



## **Representation of Intimate Partner Violence and its Traumatic Impact in *Thappad*.**

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**Abstract:** Cinema has always been a medium for representing various aspects of life in society. It has dealt with numerous themes of a person's personal life and public life. Intimate partner violence has been such a phenomenon in one's personal life which is largely a societal problem. Representation of Intimate partner violence through movies is growing because of the changing scenario of prescribed gender roles in society. *Thappad* is one such movie which lashes out at the patriarchal norms and values associated with men and women and the compulsion to accept the Intimate Partner Violence and the trauma associated with them. Family life of women, Intimate partner violence and trauma are ignored despite its serious impact and *Thappad* has outright portrayed the distress of women who have faced Intimate partner violence. This study looks at the representation of Intimate partner violence and its traumatic impact on women from different social strata through the characters of *Thappad*. This study analyses the process of trauma recovery from trauma incident to healing. It also unleashes the different coping mechanisms adopted by women of diverse social backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Intimate Partner Violence, Representation, Traumatic Memory, Recovery, Coping Mechanism.

### **Introduction**

Cinema is a medium of representing various aspects of life through different genres deriving concepts from the society in itself. Domestic Violence or Family Violence has been one such phenomenon in cinema which represents the violence committed against women by their partners or their family members. Representations of this theme have often appeared to condone domestic violence mystified as an expression of love. This idea has found resonance with more than 40% of women and 38% of men in the study conducted by NFHS-5. The report says that, both men and women have reported to government surveyors that it is acceptable for a man to punish his partner if she disrespects her in-laws, neglects her chores or children, leaves the house without informing him, refuses sexual intimacy or does not cook (Singh). Unlike other societies, India has always been bound to socio-cultural values imposed on women and likely to be followed by them and carried out to the next generations. Therefore, domestic violence remains a pervasive silent crime which most women experience but do not report or the possibility to report to police against their patriarchal family and male relatives is remote. Close to 77 percent of married women who are victims of domestic violence do not seek help or intervention (Vom Berg Nishi Mitra Tata Institute of Social Sciences et al.). This has made women silent sufferers of violence at home which is ironically considered to be the safest place for them.



In the recent years, the version of violence has changed itself to Intimate Partner Violence from the domestic or family because of varied underlying reasons such as urbanisation, industrialisation, nuclear family system, migration to work and education and the like. The concept of Intimate Partner Violence is recognised and portrayed in the movies since the early 21<sup>st</sup> century onwards. Movies like *Astitva* (2000), *Daman* (2001), *Ammu* (2022), *English Vinglish* (2012), *Lipstick Under My Burkha* (2016), *The Great Indian Kitchen* (2021), *Animal* (2023) and *Thappad* (2020) are a few movies which portray intimate partner violence and its impact on women and children.

Ultimately in most cases of domestic violence or Intimate partner violence women have been the sufferers because of various socio-cultural, political and economic reasons. The socio-cultural values imposed on women keep them silent tolerant of the violence caused by their partners or spouses. It is said that 'it is ok to be hit by your husband' because he is the provider of the family and women have to blindly adhere to the husband. The United Nations reports that "Worldwide, almost one third (27%) of women aged 15-49 years who have been in a relationship report that they have been subjected to some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their intimate partner. The 2019-2021, National Family Health Survey- 5 concludes that 30% of Indian women have experienced physical or sexual violence by their spouses at least once since the age of 18. These results do not include women who have faced emotional abuse or experienced other forms of harassment from their partners. National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5) report from 2019 to 2021 states that 14 percent of married women who are victims of marital violence seek help and the remaining women are either silenced or cognitised to remain silent. Thus, the silent spectre of women's suffering evaporates from the silver screen and manifests into reality behind closed doors of Indian households.

