



## THE DYNAMICS OF TOLERANCE VERSUS RESISTANCE VIS A VIS VIOLENCE AND MISOGYNY IN MARRIAGE: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF SCRIPT NARRATIVE THAPPAD (2017)

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### **Abstract**

*This paper aims to explore the emerging feminist trends in recent Hindi script narratives with reference to the movie Thappad (2017). The themes of subtle violence, self-effacement in and unrecognition of women's domestic role, casual insidious sexism, individualism, identity and self, are majorly dealt with in the analysis of the narrative. How the dialectics of tolerance and resistance function in portrayal of contemporary feminism. The film is known for intersecting feminisms across social classes. The analysis seeks to bring out the different embedded notions in society and family of the ideology of patriarchal oppression. It looks into how emerging female protagonists deconstruct this ideology via unconventional modes of resistance and creation of unique paths of liberation and redemption for themselves.*

**Keywords:** - Feminist resistance, feminist tolerance, feminist cinematic trends, patriarchal oppression, domestic violence, feminist trends, standpoint epistemology, embodied experienter.

### **Introduction:**

The dictionary *Merriam - Webster* defines tolerance as, “an indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own” while resistance can be defined as critique of or challenge to the dominant ideology (“Tolerance”, 2.a). A theory of feminist resistance entails twofold functions- (I) how women express a combination of behaviors which confront, resist or evade the dominant ideology, here, patriarchy. (II) how acts of resistance lead to transformational experiences for women within marginalized or oppressed discourses.

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The opening scene of the film portrays an act of subtle resistance on the part of the women which is an emerging feminist trend – the dissociation of happiness or fulfilment from marriage. The ideal image of a happy marriage is shattering and the trend is towards dissolving the necessity of marriage reminding of the critique of ‘angel in the house’ ideal.

Netra Jaisingh, a lawyer by profession, is the wife of renowned journalist, Rohit Jaisingh. She becomes the legal aid of the female protagonist. She is in an extramarital affair with Priyan. When asked by Priyan who she is - one who fights in the court, one trying to find her place in her marriage or one who is with him right then; her answer that *‘She does not know; all the three have been mingled’* shows a woman struggling with the connection to herself. The conflicting identities have disrupted her self-concept. “Influenced by the postmodern and deconstructionist philosophers of the late twentieth century, postmodern feminists, reject an essentialist notion of self-identity. The self is always changing or is never the same from moment to moment” (Scholz 99). She is unapologetic and guiltless about this relation. Legitimizing an extramarital affair reflects the call of women for their right to happiness with, and freedom of, a partner. It may entail blurring the boundary of fidelity to only one male partner. The transforming feminine consciousness is more aware to find the space of its happiness, if not attained in the marital relationship, rewriting traditional morality to normalize new morality.

Another unconventional scenario is in a role reversal when Shivani’s daughter is looking a suitable partner for her single widowed mother with a resolve to settle her. Usually, mothers look for a suitable partner to get their daughters settled. Though Shivani has not approved of any of her suggestions yet, the daughter is concerned that her mother would be alone then.

Contemporary feminism is becoming more inclusive to include the concerns and voices of “youth, poor women, women from rural areas, and many other women and groups previously marginalized from the workings of feminist theory and the ranks of feminist activists” (Scholz 117). Sunita, the protagonist’s housemaid, apparently not so educated and belonging to working class, is conscious and aware to resist the implied accusations of infertility by her husband along with demanding dignity, respect and love in return of her devotion to the household. “Status is dependent upon the economic, social and educational circumstances of class” (Millett 49). The male ego and pride often blind the man to see the fact that he is equally responsible in the process of conception. Her resistance questions that why only woman is always held responsible in cases of failure to conceive and bear a child? Sunita’s husband is portrayed as an abusive husband who does not need a specific reason to inflict physical violence upon her. He cites, ‘Do I need licence to slap you?’ The course of action adopted by Sunita is that of temporary escape like that of a prey from its predator which speaks of subtle resistance prompted by self-defense. “The “aristocracy of sex”, Stanton found ... transcended all divisions by class, family or ethnicity (Singh 96).”



### The Dynamics of Tolerance and Resistance in the Institution of Family and Marriage

“Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society – a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole” (Millett 45). The woman protagonist Amrita not only cares for and supports her husband, Vikram, but also has made his dream and vision as that of her own. She does it all along with lovingly taking care of her diabetic mother-in-law. She considers marriage an ideal gateway to happiness. Marriage is a haven of bliss and fortune for her. Her investment in the household and her husband’s life is shown in her fixed mechanical daily routine of getting up at 6 AM, picking up newspaper and milk, making lemongrass ginger tea, watering the plants, clicking a photo of the ‘blue’ sky, checking her mother-in-law’s sugar level, etc.

