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**"A Slap that Echoed: Female Desire, Resistance, and Choice in Contemporary Hindi Cinema"**

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**Abstract**

The research aims to study women's rights and choices through a select movie *Thappad* (2020) directed by Anubhav Sinha. The study focuses on the root cause of patriarchy that restricts women's freedom in marriages, families, and their choices. The movie *Thappad* highlights the socio-economic condition of women where women are taught to be submissive, and drawn to male pleasure under patriarchy. In the movie's beginning, the film director is observed depicting women as losing their desire and subjectivity over masculinity. Such portrayal of women must be given an identity through a Radical Feminism theory. The theory was introduced in the second wave of feminism around 1968. It demands structural changes in the narratives as women's oppression has been observed as more systematic since ages. Anubhav Sinha thus, overpowers dominant narratives and brings forth the realistic representation of women as human. The article thus emphasizes a critical reading of the text on a strong and independent woman's portrayal under patriarchal odds. The Qualitative-critical reading identifies various factors such as womanhood, female gaze, women's desire, and subjectivity through a radical approach to women's rights and their choice of freedom. It concludes on a note that there is an urge to abolish the patriarchal system that restricts women's freedom. Women's agency is therefore a strong influence to practice empowerment in a society.

**Key Words:** agency, choices, women, socio-economic, subjectivity, thappad

**Introduction:**

(Ian Kunsey, 2018), quotes in Representation of Women in popular films: A study of Gender inequality, that movies have been a large space in Indian culture, that has been made more powerful by media. (Roshni Sharma, 2022) states in “Bollywood study reveals history of gender bias reflecting real life” that women are not given rights for their own freedom and choices and patriarchy plays a major role in creating such a scenario. Women are distinguished as “good women” and “bad women”. It thus portrays women under patriarchal shackles who are forced to prioritize either home affairs or to maintain a balance between personal and professional life. Why do Bollywood movies continue to portray women as submissive and dominant characters? Even though strong portrayals of women in film have experienced a vast transformation over the past many years, this growth seems to be increasing only by 3% female employment in the 250 top-grossing films since 1998 (Lauzen, 2018b) quoted in (Ian Kunsey, 2018). This signifies that there is a dearth to see the female actress on the silver screen equal to a male actor or beyond them. Feminist film theory initiated the understanding of knowing film and viewer’s relation in the film around 1970s. It depicts and perpetuates cinema as a cultural practice that embodies and replicates myths about femininity and women. Sohini Chaudhuri explains in Feminist Film Theory, Routledge, the urge of reading a feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. The critic suggests why the film is yet feminist-centered and why feminist issues are still necessary in the movie. Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (1975) explains the portrayal of women in the movie. They are looked as an object of desire, motif of man’s desire, and portrayed as a foil for ‘Man’. This article explores the choices & desires carried by Taapsee Pannu and other women characters in the movie *Thappad*. How they bring gender-sensitive issues in alignment with spectators. Although, major changes have been observed in the portrayal of women in Bollywood movies but female picturization demands more powerful and alienated characters. (Sanchari Mukhopadhyay, 2021) quotes in Bollywood, Popular Visual Media, and Sexism in India: A Critical Glance Back, that “The typical characterization of “good women” in Hindi cinema can be summed up as being domestic, virtuous, unambitious, prioritizing family over self, submissive, religious or god-fearing, chaste, and essentially additional and dispensable”. Women are mostly found as a medium to experience growth in the movie. They act as a relief and beauty to the spectators, while men are seen occupied with solving critical issues. Men are seen running movie as active participants while women being a passive doer. Women’s desires are overlooked and hampered which Anubhav Sinha has tried portraying through hegemonic characters in the movie *Thappad*. Women’s agency has a major highlight in the movie to look upon. How ultimately their choices and dreams help them to live an independent life true to its norms. Irrespective of their classes and economic strata, all women characters in the movie *Thappad* jumps to voice for themselves.

