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PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN INDIAN CINEMA: A STUDY OF ANUBHAV SINHA'S *THAPPAD*

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Abstract:

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema is a multifaceted topic that warrants in-depth analysis and discussion in the literary world. Indian cinema, particularly Bollywood, has a massive influence on the country's culture and society, shaping attitudes and perceptions towards women. Historically, women in Indian cinema have often been portrayed in stereotypical roles, reinforcing patriarchal norms. These portrayals perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes, representing women as: frail, weak, submissive, fragile and victims of socio-political systems. Contemporary Indian cinema has seen a significant shift in its portrayal of women. We have seen conscious efforts made by the film makers to present women in a more positive and empowering light. The modern cinema features women who are strong minded, rebellious, confident and career-oriented. Over the years, Indian cinema has witnessed a significant transformation in the way women are presented through films. The film *Thappad* (2020), directed by Anubhav Sinha, is a landmark film that contributes to this evolution. It is a story of a young woman named Amrita Sandhu. Being a homemaker, she is unquestioningly performing her responsibilities as a wife and daughter-in-law. An unfortunate incident happened and her life turns upside down when her husband slaps her during a house party. It triggers a journey of self-discovery and empowerment of a modern woman. The present paper is an attempt to trace the transformational portrayal of women from stereotype to empowered in Anubhav Sinha's *Thappad*.

Keywords: *Indian Cinema, Portrayal, Women, Self-respect, Empowerment, etc.*

The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has undergone significant transformations over the years. The early days of Indian cinema were marked by societal restrictions on women's participation. Women from respectable families were discouraged from performing in public, and acting was considered a taboo profession. Dadasaheb Phalke, the father of Indian cinema, has casted Anna Salunke, a male actor, as Taramati in *Raja Harishchandra* (1913). Later on, Dadasaheb found Durgabai Kamat, the first female actress, who paved the way for so many women in Indian cinema.

Early Years (1930s-1960s): Women were often depicted in traditional roles, such as mothers, wives, and daughters, with a focus on their domestic duties. Films like *Nirmala* (1934) and *Mother India* (1957) showcased strong female characters, but within patriarchal



norms. Then the Golden Era (1970s-1980s) has seen the emergence of stronger, more independent female characters as seen in films like *Aandhi* (1975) *Gaman* (1977) and *Umrao Jaan* (1981). In 1990s-2000s, the portrayal of women in Indian cinema began to change with the rise of commercial Bollywood films. Women were often objectified and relegated to secondary roles, with a focus on their physical appearance. Films like *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayenge* (1995) and *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (1998) perpetuated traditional gender roles.

In recent years, Indian cinema has seen a resurgence of strong, confident and complex female characters. Films like *The Dirty Picture* (2011), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Queen* (2013), *Mardaani* (2014), *Pink* (2016), *Neerja* (2016), *Thappad* (2020) and *Gangubai* (2022) have showcased women in leading roles, tackling issues like objectification, consent and domestic violence. These movies present strong and independent female protagonist addressing various issues and themes.

Thappad is a 2020 Indian Hindi language drama film directed by Anubhav Sinha. The story takes place in an affluent Delhi home where Amrita and Vikram host a party at their house. Vikram gets angry with his friend when he learns that London promotion has been given to another colleague. Foreshadowing the tense situation, Amrita hurriedly intervenes and unexpectedly receives a slap from her husband before several guests in the party. No one in the house held Vikram responsible for his action. On the other hand, family asks Amrita to tolerate and move on. Completely stunned and shocked, Amrita gathers herself and immediately decides to file divorce and end the marriage. This decision marks a significant turning point in her character arc, showcasing her journey from a compliant wife to an empowered individual who refuses to accept abuse.

Amrita's shock and subsequent decision to leave her marriage reflect a profound realization of her self-worth. The slap she receives from her husband, Vikram, acts as a catalyst for her awakening. It forces her to confront the reality of her situation and the compromises she has made for the sake of her marriage. This moment underscores the importance of recognizing one's value and the right to live free from violence and disrespect.

Thappad is not solely the narrative of Amrita; it intricately weaves together the lives of several women, each representing different facets of the struggles and challenges faced by women in contemporary Indian society. The film explores their interconnected stories, highlighting the broader implications of patriarchy and the quest for empowerment. Here are some key aspects of how the film portrays the lives of these seven women: Amrita's neighbour (Shivani), who is a widow and has a daughter (Sania), her house-help (Sunita), about her brother's girlfriend (Swati), about her mother (Sandhya), about her mother-in-law (Sulakshana) and about her lawyer (Netra) who fought her legal battle.

- **Shivani (Amrita's Neighbor):** Shivani is a widow who raises her daughter, Sania, alone. Her character reflects the struggles of single motherhood and the societal stigma attached to being a widow. Through her interactions with Amrita, Shivani embodies resilience and independence, showcasing the strength of women who navigate life's challenges without a partner. Her support for Amrita serves as a reminder of the importance of female solidarity in overcoming adversity.



