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FROM ORTHODOXY TO THE UNIVERSAL LOGIC OF HUMAN RIGHTS: A CASE STUDY OF FILM *THAPPAD* (*THE SLAP*)

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Abstract: *This article analyses the film* Thappad (The Slap) *(2020) directed by Anubhav Sinha, which portrays slapping as a form of domestic abuse and a violation of women's right to self-respect. This study investigates the incorporation of Universal Human Rights principles into the discourse of Hindi cinema. Through textual analysis of the film text, the paper examines how the film employs the language of rights as a counter-narrative against patriarchal ideologies, promoting gender equality and dignity within domestic settings. It argues that by countering the conservative cultural perspectives pertaining to spousal abuse through the discourse and philosophy of Human Rights, the film contributes to societal transformation. The paper identifies a shift in the film's discourse from traditional, orthodox narratives to universal narratives centred around rights.*

Keywords*: cultural orthodoxy, domestic violence, self-respect, human rights, film*

1. Introduction

Of all forms of physical violence, slapping is the most common, pervasive form of domestic abuse in India (IIPS, 2017) but is barely included in marital abuse debates (Bharat, 2021). A National Family Health Survey or NFHS (conducted in 2014-2015) has confirmed that 27 per cent of married women in India reported slaps by their husbands as very common.

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At least 10 per cent of them suffered emotional violence through insult and humiliation by their husbands in front of others (IIPS, 2017). In India, the issue of spousal abuse, specifically husbands slapping their wives, is unfortunately not widely recognized as a form of abuse but rather seen as a husband's entitlement over his wife. This societal belief is also reflected in most Bollywood family dramas, where the portrayal of husbands slapping their wives is often normalized and accepted. Violence within the context of marital relationships is typically acknowledged as violent and abusive only when it results in significant physical harm or even death. *Thappad* (*The Slap*), directed by Anubhav Sinha (2020), stands out as the inaugural Hindi film to depict slapping as a manifestation of domestic abuse and an infringement of women's rights. The title *The Slap* symbolizes "gender microaggressions" (Joshi, 2020, p. 9) between husband and wife in conjugal relations. The film's content emphasizes the emotional violence that can be found in microaggressions like slapping and how it compromises a woman's individual agency and autonomy.

The film narrates the tale of Amrita (Taapsee Pannu) and Vikram (Pavail Gulati), a married couple residing in an affluent neighbourhood of Delhi. Amrita is portrayed as a capable homemaker. She deeply loves her ambitious husband and fulfils the role of a supportive and encouraging friend to him (Mehta, 2020). In the opening sequence of the film, Vikram decides to celebrate his appointment as Head of the London office by hosting a party. But during the party, he discovers that he has been stripped of his position as Head. Amidst the gathering, he feels deeply embarrassed. He engages in a heated argument with one of his employers present at the party. When Amrita intervenes between him and the employer, Vikram slaps Amrita. This is the pivotal event, and the entire film revolves around this incident, presenting a platform for Amrita to assert her rights in the face of abuse and challenge the societal norms that acknowledge microaggressions as acceptable behaviour. The slap leaves Amrita feeling humiliated, as she perceives herself as merely a vessel for her husband's anger and resentment. She anxiously awaits Vikram's apologies and seeks confirmation from his family that what transpired was indeed wrong. However, the incident is seemingly justified within the framework of societal norms, as a slap is not conceived as violence and she never gets an apology.

The film showcases the crucial elements of an honour-based family system which entails treating male honour transgressions with utmost seriousness, while considering female honour violations as normal occurrences. In such honour-centric societies, men are tasked with exerting control over women to safeguard their own honour and reputation. This system

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designates males as active guardians of honour, while females are relegated to passive objects, subject to the "currency of honour and shame" (Kamir, 2019, p. 312), ultimately devalued for the benefit of the family and male members. Amrita, her mother Sandhya (Ratna Pathak Shah), mother-in-law Sulakshana (Tanvi Azmi), and the lawyer and activist Netra (Maya Sarao) experience misrecognition of their personal interests, aspirations, and choices. Mattias Iser (2013) observes that such misrecognition reduces women to just social objects that can't exist independently. These women become a means to an end, and the feminine roles they play are primarily a means to define men and masculinity (Becker, 1999). The central focus of this objectification lies within the institution of marriage, which imposes conditions on women that primarily serve to maintain gendered hierarchies within the family and ensure the stability of the marital union (Manuvel, 2020). Realizing her secondary status as a wife, Amrita makes the ground-breaking decision to seek a divorce from her husband, an unprecedented choice for an Indian woman. In Indian society, the idea of getting a divorce as a protest against a mere slap is unimaginable. Nevertheless, the film utilizes this particular slap incident to make the audience witness the diverse reactions of individuals, regardless of gender or class, when confronted with visibly unjust acts of violence. It problematizes the seemingly normal act of slapping by positing the question: Could a mere slap be categorized as a form and manifestation of domestic violence? (Mehta, 2020)