Kabeer 1999: 438 states Agency has a number of forms; for example, “deception and manipulation, bargaining and negotiation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis”. It also includes self-efficacy where women first believe in themselves before taking any action. Taapsee Pannu aka Amrita was affirmed with her decision of leaving her husband’s house. She holds her real identity, which was suppressed by her in-laws, and she stands alone against all odds to fight for her choice. Unlike many other women, who are involved in home affairs does not have the courage to leverage and benefit from resources. Amrita had the courage to take action against political structure and oppressive societal pressure. She also became an ideal for the other women characters to develop critical consciousness. (O’Hara and Clement 2018) states in What is agency and why does it matter for women’s empowerment? Agency is often misunderstood and occurs when making decisions in household activities, and control on certain resources, which is more observant.

Transitions in women’s roles have been experienced in the Bollywood industry as well as in Indian society for centuries. Bollywood movies are mostly found showcasing female leaders for entertainment through their glamour and moves. It was the era for an actress to be termed a hero’s follower, particularly of their “love interest”. Women’s role was to love the hero passively without confronting their subjective presence. Women were hurt, obscure, and neglected by male motifs, and to that note, *Kabir Singh* is an extraordinary example that justifies such unpleasant background about actresses in Hindi cinema. This specifies women as the object to be controlled, and if women seem to express their desire to be with a man, they are always misinterpreted. Discordantly, Taapsee Pannu in the movie voices the slap that Preeti Sikka in the movie *Kabir Singh* accepted as her choice. Women are equated more with sexual desire. Calogero et al (2011) “proposed that through the portrayal of idealized images of everyday people, social media normalize the objectifying standards and promote “users body surveillance and body dissatisfaction”. “Objectification theory holds that cultural norms create social environments in which women and girls regularly experience evaluation of their worth based on the physical, exterior part of themselves” (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997)

Right after the advent of social media, women empowerment, and feminism, portrayal of women on screen became a matter of discussion and debate. It was the time when actresses turned up building their careers in different genres of filmmaking, scriptwriters, and many turned into producers and directors. Indeed, they touched the following parameters already, but it was the period, for them to shine out their presupposed dominating role. Directors have put their feet in movies that depict actresses in leading roles, like *NH10*, *Piku*, *Dil Dhadakne Do*, etc. They have played remarkably astonishingly in their parts, yet these movies do not rank anywhere around the top ten at the box office. These movies are critically acclaimed

and

have been awarded for the best actresses or screenplay roles but unfortunately could not occupy their box office position. Other Bollywood movies like *Padmavat*, *Highway*, *Raazi*, and *Queen* have focused on women as a centric identity yet did not bloom as an art-house movie. In several movies, including '*Thappad*', '*Parched*' and '*Chhapaak*', women are the foremost part of movies and have given critical performances. Particularly, *Thappad* exposes patriarchy in its sugary manner. Amrita has a very active, robust, and sufficient role. The critical analysis of the scenes helps to understand the director's view of the subject. Amrita has set an example for the people to understand that women are not just to be treated like an entity but, to be given huge respect. Women's ideologies are still practiced by patriarchal societies in many Bollywood movies which have been brought forth by Anubhav Sinha meticulously. Simon de Beauvoir's timeless assumption states that 'one is not born, rather becomes a woman', and can be functional for men too. Similarly, Anubhav Sinha has claimed Amrita's role to be ignited as a woman and not as a wife or daughter-in-law. Evers Rosander (1987) notes that "in Morocco, the separation of women from men forms the very basis of social order". This has been a practice too in Indian culture where women are assumed to look after household chores suppressing their desires. The paper will thus explore Sinha's bold narratives to visualize female character as to taking bold decision against all odds of the society.

#### **The subjective self in *Thappad*.**



**Figure 1.** A close shot when Amrita gets a slap (*Thappad*) from her husband. (dir. Sinha, 2020), (Pinkvilla, 2020)

*Thappad* (2020), directed by Anubhav Sinha, is a strike over the archaic practices linked with Indian weddings. The movie interrogates the role of women in marriage and explores the hindrances caused after marriage. Indian marriages are a practice to maintain and unites the upper strata of a family. It is not just about two members getting married but an exchange of

entire family members. It also implies on Amrita where not only struggles to convince her choices to husband but her in-laws too. Adrienne Rich, in her poem “Snapshot of a daughter-in-law”, voiced a similar decline in the role of women and presents how women agonize and confront their sole responsibility towards family and children. Sinha, has scrutinized the unheard woes of women after marriage in the movie *Thappad*. Portrayals of women have always been perplexing in Indian cinema. Bollywood movies are a reflection of society, and simultaneously, it also portrays women's role in the Indian social context. *Thappad* voices for the regulation of feminism, and the protagonist ‘Taapsee Pannu’, rebels for her identity and belongingness.