- **Sania (Shivani's Daughter):** Sania represents the younger generation and the hope for change in societal attitudes towards women. Her relationship with her mother and the lessons she learns from Shivani's experiences highlight the impact of role models on young girls. The film subtly suggests that the empowerment of women can lead to a more progressive mindset in future generations 3.
- **Sunita (House-help):** Sunita's character illustrates the intersection of class and gender issues. As a house-help, she faces her own struggles with domestic violence and societal expectations. Her experiences resonate with the broader theme of how women from different socio-economic backgrounds confront similar patriarchal challenges. Sunita's character adds depth to the narrative by showcasing the harsh realities faced by many women in India 9.
- **Swati (Brother's Girlfriend):** Swati's character adds another layer to the exploration of gender roles and expectations. As the girlfriend of Amrita's brother, she navigates her own relationship dynamics and societal pressures. Her presence in the film highlights the varying degrees of empowerment and the different choices women make within the confines of traditional expectations 1.
- **Sandhya (Amrita's Mother):** Sandhya represents the older generation of women who have often internalized patriarchal norms. Her character reflects the sacrifices made by women in previous generations, as she expresses contentment in her traditional role despite having given up her own dreams. This generational contrast serves to emphasize the evolving discourse on women's rights and empowerment 4.
- **Sulakshana (Mother-in-law):** Sulakshana embodies the traditional expectations placed on women within the family structure. Her character often reinforces patriarchal norms, showcasing the complexities of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law relationships. Through her interactions with Amrita, the film explores the pressures women face from their own families to conform to societal standards 5.
- **Netra (Lawyer):** Netra plays a crucial role in Amrita's journey towards empowerment by representing her in the legal battle for divorce. As a professional woman, Netra symbolizes the potential for women to reclaim their agency through legal means. Her character highlights the importance of legal support in challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for women's rights.

By showcasing characters from various backgrounds, including the educated lawyer Netra and the middle-class Amrita, *Thappad* emphasizes that abuse can occur in any household, regardless of social status. The dialogue between Netra and Amrita regarding the significance of a single slap serves as a pivotal moment in the film. Netra's initial dismissal of the incident reflects a common societal tendency to downplay acts of violence, especially when they seem minor. However, Amrita's firm response - "just one slap, but nahi maar sakta" - asserts her right to dignity and respect. This exchange underscores the idea that any form of violence, no matter how seemingly trivial, is unacceptable and should not be normalized.



Amrita's stance throughout the film reinforces her identity as a dignified and autonomous individual. By rejecting the notion that she can be treated as an object or a mere extension of her husband's desires, she asserts her claim to freedom of choice and self-respect. This portrayal challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the importance of recognizing women as fully evolved individuals with their own rights and aspirations. Amrita's journey throughout the film is one of empowerment through resistance. Her decision to stand up against her husband's violence and seek a divorce is a powerful statement against the normalization of abuse. It serves as an inspiration for other women, illustrating that they too can challenge oppressive dynamics and reclaim their agency.

The characters surrounding Amrita in *Thappad* collectively illustrate the diverse experiences of women in Indian society. Each character contributes to the film's exploration of themes such as empowerment, societal expectations, and the fight against patriarchy, ultimately reinforcing the message that women must support one another in their journeys toward independence and self-assertion. The film effectively engages with the plural representation of women by showcasing characters from diverse social positions, each reflecting unique experiences and challenges. This multifaceted portrayal enriches the narrative and underscores the complexity of women's issues in contemporary society.

By presenting a range of female characters, *Thappad* challenges the stereotypical representations of women in cinema. It moves beyond the binary of oppressed versus empowered women, instead showcasing a spectrum of experiences that reflect the realities of many women. This nuanced portrayal encourages viewers to recognize the diversity of women's lives and the systemic issues that affect them.

To conclude, *Thappad* effectively presents women as complex individuals with diverse backgrounds, aspirations, and challenges. By showcasing characters from various social strata, the film emphasizes that there is no singular experience of womanhood. Each character's journey reflects different societal pressures and personal struggles, allowing for a richer understanding of women's realities in contemporary India. The characters in the film embody different definitions of what it means to be a woman, shaped by their unique circumstances and experiences. For some, being a woman is tied to traditional roles within the family, while for others, it involves asserting independence and challenging societal norms. This plurality of womanhood reflects the varied ways women navigate their identities and roles in a patriarchal society. The portrayal of women in Indian cinema has undergone significant evolution, reflecting changing societal attitudes and contributing to the discourse on gender equality. While challenges persist, the industry's willingness to explore diverse narratives and empower female characters indicates a positive trajectory towards more equitable representation on screen. This evolution not only influences audience perceptions but also plays a vital role in shaping cultural attitudes towards women in society.

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