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**Redefining Gender Roles in Indian Cinema: A Critical Analysis of the Movie *Thappad***

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**ABSTRACT**

The present paper analyses the norms and practices for formulating gender roles in contemporary Indian society by scrutinizing Bollywood movies' impact on its global audience. This study also attempts to explore how Bollywood reconceptualises the concept of new women and encourages gender equality by promoting movements such as #MeToo. It also examines how Bollywood deconstructs patriarchal norms by making their women lead more empowered. The study also traverses the conventional depiction of females in Indian Cinema and later it analyses the movie *Thappad* and how its main lead challenges the conventional portrayals and withstands the prevailing gender stereotypes in their pursuit of empowerment.

***Keywords:*** *Equality, Bollywood, Indian Cinema, Patriarchal Norms, New Woman, Gender Disparity.*

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**Introduction**

Bollywood has presented women characters in a gamut of characterizations, comprising the stereotypical compassionate mother, the archetype of a powerless maiden, and the depiction of women who claim control over their own lives. These portrayals give an outlook into the multidimensionality of women’s experiences and identities. Bollywood's depiction of women has been the central issue of argument among academicians. The debate is often heated up due to the patriarchal set-up of the nation that has always placed women at the periphery and subordinate to men. Earlier women have conventionally played supporting roles and are often portrayed as relying upon male entities. Bollywood has often portrayed women characters as naive, docile, obedient wives or kind mothers whose only purpose is to serve as fuel for the hero's reversal of fortune or to be a diversion from the action.

Bollywood movies usually deal with the themes of the middle-class celebrating patriarchy, unity in joint family, and the virginity of women. Bollywood promotes male chauvinism and men are preferably given more important roles as compared to women. The Indian film business is one of the top annual makers of films and serves the largest global diaspora audience (*Dwyer*, 2006). Media plays a very significant role in creating attitudes and beliefs among its people regarding social issues that include gender roles and expectations arising from it. Therefore, movies serve as an important medium for transmitting social awareness and also trying to be a significant platform for entertainment for the masses.

Humans learn from observing others, so they try to adopt everything displayed in media as well (including actions). The kind of depiction of women in Indian cinema maintains and harmonizes male supremacy over females and women's survival in evolving Indian culture. Bollywood films leave a deep impression on their viewer's psyche thereby forming popular beliefs and perceptions. Whatever is presented in the movies, becomes deeply rooted in the mindset of the masses. According to Daryl Behm’s theory of Self-perception, “The way people perceive women to be represented in media can influence their attitudes towards women”. (1972, p.185). Thus, it can be perceived that filmmakers play a very important role in formulating beliefs and cultural attitudes among the masses about women through the depiction of women characters in their movies. Therefore, cinema can take up the responsibility to promote women's causes and display transformed women characters thereby contributing to the progress of gender equality.

For ages, Indian Cinema has showcased the matter of hierarchical orientation and domination of patriarchy through the depiction of males as superior and females as always inferior and submissive to male members of society. But now the trend has changed by bringing in newer facets of splitting cultural stereotypes, liberating female characters, and changing patterns of positive masculinity that need to be revealed and brought to the masses globally. One such movement that has played a very crucial role in raising awareness about sexual exploitation and gender discrimination in the Bollywood industry is the #MeToo movement. The movement started when former Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta came out and broke the silence accusing renowned Bollywood actor Nana Patekar, accusing him of sexual harassment on the sets of the film *Horn OK Please* in the year 2008. It was this incident that gave courage to many other actresses to raise their voices and come up with their harassment stories. With the growing trend of the #MeToo movement, women-centric stories were prioritized like never before. The movement marked a change in showcasing women in movies, with more nuanced and empowering roles written for them.