Amrita’s ‘effort and care’ for her husband is evident when she attempts to perform a conventional role of a housewife. Cooking is not her cup of tea but she tries to cook for her husband during which she burns her hand. Concerned that he should have something to eat before leaving when he gets a call from the office to be a little early, she forgets her paining injury and runs after him to plead to eat a bite of his breakfast, hands over his files, lunch, wallet, etc. She is trying to fit in the role of a perfect and ideal wife imitating her mother-in-law.

The film explicitly brings out the gender prejudices ingrained in the male psyche as well. While driving to office, Vikram’s gender consciousness is exhibited when he is irritated with the women driving the car on the road. It is a gender stereotype that driving sophisticated vehicles is a skill naturally gifted to the male gender and the women are supposed to lack the knack to drive it safely. Driving, as an activity, is associated with power, control, aggression, thrill- all the virtues reserved for the male. The film’s director, Anubhav Sinha, stated in an interview “Driving is about making instant decisions. Women were not trained to make decisions. They were trained to follow decisions” (“#Thappad: Women always the Canvas” 07:45 - 07:58).

The intergenerational nature of denigration of a woman if she fails to fulfil the expected gendered roles is reflected in how intersection between such denigration and children’s exposure to it can produce patriarchy and perpetuate gender inequality in future generations. Vikram has learnt gender normativity from his upbringing and is misogynistic to a certain extent due to exposure to such family environment. His misogyny is expressed in many instances in the film one of which is as follows. When Amrita is seeing Vikram off, they watch their neighbour Shivani drive to work in a new car. Amrita asks if she should also learn to drive. Vikram utters with sneer that first she should learn to cook *paranthas* without burning her hands. It seems an attempt to belittle her abilities and infantilize her enforcing a condition that performing a conventional role is necessary to perform an unconventional role. Vikram is also surprised at what Shivani does that she again bought a new car. The idea that a

woman can fulfil her material needs herself or progress materially on her own being financially independent is shocking to the male or social psyche. “*Mehnat*”, (hard work) replies Amrita. The emerging sorority and solidarity among women are shown in the bond of Shivani and Amrita, in the support that the latter gives to the former refuting the claim of former feminists like Millett that there is “the presence in women of the expected traits of minority status: group self-hatred and self-rejection, a contempt both for herself and for her fellows - the result of... reiteration of her inferiority which she eventually accepts as a fact” (78).

After Vikram slaps his wife in front of family and colleagues, in the heat of the moment of argumentation with his boss over his thwarted promotion, the response of the mother-in-law highlights the normative acceptance of men’s use of violence, rigid expectations around appropriate gender roles and behaviours and persistence of victim blaming attitude. Instead of criticising Vikram’s behaviour, she expects her daughter-in-law to not only tolerate his violence but also to focus on social etiquette as the lady of the house and hostess despite of her agony. “Crenshaw argued that intersectional thinking was not only desirable but necessary to adequately and accurately challenge the violence in women’s lives” (Scholz 35). Sunita induces that all men raise their hands on their wives; she uselessly curses her husband.

Amrita’s blank stare suggests that she expects from her mother-in-law some remedial response either sympathizing with her or talking to her son about it. This expectation comes from being not just a woman but also a human. The self-centrism of the man is revealed in Vikram’s legitimization as he is more bothered about what people would be thinking about him.

An important critical inquiry here is why does she take the time of these few days to come to the decision of separating from her husband after the incidence of slapping? It took her some time to reconsider her marriage. The veil is lifted off from her well -meaning in-law family. She was defined as a woman only in a certain role and not as just another human. She realises what Luce Irigaray has advocated that according to the social nature of women, they appear as use value and exchange value in one - as a mother and thus as a natural reproducer and as virgins where they become pure exchange value. “A commodity - a woman – is divided into two irreconcilable bodies: her natural body and her socially valued, exchangeable body” (179). She evaluates her place in the marital and familial hierarchy of relationship. What does she stand for, for her family, her husband? What is her value beyond the role of a house-wife? What did she get or gain and what did she give or lose in the bargain or quest of becoming a good wife?

To Vikram’s assurance that it happened once and will not happen again, she replies what if this ‘once’ does not get out of her mind? Lenor Walker’s ‘Cycle of Violence’ advocates that

in case of domestic violence, the person who perpetrates the violence is often very loving and contrite. Batterers will often promise that they will never hit their loved one again.