The depiction of Amrita as a confident and informed modern woman, who is well aware of her legal and citizenship rights, challenges the traditional idealization of women in Hindi films as "the epitome of virtue and values" (Tere, 2012, p. 2). She firmly asserts that the slap violates her dignity and self-respect, and challenges the prevailing cultural narratives that normalize such acts. This portrayal recognizes the growing cultural awareness surrounding domestic violence in India and the evolving role of films as "new sites for modernism" (Rajadhyaksha, 2010, p. 37). This shift in cinematic culture is accompanied by significant socio-political and legal transformations that have taken place over the last forty years, both within the country and globally. These changes involve interconnected "transnational formations" (Rao, 2007, p. 58) that influence and shape global culture through the "transnational circulation of ideologies" (Schaefer & Karan, 2011, p. 701; Chowdhury, 2021). The transnational influence in cinema resulted in a hybrid cinematic culture containing both global and local elements (Matusitz & Payano, 2011). Owing to this trend, other than creating a modern "celluloid woman" (Tere, 2012, p. 8) like Amrita, the film stands out for its innovative use of language. It introduces a discourse centred around modern values and rights

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such as self-respect, dignity, and equality to counter the orthodox patriarchal narratives. Since the 1990s, according to McClennen and Slaughter (2009), the Human Rights movement has given literature and film a consistent and universal vocabulary for expressing morality, immorality, justice, and injustice. Human Rights, as Ignatieff (2000) comments, has become "the lingua franca of global moral thought" (p. 320) and through cultural texts, it "worked to combat the oppression of women" (Anker, 2012, p. 1). In a novel development for Hindi cinema, the film *Thappad*'s narrative and graphics depict the circumstances in which women's rights are infringed in private settings. This new cinematic language for describing a violation of rights is what Pramod K. Nayar (2016) considers the popular construction of legal narratives for cultural purposes. He asserts that Human Rights values have now permeated fields other than law and politics, such as the arts, literature, film, and other aspects of popular culture (Hunt, 2007; Nayar, 2009; Nayar, 2012). Ram Devineni, a documentary filmmaker, opines that (sexual) violence against women in India is "not a legal issue; rather, it was a cultural problem" (Bhattacharjee et al., 2022, p. 621). Even domestic violence is no exception. Hence, mere legal remedies and redressal cannot be sufficient to deal with the problem. Active cultural intervention is also necessary, and films can be an effective tool for this purpose. Nayar argues that, while popular cultural texts like films may not hold evidentiary value in legal or judicial arguments, they possess a significant emotional influence on the collective imagination of the masses. This emotional impact has the potential to rectify cultural and moral missteps committed by society, thereby serving a corrective purpose and contributing to "the remaking of a civil society" (Nayar, 2009, p. 2; Nayar, 2012).

The qualitative methodology employed in this article revolves around analysing the influence of realistic cinema on society and its potential for generating social change. Kamir's feminist film theory of "law films" (Kamir, 2006, p. 2) is used to explore how popular fiction films influence society's understanding of legal discussions such as domestic violence and serve as vehicles of the rule of law. Relying on Kamir's theoretical underpinnings, this article views films as the primary and prevailing form of discourse through which society tells its stories and shapes its identity. Moreover, drawing from the "filmic reality" lens, as defined by Rushton (2013, p. 2), the paper reads the film as a creator of new realities and possibilities and as a powerful medium to generate social change, raise awareness, and encourage dialogue about crucial social issues. This paper examines the movie *Thappad* through textual analysis, aiming to explore the influence of the Universal Human Rights in the discourse of Hindi cinema. The argument put forth is that, while the cultural understanding of domestic violence

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remains orthodox, principles of rights have been used in cultural mediums like films to promote gender equality and dignity within domestic settings. The paper highlights how the film employs Human Rights principles in its storytelling, using the language of rights as a counter-narrative against patriarchal ideologies. Ultimately, it argues that by countering the conservative cultural perspectives pertaining to spousal abuse through the discourse and philosophy of Human Rights, the film contributes to societal transformation. The paper identifies a shift in the film's discourse from traditional to universal narratives centred around rights.