The introductory scenes in the movie represent category of female characters at different levels leading to an identity crisis. Female spectators could experience a lack of critical consciousness in these women which also looks lacking in Mulvey’s approach to Visual Pleasure and Narrative cinema. They seem to live other lives more easily than themselves by normalizing subjugation. Some are trapped in the mesh of marriage while other women enjoy their individuality and do not trust a male counterpart. Dhawan, in “Redefining the concept of equality in Indian Marriages: A Feminist Analysis of the movie ‘*Thappad*’”, states, “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 essential public and political act that structures treaties, social networks and hierarchy. The core objective of marriage is to reproduce the social order”. The opening scene of the movie presents the female protagonist as a happy homemaker who is available for every tiny thing to her family. Sinha, has cleverly presented Taapsee Pannu as a devotee to her husband but the irony associated with Indian weddings manifests from movie’s start. The protagonist is portrayed to depict her responsibility as a happy housemaker. Another character named Sunitha, who belongs to a lower-level class, was also a victim of endless domestic violence. This movie highlights the core problem of marriage in terms of equality, rights, and decision-making power. How the characters lack self-efficacy initially and thus feel less empowered is what has been portrayed by a director so that female spectators can relate to it.

Although, Indian culture has normalized violence against women only for lower-level people and a “slap” for such women is an acceptance. Sinha, depicts women as wings of a bird yet trapped in a cage. “*Thappad*” does not only voice for a slap but women’s suppression in marriage through sexual harassment or financial dependence. Diya Mirza holds a role of a widow and an independent woman with a little girl to look after, but viewers can manifest her as an empowered woman. In the process of cinematography, low angle shot gives a glimpse of a character depicting a strong psychological solid to the viewers. Simultaneously, the high-angle shot makes the protagonist look powerless and vulnerable. The above images

instead create a dramatic scene for the audience. Sinha, justifies the art of knowing a camera. His focus on high angle and low angle clearly states his sense of revealing characters in several shades. Every women character has occupied space through a male character and has shown their suppressed marriage internally. It is dicey in the state whether the director has considered women abuse as a plot to this movie, or is it a women's role post-marriage. All three women characters that are portrayed parallel seem to undergo social orders until they are consciously charged.



**Figure 2.** The Conversation behind Glass between Vikram and Amrita's house.

(dir. Sinha, 2020), (Sachdeva, 2020)

The above mirror sequence is hard to capture due to mirror reflection. The camera angle is on the mirror which becomes a long process and patience to capture the shot intensely. It also reduces the VFX (visual effect) if not recorded minutely. The mirror shot is considered the most difficult part of movie art and adding the director's personal space is like giving decision-making power to women in a patriarchal society. The director gives the notion of bringing apart the character's faith by offering patriarchal belief in Amrita. It is found regulated by her husband or in-laws. In the process, they lose identity, beauty, and intellectuality, and remain a robot who is constantly serving their house. Feminist film theory has helped and analyzed the stereotypical role of women being portrayed and carried away by media. This trauma can be both psychological and physical that contributes to low self-esteem and despair. Petition filed for an unwelcomed repercussion caused to Amrita also called Ammu by her husband, who was the only agent to realize her lifeless soul. The director also seems to adhere to the power of language through Taapsee Pannu when she states on behalf of her lawyer, that not to forget:

"A lawyer is a woman too,  
and of course,  
it is not suitable for you people".

Amrita was trying to normalize what her lawyer could not in her personal life through her petition. Marriages are effortless and have equal responsibilities and it should not be discriminated against upon gender grounds. Dorren Massy states in her book “Space, Place and Gender” that the ways gender is produced and interpreted in the society in which we live are both reflected in and affected by this gendering of space and place. This very well justifies Anubhav Sinha’s female character in the movie. How Amrita’s maid; a minor character is bound to compromise despite of physical violence caused by her husband. Amrita is seen performing her duty without complaining because she was taught that women are constructed to do household chores. The third female character is also a lawyer and independent yet has suppressed desires.