Applying Nancy Hartsock's **Standpoint Epistemology**, based in Marxist thought, that the oppressed gain a vision through their work and struggle in a stratified society, makes a woman an **embodied experiencer**. This epistemology takes action on organisational egocentrism. New knowers result in new values, problematics and relevancies. A standpoint is context dependent, based in time and place. Another third wave insight into domestic violence is the way a woman subjectively experiences her relationship with her abuser.

The emerging feminist trend is the shift in core value of a woman. Love, happiness and self-respect are her core values rather than traditionally interpellated value of emotionally binding the family together. Barkha Dutt while interviewing the film's director states, "The slap is a context for Amrita to actually look at everything that is going on in her marriage, including the element of huge sacrifice, including the element of having put herself in the background to create this perfect environment for her husband" ("#Thappad: Women always the Canvas" 02:10 - 02:28).

*"Jod ke rakhni pade koi cheez to matlab tuti hui hai na"*. This statement is the most powerful resistance to the interpellated norm of women's essential duty as the binding force of family. The course of remedy adopted by the protagonist is unique and innovative. She does not completely sever ties from her in-law family or refuse to perform her duties towards it. That one slap clarified her vision to see clearly what she had been ignoring and had been moving on. She could see all unfair things. It woke her up to a lot of things happening over years which she had normalized. They suddenly become visible to her after that slap. She is a woman who is not living to her full potential in this marriage and is taken for granted. The slap actually just triggers it. That slap made her realize that she wants just 'respect and happiness' from life like the Amrita in college.

The stakes become complicated when their expected child comes into the picture. Her refusal to betray her inner calling is evident when Amrita says that if she stays with him, she would ruin three lives - his, hers and the child's. Her unconventional choice is in the assurance to him that the child belongs to both of them and it will stay so. She charts a path for herself where she will fulfil and discharge maternal duties, bring up the child not depriving him of paternal affiliations. The wisdom of Amrita's father reflects a progressive stand for a girl's father as he understands and supports his daughter in her stand. But this empowerment to her by him is not without a bitter note of caution that right does not necessarily entail happiness. The life ahead for her will be fraught with challenges from society and responsibility as a single parent.

Vikram offering Amrita a hefty alimony, in cash and kind, in exchange for the full custody of the unborn child deconstructs to a simple material objectification of the woman and the child. Vikram, as his last resort, tries to persuade her to return home for the sake of his mother who is waiting for her grandchild, here he taps on maternal continuum again projecting the societal notion that motherhood is the ultimate essence of womanhood for which she can compromise upon her basic rights as an individual or as a human. She makes it clear that she has no intention to take the child away from Vikram's family but at the same time her child is not 'saleable'. She just wants joint custody of their child.

The question of his superior, Rajhans, to Vikram during the office celebration of his appointment in London, "Would you have hit me or your boss, Mr. Thapar because you were very upset with us?" is a subtle insight into the prejudice against the other sex as inferior and weaker ingrained in male psyche. It is a counter-argument to all the justifications given by Vikram earlier. Ambition - fueled aggression would perhaps never vent out where there is higher hierarchy of masculine power.

In the prayer – meeting for the unborn child kept by her mother-in-law, Amrita in a heart-to-heart conversation expresses her inner turmoil of feelings. She never answered 'housewife' when anyone would ask her what she wished to grow up as. She is thankful for the love she received from Vikram's family but that night she felt that all that love was for 'Vikram's wife' and not her. Women, especially after marriage, are not perceived beyond a gendered role. She uniquely navigates her unconventional choice and her balanced negotiation without making her fight her child's fight or anyone else's. The rising consciousness towards something more insidious in our homes and relations that we don't pay attention to is reflected in Sulakshana's acceptance that the fault is not Amrita's but of the mothers and fathers who never teach their sons that 'this' (to slap) is not their right. Her admittance that, 'Mothers, who tell their daughters to quietly bear, are at fault' brings conscious attention to the casual insidious sexism of our lives.