2. Inequality in the home space

The idea of gender equality is complex, as it intersects with biology, religion, sociology, economy, and politics (Tere, 2012). Probably for this reason, even in the 73rd year of the incorporation of the principle of equality in the Constitution of India, the right to equality was hardly realized in the domestic spaces for women. NFHS-4 data confirms that domestic violence remains one of the major manifestations of the violation of the rights of women to equality and the right to life with dignity (Suri et al., 2022; Agrawal, 2021). Understanding the nature and manifestations of inequality beyond data can be challenging due to the lack of readily available mediums to observe it. To bridge this gap, films like *Thappad* step in to depict and portray the dynamics of gender inequality in domestic settings. The film sheds light on the prevailing disparities between men's and women's rights within Indian households. It illustrates the various ways in which inequality persists between husband and wife, offering a visual representation of this societal issue. The film decodes the slap as a consequence of the subordinate position of women in households and narrativizes how a woman becomes someone who can be slapped/ abused with impunity.

Amrita wanted to become a dancer. However, she has to compromise after she gets married to Vikram and, like a typical Indian wife, her only job remains to keep her husband happy (Mungle, 2020). She says:

> *Vikram ko hi khus rakhne mein itni busy ho gayi ki mujhe yaad hi nahin raha ki blue to mera favourite colour tha hi nahin kabhi…Mujhe laga housewife bhi banungi to best. Koshish karti rahi* (I was so busy keeping Vikram happy that I forgot blue was not my favourite colour…Then I thought I may not be the best dancer, but I can become the world's best housewife. I tried very hard. I promise)[1] (Sinha, 2020).

[1] This and subsequent translations of film lines were made by the authors of this article.

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Amrita discovers how, gradually, all her goals, hobbies, and economic and social security have been diminished and aligned with those of her husband's. She wonders how a woman's reliance on her spouse for socioeconomic security has not only been celebrated but also reinforced. Vikram actively attempts to exert control over his wife. He encourages her wifely obligations and only acknowledges attributes that conform to patriarchal roles prescribed for a wife (Lakshmi, 2020). When Amrita proposes to learn to drive a car, with a teasing smile, Vikram says: "*Pehle parathe toh banale… bina hath jalaye*... (First make parathas... without burning your fingers)." (Sinha, 2020) According to Iser (2013), recognizing a woman's roles and activities as a traditional wife while discouraging her from taking other career opportunities or hobbies is a form of psychological resistance to her autonomy and agency. Such normative psychological resistance is manifested on several occasions in the film. Amrita says: "*Bachpan mein sab mujhse poochhte the Amrita badi hoke kya banegi. Mujhe yaad nahi ki kabhi maine kaha ho housewife banungi* (Everyone asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. I don't remember saying I wanted to be a housewife)." (Sinha, 2020) The point highlighted in this comment is that a husband can continue to aspire and desire to be a businessman, doctor, artist, and so on. However, a woman can only be a dutiful housewife after abandoning her job, autonomy, agency, and individuality (Manuvel, 2020).

Other female characters in the film, Sandhya and Sulakshana, are glorified as good wives; however, they also lack independent security and agency. Sandhya has to abandon her ambition of being an All India Radio vocalist in order to care for her husband and children. Sulakshana considers her sole responsibility to be making her family happy and content.