Movies on Intimate Partner Violence are produced from Bollywood to Kollywood in India, which deals with Intimate Partner Violence to romanticising and normalising up to a certain level, which insists on correcting women who have deviated from the set standards of a wife/woman in the society or it is shown as a trait of those people in love. Exercising violence on their spouses is shown as a form of love as in the movies like *Animal*, *Arjun Reddy*, and many more which has normalised this behaviour and the heroine characters of these movies are ought to accept it as part of the script despite the fault being on the male hero. Cinema clearly establishes the facts on a wide range of acceptance of patriarchal notions and norms prevalent in the society. This angle of romanticising Intimate Partner Violence has underlying consequences on the psyche of women which is not represented in most of the movies because of the acceptance of violence to a greater extent. It is considered that taming a woman through language (words, tone, voice) or even slapping her is a man's right, to keep a woman under control. The other side of the truth is always hidden or underrepresented until the heroine is dead or she is facing serious health issues. In addition, the condition of women who face violence is merely represented as sacrificing herself for her children or abiding by the norms of the society by being trauma bonded with the offender as long as possible considering family honour, pride, shame, guilt and other varied reasons. However, the impact of facing Intimate Partner Violence on a daily basis in the private space, home, affects the mental health of women and children which is either ignored or discussed.

Intimate Partner Violence being the interpersonal violence between two partners is coercive and dangerous to one partner in the relationship due to established or unestablished factors. It can



induce physical and psychological issues on the weakest partner. Cinema has been representing women as physically weaker than men in a relationship so that they face abuse by their husbands as victims of violence. Such abused women either stay in the relationship or move away from it based on their support system and other circumstances. Women who move away or stay back in the relationship end up experiencing trauma based on the effect of such incidents. This trauma could create an imprint on their memory which never withers away for a lifetime. Intimate Partner Violence can be a chronic or complex issue in nature because it may continue for a lifetime or a short span of time. Despite being chronic or complex, it might induce a lifetime trauma for an individual particularly in women and children. Based on the severity the effects of trauma would vary from Acute Stress Disorder to Post traumatic stress disorder. Women being the victims of intimate partner violence face serious implications of physical, psychological, emotional, sexual and financial crises. These issues pull down women to face identity crisis, livelihood issues, physical and mental health concerns. Abuse or battering need not be chronic; rather it could have happened acutely just once and it can traumatise the entire life by leaving an irrecoverable imprint in the memory of the victim. The recent cinema has attempted to look at such concepts seriously and bring awareness in the society regarding Intimate Partner Violence and its effects on women and children especially on physical and mental health. *Thappad* is one such Bollywood movie which is used for the discussion in this paper to look after the effects of Intimate Partner Violence and its traumatic effects on the victim's life.

*Thappad* (2021) directed by Anubhav Sinha, represents women from different walks of life. Amrita the central character of the movie chooses to be a homemaker after marriage stating that she is happy with the decision. She takes care of her husband and mother-in-law and all physical and emotional labour needed for the household. She faces Intimate Partner Violence in an unexpected incident where her husband displaces his anger on her because of his issues with his employer which changes the relationship dynamics of the couple. Sunita, the maid of Amrita also faces domestic violence/family violence from her husband and mother-in-law where she manages to bear it every day, resists, escapes at times, badly hit by her husband at times. Netra Jaiswal a famous advocate who is in-charge of Amrita's case is no exception in terms of intimate partner violence. She is verbally and sexual abused by her husband Rohit who blames her as an incapable woman who just lives under his roof despite being successful in her career. All these characters undergo Intimate Partner violence and adopt various coping mechanisms to deal with their lives. Amrita divorces her husband; Sunita continues to live with her family and Netra has her way of dealing with it in the entire movie. Other female and male characters try to normalise Intimate Partner violence by stating it was one slap, he did it in haste, he was tense about his career, he was doing this job for both of you, women should adjust with such things. On the other hand, Amrita's father understands the plight of his own daughter and supports her decisions, whereas for Netra and Sunita, the support mechanism and the coping strategies vary. This movie deals with Intimate Partner violence and the consequences associated with it which is used in this study for further understanding of the sufferings of different women at all levels and layers of traumatic experiences.

Qualitative analysis is used to understand the gestures, words, statements and actions to identify the underlying meanings and hidden agendas of Intimate Partner Violence. Using Content



analysis as the methodology, certain terms and statements are decoded to look at the effects of Intimate Partner Violence in terms of verbal, financial, sexual, physical and psychological abuse and its traumatic effect on the life of the victims. In this paper, Judith Herman's theoretical framework of trauma has been used to analyse the lives of women in processing the traumatic incidents, reactions and responses, resistance and the socio-cultural factors leading to healing.

