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REDEFINING THE CONCEPT OF EQUALITY IN INDIAN MARRIAGES: A
FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE MOVIE ‘THAPPAD’

Lakshmi B

Assistant Professor on Contract

Department of English

Devaswom Board College Thalayolaparambu

Kerala

Email id: lakshmibchirackal@gmail.com

Address: Chirackal house,

Navodhya Residential Association,

Athirampuzha P.O,

Kottayam, Kerala

Abstract

Typical Indian marriages can be marked as the torchbearers of patriarchy. Starting from dowry, everything that comes under an arranged marriage gives an upper hand to the groom. Anubhav Sinha’s movie named “Thappad” (Translated as slap) is a big slap on the age old practices associated with Indian marriages. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the movie to bring out the domestic violence that is normalized in marriages. The paper also questions the role of women in marriage. Anubhav Sinha, through his movie presents the innumerable compromises women are forced to make in a marriage. This paper explores the unheard woes of married women which are suppressed by the society.

Keywords: Patriarchy, gender, gender equality, feminism, self, patriarchal system, Feminist film theory.

The role of women is often confusing in Indian movies. Over many decades, women were mainly presented as an object in majority of the Indian movies. For generations Indian movies made use of female characters, just like writers use comic relief in their plays. The female characters did not have any significance of their own in majority of the male oriented movies. Films, being a portrayal of the society, in a way, also reflected the position of women in Indian social setup. The role of women is always puzzling within a society as well as in films. However, there is a remarkable shift in the trends of recent cinemas. At present, innumerable movies represent strong and powerful

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female characters and many movies focus around female oriented subjects. The significant shift in the themes of the films also implies the elevated status of women in the current time.

Anubhav Sinha's celebrated movie "Thappad" illustrates a strong statement of feminism which is very much needed for the empowerment of women at present. Through constant fights women have come a long way crossing the path of patriarchy, however they haven't totally achieved the equality they have dreamed of. The opening scenes of the movie expose different female characters in the movie and all the characters stand at different shores in terms of identity and self-respect. Some of the female characters in the movie are entangled in the web of marriage while there are a few characters who enjoys their true self rather than depending on a male counterpart.

Indian culture is highly supportive of the male dominance. Even though on one side the Indian culture praises or even glorifies women as goddess and deity, on the other side it has its loopholes to suppress women to the core. Most of the marriages within Indian culture are in favour of the groom rather than the bride. The practice of dowry validates the superiority of males in marriages. Moreover marriage is a

divine social practice in India as everyone is expected to get married within an age limit. Even at the 21st century many of the women find the difficulty to opt out marriages for their career as marriage is not regarded as an option but rather as a mandatory process every females are expected to undergo. As Nandita Dhawan remarks:

The Transfer of a woman from one family to another is the premise of the institution of marriage in India, and is ruled by negotiations based on caste, class and religious boundaries. Marriage, thus, is an essentially public and political act that structures alliances, hierarchies and social networks. The prime objective of marriage is to reproduce the social order. (149)

The central character of the movie "Thappad" is the character named Amrita Sandhu, a girl from a middle class family who got married to an upper middle class family. As the movie begins, the director has presented the character as a happy housewife who is ready to provide everything for her husband. But the deep irony associated with Indian marriages is evident from the beginning of the movie itself. Even though, Amrita seems to be happy, still she can't escape the role of a stereotypical wife. As a result, to a point

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she doesn't even realize that she isn't having a life of her own, when she devotes her entire life to make her husband's life comfortable.

All the female characters in the movie have faced the harsh realities of patriarchy at one point or the other. While some characters could identify the injustice done to them, some others aren't even aware of the injustice they are facing. One of the female characters in the movie named Sunitha who comes from a lower strata of society is a victim of constant domestic violence. However she was forced to bear with it mainly due to economic dependency. So it is also a proven fact that, economically dependent females are more prone to face domestic violence than an independent lady.

The reality is that the society never wants a female to be totally independent without any dependence on the male counterpart. The society will throw shade at even highly successful ladies simply because they could manage everything so well without any dependence. That is clearly evident through Amrita's husband Vikram's attitude towards their neighbour, a well to do single mother. As Vikram satirically dismisses her hard work with a sexist remark: "Did Shivani buy a new car? What kind of work does she

do?" (23:02). The attitude of Vikram reflects the common attitude of a male dominated society. Even at the present scenario, when women are given freedom to study and work, still they are expected to have a reliance on the male members of the society. This is basically to reinforce the norm that social setup is developed and implemented by man. So men should always have an upper hand in terms of respect and position. Even though, some women could break the chains of patriarchy, most of them got entangled in the web of patriarchy at some point or the other. Usually, Indian movies try to reinforce the norms of patriarchy through gender stereotyping as Nidhi Tere states:

The narratives of Hindi cinema have undoubtedly been male dominated and male centric. Themes have been explored from the male audience's point of view. The heroine is always secondary to the hero. Her role is charted out in context of any male character which is central to the script. It may be the hero, the villain, the father, the boss, an elderly male figure etc. She is devoid of any independent existence and her journey throughout the film is explored in relation to the male character. This kind of straight-jacketing limits the women's role to providing glamour, relief, respite and entertainment