Amrita, Sandhya, and Sulakshana are frequently appraised based on their cooking abilities, a conventional position that a woman must fulfil. Amrita is frequently chastised for not knowing how to cook. Vikram claims that despite knowing she didn't know how to cook, he married her: "*Tumne sirf ek baar kaha shadi ke pehle ki tumhein khaana banaana nahin aata? Kuch kaha maine*? (Before we married you said you didn't know how to cook…Did I complain)?" (Sinha, 2020) Because of the typical social view that women belong in the kitchen, the husband believes that marrying a woman who does not know how to cook is a compromise (Manuvel, 2020). Similarly, Jayant (Kumud Mishra) repeatedly teases Sandhya, saying "*Bas Chaay thodi zyada ubaal deti hain* (You boil the tea too long)." (Sinha, 2020) Sulakshana's cooking skills are celebrated in the text but being a good cook becomes her only identity apart from being someone's wife. However, that too wasn't her choice but something that was forced upon her to be learnt and practised as her duty towards her family. She says that she learnt

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cooking after taunts and chastises: "*saalon saal gaalyin sun ke aaya hai banaana. Kabhi papaji se kabhi saas se* (I had to endure years of nagging first. Sometimes it was my husband. Or my mother-in-law)." (Sinha, 2020)

Sandhya complains to her husband Jayant that she had to suppress her aspirations of becoming a singer just to become a "good" wife. Despite knowing her dreams, Jayant never encouraged his wife to pursue her aspirations, as he was afraid of social criticism. Sandhya laments:

> *... [h]amari ichchayein nahin thin kya? Apni beti ko Sitara Devi banana chaahte the hum to mere papa bhi gawaana chahte the mujhe All India Radio pe. Par maarna pada na man? Ghar sambhalti, bachche sambhalti ya gaana gaati* (Didn't I have desires? I wanted Amu to become a dancer like Sitara Devi. My father wanted me to sing on All India Radio. But I had to compromise. Should I have looked after the house and the kids? Or sing songs?) (Sinha, 2020)

Women's care work has been demonstrated to be not only unpaid but also devoid of any acknowledgement. Even if acknowledgement is provided, it is recognized in the form of praise for patriarchal beliefs that reinforce gender norms. Jayant adds "*Sari zindagi dusro ki khusi me nikal di isne. Damaad ki Kachauri, meri Tehri aur Karan ka pasta* (She's spent her life making other people happy. Making *kachauri* for Vikram, *Tehri* for me and pasta for Karan)." (Sinha, 2020) Both Vikram and Jayant see their spouses' sacrifices as something natural and usual for women. As a result, the inequalities and humiliations that a woman encounters in the domestic realm are considered natural, acceptable, and necessary. Netra is a wife and a successful lawyer. Despite being a very successful and reputed lawyer, Netra's accomplishments are narrated as validation of being the wife of a successful man and the daughter-in-law of a successful lawyer. Netra's husband Rohit tells her:

> *5 saal ki practice mein tum jis profile ke cases handle karti ho that's a privilege. A privilege that comes to you because tum Justice Jaisingh ki bahu ho. Rohit Jaisingh ki biwi ho* (With only 5 years' experience, you have the top cases. Why? Because you're Justice Jaisingh's daughter-in-law. And you are Rohit Jaisingh's wife). (Sinha, 2020)

In 70 per cent of Hindi films, as Derné (1999) notes, women are shown to be mistreated and abused. These women are often portrayed as homemakers who willingly relinquish their rights and aspirations in favour of their families (Ramasubramanian & Oliver, 2003; Khan, 2016). However, *Thappad* presents women as individuals who courageously express their grievances about being denied their own individuality and being reduced to instruments in

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upholding the patriarchal institution of marriage. It foregrounds how they lose moral agency and autonomy in this process of maintaining patriarchy. The loss of agency and subjectivity helps patriarchy establish and maintain dominance (Iser, 2013). Andrea Mazingo (2014) identifies the dominance pattern in which the dominant and powerful (men) attempt to control the weak (women). Dominance is established through social and conventional manipulations and physical, sexual, and emotional violence and legitimized as normal and nothing harmful. Mazingo argues that such violent male behaviour emerges from the pre-existing societal position of power where the victim is made to believe it is acceptable (Mazingo, 2014).

Orit Kamir's theory of "dignitarian feminism" (Kamir, 2019, p. 304) best explains the concept of gender inequality. She proposes the theory to examine gender-based violence in terms of universal Human Rights, particularly from the standpoint of human dignity. According to Kamir, dignity should be the main organizing concept for a gender-equal socio-legal order. It is the cornerstone of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). She takes a dignity-based approach to addressing gender issues such as sexual harassment, rape, and domestic violence. Kamir believes that identifying, decoding, and criticising honour-based social constructs, customs, and behaviours will greatly assist feminism. Her notion of dignitarian feminism exposes the weaknesses in honour-based institutions. She exemplifies the competing coexistence of social hierarchies based on honour and dignity (Kamir, 2003; Kamir, 2019). Honour-based social and legal orders sustain patriarchal institutions, whereas dignity-based organizations may result in gender-equal social and legal regimes. The honour values degrade subjectivity, resulting in social, political, economic, and physical insecurity. As a result, dignitarian feminism sees honour as the primary impediment to obtaining equal respect for women (Kamir, 2003; Kamir, 2019).