### **Intimate Partner Violence and Trauma responses**

Intimate partner violence can happen in any type of marriage by altering the expectations and perspectives on life which is built prior to the incident. From minor to major incidents the range of affect would change out of one's own capability and coping skills. Different forms of Intimate partner violence include physical, psychological, sexual, verbal or economic abuse affect their lives permanently. Incidents and characters from *Thappad* are used to analyse the effect of IPV on women.

Amrita, the central character of the story is a well-educated woman from an upper middle-class family, decides to stay as a homemaker after marriage. She takes care of the home completely, where the audience can witness the dialogues from her husband stating that, 'your printer does not work, your kitchen, your responsibilities' (Sinha) which makes her happy until she gets slapped by him in a house party displacing his anger on her. This incident happens unexpectedly, where Vikram could not express his job dissatisfaction to his authorities rather, he hits his wife considering her as an easy target (Yadav & Jha, 7). This implies that it is ok for a husband to hit his wife and the wife has to adjust and accept it without questioning or talking about it and the next day she should act normal like nothing has happened rather continue to do all the household chores as usual. Certain dialogues from the movie emphasise the idea of tolerating violence and maintaining peace at home, "This much is acceptable, It is a woman's duty to manage the household and maintain the marriage". However, she reacts differently from the expectations of the society. Her immediate reaction to the slap is complete silence where she could not believe such an incident happened to her. According to Herman, freeze, flight and fawn would be the immediate reactions to the trauma incidents and Amrita is frozen at the moment where she could not respond rather, she is shell-shocked and her sense of self and the environment around her is devastating. She could not bear the fact of getting slapped by her husband in a public forum and the reaction of her husband and the family members towards violence is intolerable and suffocating to her. "Not everything is perfect in a marriage, it happens sometimes in anger, he hit me too, he got angry because he loves me" (Sinha).

Her psychological distress caused by the physical violence turns her into a different person from the next moment of her life. She was a happy home maker despite having good education and family status, left her job for him and his family, filled her with regret. Vikram's behaviour after hitting and the relatives' normalisation of the physical violence adds fuel to the fire. Justification stated by her husband and the advice provided by her family torments her psychologically which leads to prolonged sadness and stay in the frozen mode. Instead of apologising for his behaviour, he justifies the act and says it just happened in haste. Her family justifies it saying it is just one slap out of his work tension, why don't you understand the situation. This intends that it is common to be hit by the husband out of pressure and women should accept it and learn to live with it. Men having the



upper hand in the families justify the patriarchal violence on women in Indian society by stating that women should accept violence from their husbands because he is everything and women are nothing without them, hence she cannot leave him for various reasons.

This specific incident changes Amrita's life to become aloof where no one could understand what is going on within her including herself. The state of shattering and freezing converges with each other disrupting her idea of life itself. That one tight slap reminds her of a life that she has lost in the process of marriage and creating a family. The most affecting part of the trauma incident is that her family supporting her husband by saying that hitting her was a family matter accidentally happened in public, it was just a slap which can be forgotten and forgiven.

With this incident she regrets her choices and the life she has lost and she feels guilty of what she has sacrificed for all these years by losing her individuality and identity. The portrayal of her character in the film represents women who have lost their individuality and identity by sacrificing themselves for the sake of family and completely becoming dependent on their partners at all levels. This movie clearly establishes the fact that Intimate partner violence creates trauma in a woman for no fault of hers in her life. Her trauma affect becomes intense not just by the slap but the casual acceptance of it by her family and husband. Everyone in the family including her husband and mother-in-law expects her to be casual after the night which affects her constantly. The ignorance and acceptance of violence puts forth the patriarchal norms and its acceptance in the society. A man hitting his wife and being angry is accepted as a masculine trait and women are expected to be passive and receive the violence silently is reinforced in the society and the same is expected by Amrita in the movie.

