finds comfort in the solidarity of those who recognize her struggle and empower her to fight for her rights. Even throughout the film, Nethra's character undergoes a personal transformation. As she advocates for Amrita, she discovers her own strength and learns to break free from the boundaries of societal expectations. Nethra's journey of empowerment is not limited to her professional life but also extends to her personal relationships, as she confronts her own insecurities and reevaluates her choices. At the end Netra tells her Husband Rohit,

Netra: "Main Daddy ka office chhod rahi hunRohit. Naya office shuru karungi.Aur ab mujhe koi favors bhi nahinchahiyein tumse. No privileges of being his daughter in law or your wife. No plum cases. No profiling stories. Main Ja rahi hun Rohit. If it is okay kabhi kabhi aake Papa se milna chahungi.(2:06:24-2:06:50)

(I am leaving your father's office , Rohit . I am opening a new law firm. No more favours from you. No privileges of being his daughter in law or your wife. No plum cases. No profiling stories I am leaving Rohit. I will come and see your father from time to time , if that's OK?)

By showcasing these supportive relationships, *Thappad* highlights the significance of allyship in dismantling oppressive norms and inspiring shared action. One more important aspect that *FilmThappad* delves is the exploration of masculinity and the toxic behaviors associated with it. Amrita's husband, Vikram, primarily fails to recognize the severity of his actions, echoing the indifferent attitudes prevalent in society. However, as the story progresses, we see a shine of hope by portraying the transformation of Vikram's character. This transformation signifies the possibility for men to question their own biases and evolve towards a more egalitarian mindset. It challenges the notion that masculinity is defined by dominance and control, urging individuals to redefine what it means to be a man. As Vikram says to Amrita at end:

Vikram: I messed up Amu. Nhi kuch nhi maag raha tumse ab , mera adhikar hi nhi hai. Wo... thappd bhi mera hak nhi tha.Pata nhi mujhe kyon laga ki ha. Ye kisika nhi hota hai. And I never apologized to you actually. Sorry to maine kabhi kaha hi nahin. Bus I love you bol deta tha or mujhe lagta tha ki ho gaya. Kya kya petition sign ki hain maine. I am sorry for it, all Amu..... Amu iss baar mai kamauga tumjhe.
(No I am not asking anything from you. I had no right to slap you. Why did I think I had that right? No one has that right.And I never apologized to you actually. I never said sorry. When I said: "I love you," I thought that was enough. Goodness knows what I wrote in those petitions I am sorry for it, all Amu.... Amu this time I will deserve you.) (2:13:00-2:14:06)

Thus the film *Thappad* reclaims individuality of both women and man by challenging the normalization of abuse within marital relationships. It confronts social norms and gender expectations by shedding light on the constant issue of domestic violence in marriage and the oppressive nature of patriarchal constructs. Through its powerful narrative and compelling characters, the film encourages spectators to question societal attitudes, challenge stereotypes, and work towards developing a more equitable society. By emphasizing empathy, support, and introspection, *Thappad* paves the way for urgent conversations surrounding gender equality, urging us all to recognize the need for change and take steps towards a more inclusive future.

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