3. The culture of honour

Radical feminists argue that the inequality between men and women is primarily because of power imbalances in society. Furthermore, MacKinnon believes that the subjugation and control of women is a conscious effort that is political and systematic in nature. Hence, equality is difficult if the entire construct is not challenged to change (MacKinnon, 2003). The inherent disparity within the husband-wife relationship in Indian society stems from its reliance on a hierarchical system rooted in notions of honour. The film's protagonist critiques the patriarchal families' "most valuable symbolic possession…honor" (Kamir, 2015, p. 5). Honour is frequently related to a family institution that acknowledges the family's successes and offers

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societal respect. Male family members are often praised for their efforts as the family's head or breadwinners (Agarwal, 2014). On the other hand, women's contributions as carers are mostly overlooked as something that comes naturally to them rather than something that can be recognized and rewarded.

Amrita wants her sincere efforts to keep the family happy and her contributions towards it to be recognized. She expects respect for herself, for her contributions, which the slap has shattered. She finds that her self-respect and happiness are unimportant to Vikram and his family, and they are anxious about what others think, ignoring Amrita's concerns. When Amrita leaves the party after the slapping incident, Sulakshana follows her and says: "*Chalo mehman hai bahar. Kya sochenge sab. Ghar ki baat hai* (Let's go. There are guests outside. What will they think? Amrita, it's a family matter)." (Sinha, 2020) Amrita asks for a little time to recover from the shock. She chooses to visit her parents, defying the social norm that a bride should not leave her husband's house without the family's approval. It is considered an assault on the family's honour. When Amrita arrives at her parents' house, her mother inquires as to why she has suddenly returned. When Jayant interrupts by asking if she needs a reason to come to her parent's home, Sandhya replies, "*Uska ghar wahan hai, wahan se aane ki wajah pooch rahi hun* (That's her home. I want to know why she's here)." (Sinha, 2020) Sandhya is concerned about jeopardising Amrita's husband's family honour as well as their own. Amrita's brother also feels upset because "*uska ghar toot raha hai* (my sister's marriage is breaking)." (Sinha, 2020) As the film shows, the primary aspect of the Indian family system is the prioritization of family honour over individual dignity. This not only undermines women's equality rights but also makes them susceptible to abusive men. Vikram tries to urge Amrita to return, not because he regrets what he did, but because his family's honour is at stake. He asks Amrita "… *[k]ya bolun neighbours ko, relatives ko ki meri wife mujhe chhod ke bhaag gai*? (What do I tell the neighbours? Or our relatives? 'My wife has left me and run away')." (Sinha, 2020) He proudly informs: "*Hamare yahan family honour ka matlab sikhaya gaya hai. Hamare yahan ghar ki auratein ghar chhod ke chali nahi jaatin* (Family honour matters to us. Wives don't leave their husbands like this)." (Sinha, 2020)

Amrita hopes that Vikram and his family will see the error in the slap. They do, however, attempt to justify and normalize the violent reaction as natural between husband and wife. Amrita's mother Sandhya considers the slap insignificant and normal. She tells her husband "*Kyon tension le rahe hain aap itna. Ho jaata hain miyan biwi ke beech* (Why do you get so upset over nothing? Things happen between couples)." (Sinha, 2020) Vikram also tries