**Figure 3.** Amrita’s mother is having a conversation with her husband about the change in the role of women post-marriage. (dir. Sinha, 2020), (Sachdeva, 2020)

Amrita’s mother Sandhya, sadly spoke to her husband blaming her daughter for the sin.

Sinha, very cunningly has given screen space to a “mother” and not a “woman” to bring forth patriarchy in the time frame of 1:09:09 to 9:25sec and 1:12:8, stating:

“What did we do wrong?

We raised her, educated her, married in a good family,

Now, it is her responsibility to look after her family”.

The language and conversation that Amrita’s parents commute to show women’s status after marriage also reflect the taboos of patriarchy. Does every mother dictate to their daughter to compromise for a happy married life instead of voicing their choices and desire?

Women are taught to tolerate and suppress their desire and prioritize family before anything else. Amrita’s choice to divorce Vikram has angered Sandhya. In a conversation with her

husband Jayant (Kumud Mishra), she explains that to keep their families together, women must suppress their emotions and suffer injustices (Sachdeva, 2020). The sequence is notable for the delicate way female complicity and choice are treated. This scene in the movie justifies women's identity, particularly the wife's shattered emotions being held. Sandhya's exasperated counters were, if you did not stop, you neither encouraged. Why did she never tell her husband about her choice to continue singing? Why did she need her husband's encouragement to make her hobby of singing? Why didn't she say, "I want this"? Why is she not confident? Maybe this has been followed for ages, and women are brought up injecting the choices they cannot take up and experience what their mothers have inherited. This lack of self-efficacy leads women to carry a social order. Her submissive nature has been transferred to her daughter, and she expects the same from her. This chain, however, is broken by Amrita's reaction to a slap. Sandhya's husband was supportive, but due to social pressure, she could not say this ever. Had she spoken about her inner desire, she could make a difference in her life and in her daughter's life as well. Because she never spoke, she did not expect to see the same from her daughter. She didn't accept change though she wanted and the duplicate suppression she is transferring to her daughter, though unintentionally. This heated conversation thus highlights the misogynist society that carries a mask of modernism followed by the second wave of feminism. The period that allows women to make their choices equal to men. Amrita is the foremost example to experience these feminist rights against the acceptance of society.

The camera focuses on Sandhya's narration while hiding Jayant's image of guilt and allows her to be an active participant. Ultimately, Amrita receives *Restitution of conjugal Rights* (Section-9); a legal notice to bring her back home. Legalization became more convenient than love for a dedicated wife.

"He hit her for the first time,  
but he could not hit her ever,  
and that was what the petition all about".

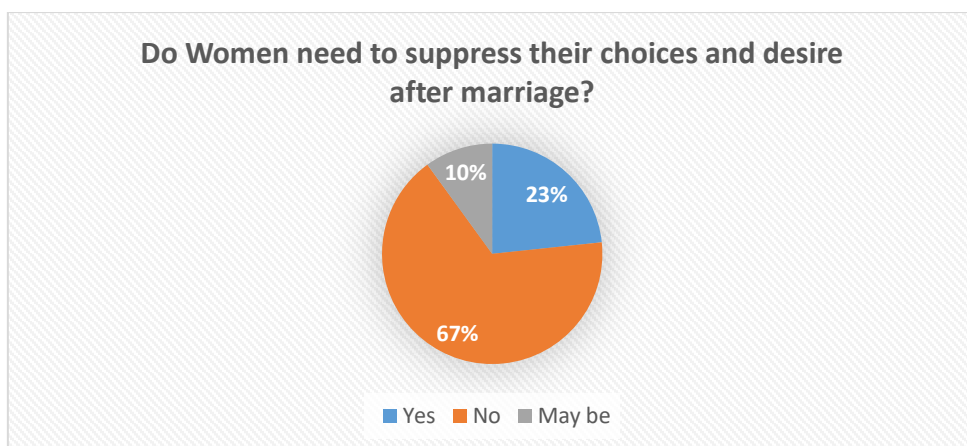
This movie also gives the reason for showing an affectionate relationship between Amrita and her mother-in-law. Amrita exclaims, saying gently to her mother-in-law that she did love me but as a daughter-in-law. Maslow's hierarchy states self-actualization's one of the final episodes of a human being and, in order to achieve the final stage, one should be satisfied with preceding needs. Indeed, self-actualization helped Taapsee to be determined and controlled by her choices and not a driving force. She is a single character who motivates and builds affirmation in many females on-screen and off-screen. The shift in camera angle is a shift in a female spectator toward their choices and dreams to the filthy questions of patriarchy. Sinha, has subtly allowed a woman to question her husband about whether she

was



permitted to follow her dream. Feminist film theory urges to represent women as more independent, and strong, emphasizing female subjectivity and their desire. Diya Mirza is portrayed as one of the female roles in the movie whose subjectivity is enhanced by her conformity both personally & professionally.