In contrast to Amrita, Sunita, the maid of her family, faces physical and verbal abuse from her husband and Mother-in-law. Initially, she would get beaten up by her husband severely and ends up falling ill mostly. Sunita normalises violent behaviour of her husband "He's a man; sometimes he hits in anger". She accepts and believes that a man can hit his wife, "He's my husband; he has the right to hit me" (Sinha). More than the psychological abuse, physical and economical abuse is highlighted in her case because of her financial condition and social status. However, the psychological distress is diminished by the physical and economic distress. As time passes, she tries to cope with the issue by taking the escape route such as shouting when her husband tries to hit her, so that the neighbours would save her or she would lock her husband in the house to escape the wrath of her husband. Her abuse is complex in nature because of varied problems for a prolonged period of time. Out of her trauma and traumatic stressors she uses escaping, abusing verbally as coping mechanisms. Her response to the abuse is that she becomes alert whenever there is brewing heat between the couple.

She had the preconceived notion that women from the lower strata would face violence from the family members especially by their husbands. When Amrita is hit by Vikram she is surprised and shocked by the incident which leads to vicarious trauma. She speaks to Amrita by stating this "Getting beaten is a part of every woman's destiny" (Sinha). Her idea on lower class women getting hit by their husbands is changed as she realises that any man in the world would hit his wife despite



irrespective of his class position. She states this to her husband, that I am amused that you are not the only man who hits his wife which indicates her shock towards the incident.

Netra Jaisingh, another important character in the movie portrayed as a famous lawyer from the elite class faces sexual, physical and verbal abuse from her husband leading to an identity crisis. He always insists upon the lack of individual identity of Netra despite knowing that she is capable of independent action. She is criticised for not managing things at home rather focussing more on her career. Her husband states that “Managing both home and work is your responsibility, You are such a great lawyer, but you fail to understand matters at home” (Sinha). She is verbally and sexually abused and insulted which leads to her trauma. She realises that she is abused and traumatised for which she could not do anything other than cry alone but remains a reputable lawyer for the outside world by hiding her vulnerabilities.

“I’m fighting everyone’s battles, but who will fight mine?” (Sinha).

She reconciles with her trauma through Amrita’s case to prove herself as an individual who is capable of forming her own identity. Being a lawyer does not exempt her from abuse or trauma but her way of coming out differs from other women in the movie.

Sania, an adolescent daughter of Shivani, is shocked by watching Amrita getting hit by Vikram. She is vicariously traumatised by the idea of getting hit by the husband and questions if her mother has her father hit her any time. She is compelled to look at life as a tragic incident where every woman will be abused by her husband. A young adolescent is traumatised by the unknown future which has completely changed her sense of the world and future.

Physical and Emotional violence has its own effects on a woman’s psyche. Physical violence can always create psychological issues and vice versa. Physical abuse faced by women like Amrita, Sunita and Netra in *Thappad* changes their entire psyche and their sense of self and the world. Physical abuse creates emotional stress which leads them to Acute, Post-traumatic and Complex Post-traumatic stress disorder. In most cases physical abuse is recognised and addressed by women themselves and if it exceeds their level of tolerance the law could help them. In case of emotional abuse, it is not always recognised and discussed by the victims as well as the perpetrators. The effects of physical abuse on a woman’s psyche are overlooked but the physical injuries are treated but the emotional injuries are not recognised and left untreated. Emotional violence is not even a matter of discussion for decades in cinema. Emotional abuse is seen as keeping women under control of the husband which indicates the power structures of patriarchy and masculinity in the society. Making women powerless and dependent on men economically and psychologically in the name of love always threatens women’s independence which is clearly picturised in *Thappad* through the characters of Amrita, Netra and Suita.

Every woman character in the movie has different life scenarios and their responses to trauma incidents differ and allowing us to look at their class, caste, social status, place of living, nature of job, living conditions and familial set up. The kind of abuse they face and the type of trauma they go



through, and the reactions and responses to the trauma incidents are decided by the social living conditions. The intersections of gender dynamics and trauma with regards to a woman's class, caste, ethnicity and so on is clearly portrayed in this movie.