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to portray the slap as insignificant. He tells Jayant: "*Papaji aap hi samjhaiye. Ab itna bada to kuchh nahin hua na* (Papaji, try and make her understand. It wasn't such a big deal)." (Sinha, 2020) Vikram's assistant Subodh (Santanu Ghatak) considers the violence (slap) as an expression of love: "... *thodi bahut maar peet to* expression *hai bhaisahab.* Expression of love... (A little physical aggression is an expression of love...)." (Sinha, 2020) Ramasubramanian and Oliver find that in Hindi films "…it was appropriate, normal, and perhaps even romantic for men to aggress against the women with whom they were romantically involved" (2003, p. 334). However, Amrita refuses to accept the violent behaviour of her husband and vows not to allow him to let it go as normal. Almost everyone around her tells her that the aggression of the husband towards his wife is normal. Challenging the notion, she questions why they feel that it is normal for a man to slap his wife. Moreover, she discovers that she receives attention and love from her husband and family as Vikram's wife, rather than as an individual, and for the services she provides, namely care and love for the family. She was nothing more than a wife and daughter-in-law for their family. She says: "*Aap sab ne bhi bada pyaar diya mujhe par us raat samajh aaya ki wo sara pyaar Vikram ki wife ke liye tha. Mere liye nahin* (You showered me with love. But on the night of the party, I realized you loved Vikram's wife. Not me)." (Sinha, 2020) Amrita recognizes the issue as systematic and serious and hints at the fact that she exists in the role of wife and daughter-in-law and not as an individual (Lakshmi, 2020). Amrita, protesting against her subordinate position in marriage, courageously opts for divorce. In Indian society, divorcing over a slap is inconceivable. Yet, the film asserts that any act of aggression, no matter how small, should be condemned if it undermines a woman's status and agency in marriage.

Amrita considers her transformation from a passionate girl to a conforming wife as an objectification of the "self". She regrets that in the process of being the "best housewife", she lost her individuality and turned into someone who could be abused and slapped (Parvathy, 2021). She refuses to tolerate "just a slap" as normal. She says: "*Main apni* respect *nahin kar pa rahi* (I can't respect myself anymore)" (Sinha, 2020) after the slap. She becomes so busy thinking and caring about Vikram's needs and dreams that she becomes "immaterial" to the extent that someone can slap her. She realizes that the marital relationship, which is based on inequality and misrecognition can't keep her happy. She decides to divorce her husband to be happy and regain her self-respect. She says, "*Khush rahna chahti hun. Utni khush ki jab main bolun khus hun to jhoot na bol rahi houn* (I want to be happy. So, when I say I am happy, I would not be lying)." (Sinha, 2020) Amrita believes "two things in her life" are necessary,

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"respect and happiness", in the absence of which the marriage seems faulty. She realizes that she and her husband led two separate lives in the same house. She embodies the feminist arguments that claim that women should be appreciated as individuals as well as "women-persons" (Farley, 1993, p. 195) for the compromises they make as women. In the pursuit of equality, Galeotti is concerned about turning a blind eye to inequities. To create fair respect, she suggests filtering out the negative connotations associated with gendered differences (Galeotti as cited in Irrera, 2018, p. 432).

The film seeks to promote the right to self-respect for women to counter the inequity and indignity prevalent in the household. Respect is a concept that broadens the scope of dignity-based orders. It acknowledges the individuality of each person's identity (Kamir, 2015). However, the distinction between dignity-based rights and respect-based rights is sometimes misunderstood, as the concept of respect undermines the dignity-based premise of equality. Dignity subverts hierarchical dominance and provides absolute equality. After filtering out the disadvantages connected with honour-based structures, respect recognizes the positives of differences. Amrita, for example, should be treated equally while still receiving respect and acknowledgement for the sacrifices she has made for the family. She claims that all women who make similar sacrifices for their spouses and children deserve acknowledgement and appreciation. Respect for their traditional gender roles would recognize their devotion and dedication towards family while avoiding the formation of an illegitimate honour-based hierarchy. Kamir's intention is that women should be treated with dignity despite their belonging to a different sex. Dignity, as Kamir declares, should be the "protective bottom line" (Kamir, 2015, p.18) that must never be crossed. Because women are taught to be tolerant even when the "bottom line" is crossed, a violation of this protected bottom line has no repercussions. When Sulakshana advises Amrita that "*Thoda bardasht karna seekhna chahiye auraton ko*... (Women must learn to be tolerant)." (Sinha, 2020) Amrita responds with a counter question to Sulakshana, inquiring if she finds contentment in being tolerant. From Sulakshana's response, Amrita understands that tolerance is not about personal happiness but rather about maintaining harmony and happiness within the family at the cost of her self-effacement. Amrita refuses to accept this philosophy of tolerating everything just for the sake of family. In Indian society, any protest against domestic violence that is brought to the attention of the public brings dishonour or shame to the family. Shame is regarded as a disgrace in an honour-based society. For men and women, honour as a good value and shame as a negative value have different connotations. This dichotomy is evident in the belief that women should be tolerant