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Vikram, seems to be a perfect husband from outside, but deep inside he is a typical dominating male. He doesn't expect his wife to be successful or independent. All he wants from his wife is a caretaker, who can do everything to make his life smooth and better. At one point, he childishly dismisses Amrita for asking permission to learn driving. In fact, he advises her to first learn to cook properly. Some other time, Vikram praises his sister-in-law for cooking delicious food and asks her to teach his wife to cook properly. So throughout, Vikram's only concern was to make Amrita a better house wife. He never wishes to see Amrita as an independent individual capable of taking a decision her own. He never thinks of Amrita's career or her feelings. He has barely no idea that Amrita is an excellent dancer and she could be successful as a professional as well. This kind of ignorance from the husband's part is a common thing in Indian marriages, especially in arranged marriages. The society has the tendency to normalize such things as a convenient gesture from the so called "good house wives" for the sake of a successful married life.

Amrita, being a house wife is not only burdened with the duties to her husband, but also to the in-laws as well. She is responsible of everything happens in Vikram's house. It is her

responsibility to sort things out. The movie portrays Amrita's good relationship with her mother-in-law. Unlike many of the Indian movies, the mother-in-law of Amrita is not a cliché toxic lady. Amrita's mother-in-law is somewhat moderate to the extent admitting that Amrita can't cook well. However, as expected in every Indian marriages, the mother-in-law seems to be superordinate. All her concerns are reserved for her son and sometimes for his son's wife. She is not ready to accept and love Amrita as a different individual, but as her son's possession. She always enquires Amrita about his son's well-being and doesn't bother to know about Amrita's welfare. The mother-in-law's words and intention clearly suggests the purpose of the marriage happened in her family. In a way, the mother-in-law is totally responsible for what happened to Amrita. She should be blamed for raising her son as an inefficient adult not capable enough to do his own personal things. She should be blamed for silently victimizing Amrita. While one woman expects another woman to lend a supporting hand at the time of a crisis, it is always the other way around happen. As the famous Turkish feminist economist Deniz Kandiyoti rightly notices:

There, they are subordinate not

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only to all the men but also to the more senior women, especially their mother-in-law... Woman's life cycle in the patriarchally extended family is such that the deprivation and hardship she experiences as a young bride is eventually superseded by the control and authority she will have over her own subservient daughters-in-law. The cyclical nature of women's power in the household and their anticipation of inheriting the authority of senior women encourages a thorough internalisation of this form of patriarchy by the women

*themselves.
(Kandiyoti)*

Marriages usually demand a lot of sacrifices from women. Women are constantly forced to sacrifice their career, their comfort zone, their interests and a lot more for the sake of a successful married life. Such kind of practices become so common to the extent that the society started normalizing it. As a result, women became so socialised and in the process they forget to think about their own happiness. In the movie, a conversation between Amrita and her father shows this social situation very vividly. As Amrita's father puts it:

Your mother spent her life making others happy. Making Kachori for Vikram (her son-in-law), Tehri for me (her husband) and pasta for Karan (her son). Mothers don't have a choice than making others happy. (16:49)

Amrita's life goes upside down all of a sudden when she receives a slap from her husband Vikram during a party hosted in her house. Even though Amrita was surrounded by her family and friends, no one was there to really backup her. The only character who felt like voicing against this was Swati, Amrita's sister-in-law to be. However Swati was silenced by Amrita's mother to avoid any clashes with Vikram's

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family regarding this matter. For Amrita, the slap was not simply a physical form of violence but infringe of her self-respect. The slap also make Amrita realize her value in the relationship and how she was pretending to be happy all these time. Unlike Sunitha, Amrita being an educated lady could easily identify the injustice done to her. Like Meena Shirdwadkar explains:

As women received education they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviour problems at home and at place of work or in society—all come up in a welter of projection.

The scene in which Amrita's husband slaps Amrita is a turning point in the movie which makes Amrita think about herself and her value as a person. She comes to the realisation that in process of being making herself a good wife, she forgets her true self and identity. She realises that so far she was trying to find happiness as someone's wife. But this is not something particular to Amrita, but most of the Indian women can associate with this. Even the society validates and appreciates such sacrificial mentality of women. Most of the Indian

women has the tendency to change their last name after marriage. As Yamini Bhalerao says: "Subtle or stark, the demand this policing of women's existence happens and they often end erasing their previous identity, to become a new person that is approved by their new family."

Amrita's life got reshaped when she decides to leave her husband's house. Initially she decides to take a break and sort out the things. However her husband's attitude makes her take a proper decision to protect her self-respect. Amrita's husband had only concern for his family's dignity. He isn't really bothered that he hurt his wife's emotions but what worries him is the thought what people will think if Amrita leave the house. This is evident in his words "You know how bad I feel. You know what I am going through. If you want to make this a big deal then go" (53:31).