### **Traumatic Memory**

*Thappad* unfolds the psychological journey of Amrita, Sunita, Netra and other women depicted through the movie which represent the lives of many women who hide their trauma from society at large. Amrita faces acute post-traumatic stress disorder due to the incident which leads to traumatic memory. Memory serves as an important tool in traumatising or healing an individual from the actual incident. After that specific night, she is disturbed and devastated by the memory of the incident back and forth. Not just the memory of getting slapped but the memories of love, sacrifice, hitting and its after effects, her husband's reaction and family's advice towards the incident and the compulsion to accept it traumatises her intensively.

“Forget what happened and move on in life”

-Amrita's mother To Amrita

“A woman is the one who builds a home, and it's her responsibility to maintain it”.

Vikram's mother To Amrita

(Sinha)

She is triggered by the memories of the incident and rethinks it repeatedly. Rethinking the trauma itself can act as a therapy but here it works as the trauma stressor to the victim. It gives Amrita sleepless nights and breaks her emotionally and psychologically. Amrita has been a happy home maker until she realises that her work is not valued by her husband and marks her as an economically dependent woman. That tight slap on her face within a second leaves a permanent mark in her memory for a lifetime.

Shivani is re-traumatised by the vicarious trauma effect on the incident of Amrita. She is reminded of her past which triggers unwanted and pathetic experiences of her life. According to Caruth's, *Unclaimed Experiences*, 1996, on traumatic memory she experiences her past in the present through her memory which reminds her of pathetic incidents from the past. Incidents from Amrita's life triggers Shivani to revisit her past. Traumatic stressors could often be incidents, things, human beings, sounds, light, places etc. These things often bring the past back into the present by traumatising the victim. A victim can be resilient and re-traumatised through their memory which indicates that trauma healing is a non-linear process which can always reoccur and reappear and also disappear when the triggers are removed or resurfaced. Netra is reminded of her traumatic incidents, yet she tolerates it until Amrita's encounter. Their meeting brings in a lot of changes in her and she decides to reconcile with herself to move out of her abusive life. In the case of Amrita and Shivani, the conscious and unconscious memories of their past appear and disturb them in the present where the memory of Sunita subconsciously appears which makes her alert in the intense situation.

## Social Norms and Expectations from Women

In Indian society, women are expected to be passive, weak, dependent, emotional and tolerate violence. In contrast to this idea, men can be angry, rational, dependent, violent etc. *Thappad* looks at how these assumed and assigned social roles and expectations on men and women destroys the gender equality and equity in the society. It does not destroy the women alone rather it destroys men too in certain ways despite the benefits. This movie has indicated that women need not tolerate the violence committed by her husband either once or multiple times. Certain instances from the movie are used to look at the idea imposed by both men and women:

“What will people say if you break your home over one slap?”

- Amrita’s Mother to Amrita

"You ended your entire relationship over one slap?"

- Priya to Amrita

“Divorce is not an easy decision, Amrita. Have you thought about what people will say?”

- Netra to Amrita

“He apologized, so why are you making it a big deal?”

- Vikram’s father to Amrita

- (Sinha)

The National Family Health Survey (NFHS) conducted in 2016 uncovered an alarming situation: a substantial 86% of Indian women who experienced domestic violence chose not to disclose their ordeal, refraining from sharing it with friends or family members. This silence is intricately tied to the victim’s internalisation of social norms, leading them to believe that they are inadequate as wives and, consequently, deserving of the punishment (Hooda).

*Thappad* has tried to create awareness about violence and its effects on women for society at large. In the movie, Amrita is expected to tolerate and accept the physical violence committed by her husband. Most of the male and female characters in the movie advise and expect Amrita to reconcile with Vikram since it was just one slap out of anger and his dissatisfaction in his job which represents the mindset of the society in general with the prescribed gender roles.

When Amrita tries to reconcile herself with this, she is not able to do it because of her haunted memories of her trauma from the incident. When she gets pregnant everyone convinces her by saying that she should get back to her husband for the sake of her child in which Amrita has a difference of opinion. She does not want to go back despite her pregnancy for which she is criticised badly as a woman of disgrace. She makes a firm decision not to reconcile with her husband unless he regrets his behaviour. However, Vikram does not regret his attitude rather justifies his behaviour. This shows the cognition of socio-cultural values imbibed by him with regards to treating his wife and women in the society. When Amrita approaches for divorce, he falsely claims that she was not a good wife and that indicates that she cannot be a good mother too and claims for the custody of the child.





