

*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition on Film Criticism 2020*Certificate of Merit

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**Thappad**

'Thappad' begins with orange candy ice-cream. Women eating orange candy ice-cream. An image with a history of advertising sexuality in ice-cream is merged into the opening scenes, significantly so as the women were either engaged to be married or already married or talking about a future desirable marriage like Sania and her mother. Being alone was not desirable and a young girl like Sania understood that as she sought out a husband for her mother. Anubhav Sinha beautifully crafts each scene to be connected with each other through words or images and here, the orange candy connected the lives of six women (Another instance would be a pink file, Pinkie getting married and Amu's pink nightdress) and the jovial background music tries to create an aura of happiness. This is the first instance of incongruence between the music and the scene as one woman is left by her husband on the road as she speaks of his physical abuse and possible infertility. She throws the candy after him. At this instance, the audience is allowed to laugh.

Amu brilliantly played by Taapsee Pannu enters as a woman whose life revolved around her husband Vikram and she was happy with it. Netra's male-friend tells her that she had three identities. Who was she actually? The film tries to show the multiple identities that women are forced to inhabit: Amu had to try and be Vikram's mother and cook. Food and family become significant tropes as eating becomes a communal affair, the space where Amu loses her selfhood in trying to be a good wife and later, heals in her parents' place as a space where she doesn't need to cook.

Families welcomed each other through food and in Vikram's father's family, eating was cold suggesting breakdown and tension. Cooking is a tension filled space for Amu, for Vikram's mother who was abused by her in-laws for it and then learnt how to cook, for Amu's mother who boiled the tea excessively. Home was Amu's space as Vikram clarified that she should be learning to cook first and then drive a car. Amu sacrificed her dancing which

her father said would have taken her places, but she comically retorted that where would she go beyond London, like the West was the epitome of success. She is the one responsible for Vikram's success as the latter fails to piece his personal life after she leaves.

The dynamics of master-slave is invoked as Vikram's friend mentions that Vikram has converted him into his slave and talks about Miranda, whom Vikram's boss had bought onboard to green-light Vikram's promotion and one cannot but think of Shakespeare's *'The Tempest'*. The dialogue around racism, which is not dealt in the film in its prioritisation of domestic violence, is invoked in these allusions. It was the fact that a white man was preferred over Vikram that made him lash out towards Amu, and the film questions why he lashed out in such a manner that he had even justified to himself. The question of slavery was also invoked in the context of marriage as Vikram's friend considered marriage to be slavery, while Amu considered it to be a space of happiness.

As she began each day's routine, the energetic song in the background mentions that she was satisfied in her small world. Amu cut the Aloe vera and made Vikram's tea to the lyrics of 'working girl' which subtly pointed out the fact that what Amu did was work too. The cutting of the Aloe vera for Vikram almost becomes a personal harm to herself and in her parents' house, she is shown gardening. Her maid's physical abuse is recounted dramatically like a story that Amu wants to listen and laugh at, calling the maid an actress. A comic escape valve is always provided. Until the slap.

Time stops and for the first time it is the camera that revolves around Amu focusing on her and blurring the background. People still danced, ignorant of what passed and as the scene is cut upon her mother-in-law mentioning that she should go down as there were people there. We are not privy to what Amu does and the scene cuts.

Narratives of violence existed before Vikram's abuse. But after the slap, they united in their reaction

to the slap as other women like Netra, who was treated like a prop in a ceremony by her husband, begin to get involved with Amu. In Swati's relationship, the cover of happiness is shoved away much like Amu's uncovering of the bed, which finally leads to her breaking down after days of silent, numb behaviour within the routine marriage demanded of her, with Vikram pretending things were okay and expecting her to move on. Re-watching 'Thappad' shocked me towards my own complacency towards the moment of the slap that said so much in the silence that followed. Writing about the cycle, I had myself become a part of it over the years. A scene depicts the irony of men asking women to smile as Vikram takes her out to a restaurant and asks her to smile against a background of romantic music. Food cannot mend anything anymore and Amu leaves by providing food for Vikram. All men are implicated in being unable to provide for themselves as Amu sees her brother being similarly coddled by her mother.

The fact that women perpetuate patriarchy is exhibited as Vikram's mother asks Amu about Vikram and Amu's mother wonders why Amu left her own home to come to her parents' house. Vikram is so self-absorbed in the injustice done to him and his life that he fails to realise Amu has a personality of her own (beautifully portrayed in stills of Amu standing alone against a blue wall) until the very end. When such incidents happen, society looks for a solution: Amu's mother desired one by normalising the slap, Vikram wanted it by buying Amu jewellery and Netra advised Amu that it was the only way things could be solved amicably. Divorce is never viewed suitably in society and Amu's mother's story of sacrificing her desires to be a singer to keep the family together becomes the tale of all women. Mothers spend their lives on others' happiness, as Amu's father said, which changed their identities and Amu's mother rightly mentions it was the family who made her the way she was. All men are implicated in their silence upon seeing women sacrificing their lives.

After phases of not speaking, Amu begins mimicking Vikram as he arrives to take her home

and once again Shakespeare's Caliban is evoked with the slave ironically mimicking the master's words as Amu tries to show Vikram that her struggles were akin to his, which he fails to see. The fact that it may happen again is implicit in Vikram's considering women shouldn't be allowed to drive, his non-apology and the nonchalant way he signalled for Amu to meet his boss during the party as if he were beckoning an animal. As Amu gets a legal notice, she meets Netra who just won a case on sexual harassment and is herself raped by her husband upon her win, who incites her to doubt her talent. Every woman had lost their self-respect in the hands of their partners and abuse came from people they loved and lived with. Limits were drawn, like Amu returning home after precisely one hour of teaching. Limits are eliminated in the scene where Amu crosses the road after the visit to Netra and we see her outside the space of a home for the first time. The idea is broadened in the last scene as a pregnant Amu drives a car from the Family Court, independent.

Legalities bring out another side of marriages as mere contracts where love is secondary. And if there is love, violence becomes an expression of love,

which must be taken into stride to keep the family together. Amu's pregnancy and Vikram's claim over the baby highlights the necessity to keep lineage flowing. Even though Vikram's advisors tell him to leave Amu for the baby, the expressions on his face reveal he is unwilling. The same occurs when he sees Amu as she asks for papers, but then resorts to violent verbal dialogue.

The film showed that society was about pretence, but does it end trying to bridge the structures it had dismantled? It is only when men like Vikram's senior or his lawyer finally say he made a mistake, is the last scene of apology constructed, which falls flat as the sudden shift seems stilted, performative at certain points.

But 'Thappad' is not a battleground between men and women. It begins with that and shifts away from differences to men understanding their privileges and abandoning them to 'reboot' and build a better, more understanding life with women. As Amu's father poem mentions 'Tera bhi ek aasma ho, aur mera bhi ek aasma ho' the last scenes of happy mutual living elucidates Sinha's vision.

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