Initially, Amrita's family was sceptical about her decision, however they understood the real reason. Amrita's bravery is portrayed where she showed everyone that why she couldn't tolerate the injustice done to her. As she said everyone consoled her saying it's just a slap. Literally everyone including her husband tried to normalize that incident. That shattered Amrita's dignity

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as a woman. No one made an effort to make Vikram accept his mistake. In fact, he never apologizes to her and that is exactly the reason why Amrita couldn't move on. If he had made an apology to her, like any woman she would have forgotten it. But when Vikram refuses to accept his mistake she realises the seriousness of the incident. At one point of the movie, Vikram discusses about his company and says that he couldn't spend his effort on a company where he is not valued. The same thought strikes Amrita and she decides to free herself from a relationship where she isn't valued.

Even though Amrita, isn't happy about the divorce, she doesn't convince herself for an adjustment. That is the point where she proves her worth. She can be identified as the true exponent of practical feminism. She doesn't preach big theories or ideologies, but her actions pass strong messages to the audience. Amrita is not alone in this journey. All the female characters in the movie have experienced the bitter side of patriarchy in some forms. The movie becomes brilliant, when it shows the liberation of all the women through using different weapons to fight against the injustice they have faced. So the movie propagate the concept that feminism is not an all-exclusive group, but literally anyone can be feminist. The movie encourages the subordinate

gender audience to fight back against any kind of issue in their life and it also conveys a bold message to the dominant gender. The feminist film critics has special interest in such movies as remarked by Nidhi Tere:

The interest in films taken by feminists stems from concern about the under-representation and misrepresentation of women in cinema. It adopts a critical approach towards gender bias on celluloid. The feminist approach to cinema asks a few pertinent questions like how women are represented on screen, how women's issues are treated in cinema, what does feminism mean to film-makers, how does the feminist agenda manifest on screen, how is the women character positioned compared to the male character and what is the role of women film-makers and women writers in depicting women's issues through cinema

The movie delivers a strong statement of feminism. It clearly criticizes the traditional concept of Indian marriages. It also showcases the wrong norms traditional marriages propagate. It is a tendency to normalize the violence towards females or subordinate genders within marriages. The society has the attitude to silence the people who raise their voice against such injustices. As a result innumerable

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women have experienced domestic violence and marital rapes. Most of these women lack courage to speak out their issues, but the irony is that even if someone finds courage to speak boldly, no one will encourage her including her own family members. According to records, "About 86% women who experienced violence never sought help and 77% of the victims did not even mention the incident(s) to anyone." The number of cases of domestic violence is also increasing day by day. The statistics shows that the one responsible for this kind of violence is not woman but the easy going attitude of people on this matter. As the movie shows, gender equality can be only achieved if there is a combined effort from both the dominant and subordinate genders. Movies can play a prominent role in creating awareness about gender equality. As stated, the role of media is a major concern of the feminist film theories:

Women's position within media power structures and media representation of women are persistent concerns in every society, because negative stereotyping and lack of female input both reflect and reinforce wider gender inequalities. Films, indeed in the most effective manner maintain the diffusion of traditional female gender roles, which women are depicted in

culture and society. Research on gender and cinema has emphasized the question about women's identity. In fact, the study of the images of women in cinema were a central concern of the 'second wave' feminism of the 1960s and 1970s, criticizing women's image in film and women's roles in the film industry (Jackson and Jacjie, 1998).

The importance of movies like 'Thappad' is highly commendable at the present scenario. The movie redefines the concept of gender in Indian arranged marriages. The movie questions the age old patriarchal practices associated with Indian marriages and also criticises silencing the victims of domestic violence. Such movies can create a better perspective about the gender related issues. The movie not only teaches the importance of gender equality but also rejects the idea of normalizing gender stereotyping. Many factors can contribute to the achievement of gender equality where education and financial stability top the list.

Films are integral part of the society as it is a representation of the society itself. Films portray the social and cultural aspects of the society. Recently, film critics have identified gender as one of the main aspects of film narratives. Through various studies on films it is evident that film narratives all

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over the world is ruled by male gaze. This concept is clearly visible in the Indian films where patriarchal norms dominate the female characters. The gender stereotypes in movies have a highly negative influence and such representations can sometimes normalize the violence towards the subordinate genders. Modern movies on the other hand focus more to deconstruct the wrong norms associated with gender. Most of the modern movies in India try to establish gender equality in one way or the other. These can educate a nation and can create a change in the mind of people. The movie 'Thappad' is a good example of a modern movie in India. It also illustrates how a movie can reshape the idea of gender roles in marriages and it advocates the practice of healthy relationships. So it is clear that films can change the perception of the society by giving a better position for females. The representation of empowered women on screen can provide the audience with a better understanding of women's cultural and social issues.

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SP Publications

International Journal Of English and Studies (IJOES)

An International Peer-Reviewed Journal ; Volume-2, Issue-7, 2020

www.ijoes.in ISSN: 2581-8333

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