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and happy in their family's happiness. The narrative is passed from one generation to another generation of women as their social duty. As a result, the tolerance narrative preserves the violent culture at home, where the husband can beat the wife. Nonetheless, this narrative is challenged towards the end of the film text. The film concludes with the statement by Sulakshana:

> *Teri galti nahi hai. Meri hai. Kabhi sikhaya nahi beton ko ki haq nahi hai tumhara. Sandhya ki galti hai usne tujhe sikhaya chup raho*… (It's not your fault. It's the fault of us mothers. And fathers. We never taught our sons they could not slap a woman. It was your mother's fault. She told you to stay silent…). (Sinha, 2020)

Gender inequalities are the most extensively researched feature of honour societies. Males are held accountable for family honour and respect, while females are held accountable for sexual purity and compliance. As a result, the purity and conformance of women as mothers, daughters, sisters, and wives is a certificate of masculine and familial honour. Males earn honour through females, and female dignity is diminished in honour of her husband and his family. In the exterior world or larger society, men compete with other males for honour and respect, whereas in the conjugal area, they achieve respect and honour through familial authority.

Amrita represents radical feminist ideologies and advocates for the rights of all women characters who experience similar discriminatory treatment. She vocalizes their grievances and challenges the social, cultural, and legal norms that perpetuate women's subordination and oppression. Other than producing cultural images of inequality in honour-based social and familial settings, the film's narrative encompasses a feminist critique of the legal system. According to radical feminists, the legal discourses also are immensely influenced by honour-based cultural narratives that adjudicate women's bodies and their choices from a male-centric rationale (Littleton, 1992). Lodhia (2009) argues that patriarchal norms are re-cast in the laws that continue to treat women as objects to be held and controlled. Amrita, feeling emotionally drained after the party, expresses a desire to spend time with her parents for some recovery. However, Vikram insists on her returning home promptly. When Amrita refuses, he resorts to sending her a legal notice citing Section 9 of the *Hindu Marriage Act 1955*. This section pertains to the restitution of conjugal rights, which allows husbands to legally seek the return of their wives and vice versa. However, this enforcement of conjugal rights infringes upon personal liberty as well as the right to life and dignity, as argued by Poddar (2016). The notice further humiliates Amrita, as it denies her the autonomy and agency to make her own decisions.

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Moreover, her hope for an apology from Vikram is shattered, leading her to make the decision to divorce him. Ellen Willis (1984) rightly comments on this situation that "women's demand for equality in the home comes up against male resistance, and if they press their demands 'too far,' the probable result is not an equal marriage but no marriage at all" (Willis, 1984, pp. 98-99). Similarly, Sharma and Tripathi (2023), conclude that spousal violence in the home space is patriarchal resistance against women's rights to equality and liberty. Feminist critics like Lodhia (2009) express scepticism about the equality theory in law which treats women as equal citizens to provide equal protection of the state against violence, however, without challenging the unequal institutions like marriage and family. Moreover, the equality theory falsely assumes that males and females are social equals (MacKinnon, 2003). These critics affirm that modern legal thinking and judicial and legislative attitudes remain manipulated by masculine thoughts and patriarchal assumptions. Therefore, the legal system contains, produces, and reproduces patriarchy (Henderson, 1991).

Netra informs Amrita that she cannot divorce her husband citing the slap as a cause. Amrita counters the traditional legal understanding of domestic violence and asserts her subjectivity. She argues that a husband cannot slap his wife even once. She contends that it's about her dignity and not about the reputation of the family. She questions the legal impunity of the husband to slap his wife by questioning why just a slap seems unreasonable to lodge a case of divorce. Why is repression at home with the wife considered a personal and family matter? (Bharat, 2021) One answer to this question, as dominance theory by MacKinnon notes, is that physical, sexual, and emotional violence from husbands is a form of cultural politics through intimidation to dominate women and deprive them of their agency. MacKinnon opines that family is the "crucible of women's unequal status and subordination treatment sexually, physically, economically, and civilly" (MacKinnon, 2006, p. 194). The arguments reject the notions and discourses that propagate domestic violence as personal and private. McGlynn (2008) highlights the political nature of violence in conjugal space by comparing it with pornographic studios, prison cells, and detention centres where torture and intimidation are allowed to punish those who challenge the regime. Male domination, therefore, is like any other systematic class domination that uses institutional power to defend its interests (Willis, 1984). Also, the legal regimes maintain honour-based male domination and subordination of women (MacKinnon, 2006) in order to promulgate "cultural homogeneity" (Jackson, 1992, p.195).