The color themes too in visual background are dictated symbolically by a contrast of two major colors – blue and yellow. The existence in the house when Amrita is a devoted housewife is marked by blue- blue curtains, upholstery, even Amrita's salwar suits are blue colored – since it was Vikram's favorite color. Even Vikram's crisp blue shirts dictate that this world is an extension of Vikram. When Amrita conducts her dance class, the color yellow is observable in the background of the frame. In fact, whenever Amrita performs an activity that is independent of Vikram or life around him, the yellow theme underscores it, viz. when Amrita meets with lawyer to make her stand for divorce clear or when she spends time with her own family. She declares that in this new blue world, she completely forgot that her favorite color was actually 'yellow'. Blue stands for frigidity, emotional distance and barrenness as a consequence of isolation and even despair. Yellow on the other hand denotes joy, life, vitality, exuberance and youthfulness. Rosheena Zehra writes in her review titled

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*Thappad's Unspoken Characters: The Yellow and Blue of Amrita-Vikram's Life* that, "The predominance of a single color denotes a single identity, the whole house has clearly been marked as the territory of one character, painted with a single brush stroke...the two colors... are used to drive home the message about the contrast in who Amrita truly was and who she thought she should be."

According to her husband, Netra has been able to bag high profile cases in her legal practice of five years because she has the privilege of being the daughter-in-law of his father who is a reputed Justice and the privilege of being his wife. As a rippling effect of Amrita's bold and unconventional stand, other women also experience a shift in their vision. Netra realizes that she can no-more compromise on her self-respect by choosing to live in a marriage where she is devalued and her self-worth in terms of her capabilities and basic human dignity are denied to her constantly by her husband who imposes the favor of his patriarchal superiority. So, she decides to leave her father-in-law's office to begin her own firm. While for Sunita, finally, her husband's beating gets above her threshold and she challenges him to kill her. When he cannot do so, she, for the first time, musters the courage to slap him back and slaps him again and again until she breaks down.

The standpoint epistemology of feminism, which I have applied to the analysis of these narratives, favours the plurality of situated standpoints with appreciation of intersecting, marginalised identities. Shivani assures her daughter, who has decided to give up looking for a partner for her mother, that she is happy the way she is. Her character presents a role model that for a happy life for a woman, the presence or support of a man is not essential and that she can live independent of a man happily.

Vikram talks to Amrita of his realization of overcoming the belief that being a man of the house, everyone should just support him and his goals are always more important than other people's happiness or goals. He admits that he did not have the right to slap her and he never apologized to her actually. This is the most significant achievement of the film.

A survey through a questionnaire was conducted among 35 viewers of the movie across age group of 23-69 including both men and women. To the question, "What do you think about the step taken by Amrita to address the treatment meted out to her by her in-laws and husband?", the over-all response emerged that it is a bold step towards rejection of normalized violence and its silent endurance expected in marriage. This stand by her aims to redefine boundaries for equality and dignity of a woman in relationships. It restructures the society in a gender sensitized manner. Women face many kinds of *thappad* – emotional, social and financial. To one of the respondents, her step is symbolic because in the beginning it is just a slap and then it might be anything. To another respondent, this headstrongness by still being respectful to her husband and in-laws takes a lot of strength. Though some respondents were skeptical too about this step. While some others consider this decision as

exaggerated and unnecessary. According to them, the slap was result of sublimated anguish not meant to insult Amrita.

The next question in the survey was, “What are the dynamics of tolerance vis a vis resistance when it comes to physical violence in marriage”? The general response converges that tolerance is socially engendered in women in the name of preserving family harmony or social order. The cultural norms perpetuate violence as unavoidable imperfections. Legal frameworks, economic factors, psychological conditioning influence these dynamics in marital violence. A respondent says, “Tolerance often stems from cultural acceptance, social pressure, emotional dependence, financial constraints, and legal inefficiencies. In contrast, resistance is driven by awareness, legal empowerment, changing gender norms, psychological strength, and support systems. While traditional structures encourage endurance, evolving socio-legal frameworks are shifting attitudes toward zero tolerance for domestic violence”. Another respondent answers, “The first time you stay silent, you lose the right to speak. Resistance isn’t rebellion, it’s survival” (Saxena).

The final question pertaining to the movie was, “What are the dynamics of tolerance vis a vis resistance when it comes to subtle misogyny in marriage”? A response highlights, “She also faces emotional gaslighting... care disguises the controlled decisions & behaviour which the male makes for the female. Her asserting personal boundaries & challenging the unequal behaviour (when she confronts her mother-in-law) is also her way to speak the unspeakable in marriage.” Other responses were “Dialogue is a form of resistance to address subtle misogyny” and “It starts with wilful blindness of misogyny in marriage”. The majority of responses express the sense in the following response, “Tolerance arises from internalized misogyny, social pressure, financial constraints, and lack of awareness, leading women to accept discrimination as normal. In contrast, resistance is driven by education, changing gender norms, financial independence, legal support, and strong social networks. While traditional structures promote tolerance, increasing awareness and empowerment are fostering greater resistance and advocacy for equality in marriage” (Saxena).

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