#### **Identification of the research gap.**



**Figure 4:** Online survey for the identification of the research gap.

The above data provides the cumulative analysis of the research gap followed by the critical reading of the text. It was formulated specifically to analyze women's conditions after marriage. How do they carry their work life and household chores altogether? ¿Are these women given equal support by their in-laws to balance their life? This survey has helped to answer and rectify the research gap. As one can see that 67% of people believe that women do not need to suppress their choices and dreams after marriage. This means that Amrita should not be judged or questioned for making such strong decisions. She has been welcoming every obstacle happily until her self-respect was damaged. She did everything happily from preparing tea to scotting her husband to a car for his work. A woman also feels empowered even in a failure but, if the decision is been made by her end. Thus, Amrita should be given physical & Psychological space to earn her respect.

Although, 23% population yet feels women should suppress their desires may be because they have been practicing the same. The lawyer, Nethra, in the movie falls into this dilemma as she continues to suppress her desires despite being an independent woman. She is forced to experience marital abuse. Also, Amrita's mother Sandhya has a similar understanding of marriage that women should suppress and compromise to keep a healthy marriage. It could be a reason she never liver her choice of being a singer. And, then there are 10% of people who are in dilemma to answer this question. May be, they have not experienced marriage or they are not self-sufficient to feel empowered. Diya Mirza has been portrayed widow yet

independent throughout the movie. She is also a neighbor of Amrita and her daughter learns a classical dance from Amrita. This makes her a frequent visitor to their house and she is aware of all the clauses taking place in Amrita's home. Thus, Diya Mirza could be that character who may not answer to such questions because of a lack of experience in her marital affairs. It could also be because she has socio-economic independence that Amrita did not. Anubhav Sinha has vigorously brought up the issues of women and the suppression of their choices and desires after marriage.

### **Conclusion**

There has been a tremendous transformation in Bollywood film, yet a lot has to transform. This progression is, however slow but is expected to increase in near future. Women should be allowed to walk in without male supremacy. Women are not the only key to bring forth the masculinity in a patriarchal society. Filmmakers must offer such roles to a leading actresses without the absence of male actors. They should be given room to promote physical and psychological freedom. Why are women trained to be canvas and not paint? It may be because women are engrained with the old practices in the modern era. Thus, they are treated as a canvas where they can be molded accordingly. Women should often be focused on their choices & desires. Reading women as a passive and sexist image is what lies in Bollywood. In the movie *Thappad*, if Amrita's mother would stand for her daughter's justice, then she must be a different girl from the beginning of the movie and maybe this slap would not take place. Women themselves are responsible for the humiliation of women as their upbringing is processed with the same thought. They are not addicted to the changes and are not even revolutionary in such cases. Not just villagers, but even males in urban society find it weird, and a crime if women stand for their rights. ¿So, the questions are like do human beings have their own choices? Alternatively, they make choices under social pressure that need to be explored. Making choices under social pressure makes them tenuous, docile, and submissive. Nevertheless, if they make their own choices, they will be in their true self, void of any social, cultural, or political practice. They will be revolutionary, they will be the trendsetter, and the forthcoming generation will be more aware, and progressive and will understand the value and importance of their choices and experiences. Their desires, grievances, feelings, ambitions, and perspectives are ignored from the scene. The above online survey thus concludes that women's desires and choices should be considered foremost to avoid hierarchy in marriages. After critically reading a text through dialogues and scene analysis, the article tends to conclude that women's agency should be more upright and approachable. They should be aware of agency and should constantly practice such empowerment. Women should be given a space to portray themselves as strong, alienated, and complex character. They are portrayed as the "other" because they are shown as not belonging to this real and worldly life. Future research scholars can work on power politics

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in Indian marriages which seems to be a concerning element for equality in marriages.

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