Custody of the child is given to Amrita since she was the mother and Vikram is proved to be guilty. The societal expectation compelling a woman to tolerate and accept the violence by her husband damages a woman's dignity and identity. This idea of woman being tolerant would sometimes kill them which is when the society awakes and calls the man a monster until then women are expected to bear the pain and violence. Misogynistic behaviour and victim blaming is casual when women decide to move away from the abusive relationship.

Sunita's life is shown as pathetic since her husband hits and verbally abuses her. The difference in class is clearly emphasised through the characters Amrita, Netra and Sunita. Power politics plays an important role in the picturisation of women from different social strata. Expectations on a woman and a man in society paves way for gender inequality. Trauma caused by social expectations has a greater impact on men and women and their lives in the society.

### **Trauma Recovery**

Trauma recovery in *Thappad* focuses on women using their voice and agency to speak back for themselves. There is a recurring pattern of violence leading to the process of trauma from trauma incident to trauma resilience. In this movie, each character undergoes a different pattern of violence and trauma, socio-cultural factors and recovery process as well. Amrita speaks back for herself despite everyone around her tries convincing her to go back to her husband and she uses dance as a therapy to recover from her trauma. She reiterates on gaining identity of her own to become an empowered and resilient individual. She speaks back for herself and the child in the womb gives her power and agency to move away from the traumatic environment and the trauma itself. She makes it to the point where her individual self is recovered from the lost identity. She wins the case by using her available support system. She does not sit back in the same abusive relationship and complain about fate, rather she reverts back from her vulnerable condition through the available support such as legal right, family support and inner motivation.

Sunita, as part of her recovery process, goes through the violence completely and resists it. Her escapist behaviour was helpful at certain incidents which was not completely protecting her. This made her go through it completely and become resilient by resisting the violence and standing for herself. Netra resists the violence whenever she faces it and she has been silent about it for a long time. She was silent because of her husband's social status and her father-in-law's fame. She proves herself to her husband as a great lawyer and a person of her own identity. She being an educated woman and a lawyer she faces all these traumatic experiences herself. She recovers from the trauma by establishing herself as a lawyer and leaving her husband. Every woman in the story resists, reacts and becomes resilient using their ways of recovery from the trauma.

### **Conclusion**

*Thappad* becomes a story of every woman who faces Intimate Partner Violence in their lives. The reaction to the different types of violence by any woman is shown through different characters of the movie despite their social strata. In addition, the reaction of the characters towards the violence seems



to be the reaction of the general audience too. Insisting women to tolerate violence, sacrifice for the children, misogynistic statements made on single women altogether represented the views of the society.

In this movie the recurring pattern of trauma in women is represented clearly through various characters. Trauma happens to a woman and the immediate reaction is silence for days and months until she responds to the incident. The other reaction would be crying and reacting immediately by shouting, escaping or calling for help from neighbours like Sunita. Coming to a consensus with the incident the trauma victim helps to react and respond to it by resisting or escaping. The next step would be moving towards recovery through various support systems available to them. It can be family, economic independence, therapy, spirituality and so on. This process is not linear but circular which can go back and forth and help the victim move towards resilience like Amrita, Sunita and Netra. In our society physical violence is addressed when it reaches a certain level unlike psychological, economical and verbal abuse. Psychological violence is mostly unaddressed and unrecognised by people. This movie has brought in the awareness and importance of addressing psychological violence which is caused by physical, sexual and emotional abuse. This movie has pointed out the need to look at the memory and psychological health of victims for their well being. The depiction of women and men of various strata has exposed the violence inherent in gender relations which could be intersected with other socio-cultural, economic and political factors. It has portrayed the idea that women from any class strata or educational background could face violence and become resilient using various coping mechanisms according to their availability. This film is an eye opener and brings social awareness on intimate partner violence and its traumatic effects on women alongside providing a panacea to the issues faced by women.

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