For the past ten years, there has been a drastic shift in the increase in Bollywood movies focusing on women because of the nation's growing mass conversation on women. Movies such as *Mardani, Mary Kom, Queen, Pink, Raazi, Neerja*, and *Thappad* focus on the struggle of women characters for their empowerment and transformation. Earlier in the previous decades, women characters were often presented as victims of violence or bashful powerless characters seeking upliftment. With the growing research on this topic, it becomes essential to analyse how contemporary Bollywood movies reconstruct women’s status and agency whilst promoting gender-neutral surroundings marking the arrival of “new women” in Indian Cinema. The Interpretation of the ‘New Women’ in Bollywood shifts from the earlier structure of displaying women as victims of exploitation, objects of desire, devoted, and marginalized. But in recent times, there has been an amalgamation of binary opposite characteristics, a concoction of local and traditional with the worldwide belief of “individuality and independence” (Nijhawan, 2009, p.107). The present paper provides a critical analysis of how resistance is displayed in the latest Indian movies on gender equality, power, and agency. Thus, it becomes significant to analyse and apprehend the narrative and discursive methods exercised in movies as well as the formation of women characters asserting their position and fighting with the male-dominated society in their quest for transformation and empowerment. The movie that I have selected for this study is Thappad which represents a woman’s emotional struggle that goes beyond domestic violence. By applying various concepts of cinema and culture theories, we scrutinize the emerging characters of gender dynamics in Indian Cinema.

The patriarchal ideals in Indian marriages favour male advantages and benefits which results in an unequal dispersal of power and agency. Women are always kept submissive to men in various ways. The patriarchal setup puts much of its emphasis on the bride's chastity and believes that a woman has to remain compliant towards her husband. Marriages in India are looked up as a social and cultural institution that reinforces patriarchal values and promotes the concept that men have the power to control women’s sexuality. The patriarchal tradition puts forth the fact that the family of the bride must give a huge dowry to the groom's family which reflects the idea women are treated as commodities to be bought and sold. These patriarchal values and traditions give power to men to exercise their control over women and treat them as objects of desire. Indian Cinema has traditionally been condemned for encouraging gender bias and treating women as a commodity. But in recent years, there has been a transformation in portraying strong and independent women characters. This transformation can be accredited to a more distinct group of writers and viewers which brings forth the change in societal attitudes towards gender representation. Bollywood’s prevalent misogynist culture is questioned by an increasing number of women audiences resulting in a new generation of directors, producers, and performers making more women-centric movies. The movie that I have selected for this discourse is *Thappad*, directed by Abhinav Sinha. It completely deconstructs the traditional and compressed ideals of womanhood. The movie is a tight slap on the long-lasting practices and beliefs attached to a woman in Indian marriages. The movie revolves around the life of the central character Amrita, who gave up her all ambition and restricted herself to a fake, happy marriage with her husband Vikram. The movie presents a powerful analysis of the customary, restrictive ideals of womanhood in Indian society. The main event that fuels up Amrita’s realization of the unjust conduct towards her and the restriction of the agency she has gone through within the marriage institution is a slap. A dramatic transformation is seen in Amrita’s character in the movie who from being a compliant and docile woman turns out to be a transformed woman who demands respect and equality. The movie not only deals with the experiences of Amrita but also examines the lives of Netra and Sunita who present different facets of women’s encounters that are molded by their different class backgrounds. Sunita is a domestic worker and is picturized as a sufferer of domestic abuse, totally unaware of her rights and individuality. This reflects how societal norms and expectations of class and occupation result in a lack of comprehension of one's rights and individuality. It also showcases how domestic abuse is normalized and received in lower strata of Indian society as Sunita, the victim, does not even think about leaving her husband. The character Sunita corresponds with the theory of intersectionality, which postulates that individuals' experiences of oppression are molded by intersecting identities such as class, caste, race, and gender. The other character, Netra is portrayed as a renowned and successful lawyer fighting for women's rights but she is struggling with herself. In the movie, Netra is presented as a woman who is struggling and trying to reconcile her professional and personal identity. In one of her dialogues with Amrita, she says, “Every relationship is flawed. So best mend it”, suggests her attitude, who even after specializing in women’s rights finds it correct that domestic violence is a result of societal expectations from women. Therefore, it can be seen, that all three women characters, Amrita, Sunita, and Netra display the intricacies of women’s problematic experiences of inequality and suffering in marriage and how these experiences are framed by societal norms, expectations of gender roles, and class status.

**Conclusion**

The movie faithfully represents the reinterpretation of gender roles in contemporary society and how it redefines itself. It also condemns the long-lasting patriarchal customs of Indian marriage. The depiction of domestic violence sufferers and their silence develops the understanding of audiences regarding gender-related issues. The movie, *Thappad,* also challenges the idea of homogenizing gender stereotypes by emphasizing the importance of gender equality.

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