Therefore, the uniqueness of the film *Thappad* lies in the fact that it questions the institution of marriage as an unequal institution. The liberal theory of sex equality provides for

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treating both males and females as equal persons and citizens. The sex difference approach identifies the differences between males and females and endeavours to mitigate them through special provisions in favour of women. However, both models of equality have no mechanism to uproot patriarchy in the institution of marriage, where inequality is endemic (MacKinnon, 1984). MacKinnon argues that equality and sex difference models are silenced when the problem is not out of sex-based discrimination and happens exclusively to women. According to her, the equality model conceptualizes equality as women becoming equal to men with the condition of participation in the patriarchal social order (MacKinnon, 1984; MacKinnon, 1991). The approach based on gender difference is highly informed by the discourses of male supremacy and uncritically accepts the traditional social order pivoted on male domination. It punishes individuals when the offender is the entire system, and discrimination is the outcome of social, economic, and political disparities favouring males rather than sex differences (MacKinnon, 1984). When women experience something that cannot be experienced by men, the equality model loses its context and turns inapplicable (MacKinnon, 2016; Becker, 1999).

The film presents the idea that attaining sex equality within conventional marriages is a highly daunting task, if not entirely impossible. It implies that the existing dynamics in such relationships make it difficult to achieve true gender parity. Hence, the narrative of the film highlights the significance of respect and dignity for women in achieving substantive equality. Considering family honour necessary but not a priority, Amrita demands respect, recognition, agency and freedom of choice for her own happiness. Likewise, all other female characters in the film – Sulakshana, Sandhya, and Netra – complain of lacking moral agency and freedom of choice, which they have sacrificed for the collective social reputation. Sulakshana says that she lived first for her husband and then for her children. Sandhya also complains that she has to suppress her desires and aspirations for the happiness of the family. Why do these women, despite being ambitious about their personal careers, give up and compromise to become good wives? It hints at the reality that, despite legal provisions granting equal work opportunities regardless of gender, it is often ignored that women's household obligations limit their ability to compete in the outside world (Jackson, 1992).

4. Conclusion

The film *Thappad* actively engages in popularizing Human Rights principles to educate and raise awareness among the masses. Amrita's refusal to accept inequality and mistreatment

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is influenced by global movements that aim to protect women from domestic abuse. Specifically, the Human Rights Movement has established a common language to condemn violence against women. Amrita's characterization is inspired by the universal demand for women's equality, independence, agency, and dignity. The film embraces the rights discourse as a tool to challenge patriarchal systems. This discourse enables Amrita to assert that being slapped is not her husband's right but a violation of her right to self-respect. It is through the lens of rights narratives that Amrita becomes aware of the inequality ingrained in her roles as a wife and daughter-in-law. Drawing from the debates on equality and dignity, she brings attention to the unfairness and lack of respect in her married life.

The film employs visual storytelling to highlight the lack of equality, agency, and freedom for women at home. Symbolically, microaggressions are portrayed as seeds that germinate and manifest as various forms of domestic violence, including physical abuse, torture, rape, and more. The film reflects a new wave in Hindi cinema focused on Human Rights and addressing injustices, particularly against women. What sets this film apart is its unique approach in two main aspects. Firstly, it departs from the language and reasoning of religious morality and instead adopts the discourse and principles of Human Rights to convey its message. Secondly, it grants women characters subjectivity, language, and freedom to express their first-hand experiences of inequality and indignity in the face of patriarchal systems. Unlike many Bollywood movies that often portray women as stereotypes of the mythical character Sita, symbolizing purity, obedience, and submissiveness as wives (Moini, 2011), *Thappad* challenges these traditional depictions. It questions the conventional portrayal of marital relationships and its societal norms, which were often justified and aligned with religious scriptures, dictating an Indian woman's rights and her role within her family and society. The film's narrative replaces the dogmatic logic with the universal value of Human Rights.

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