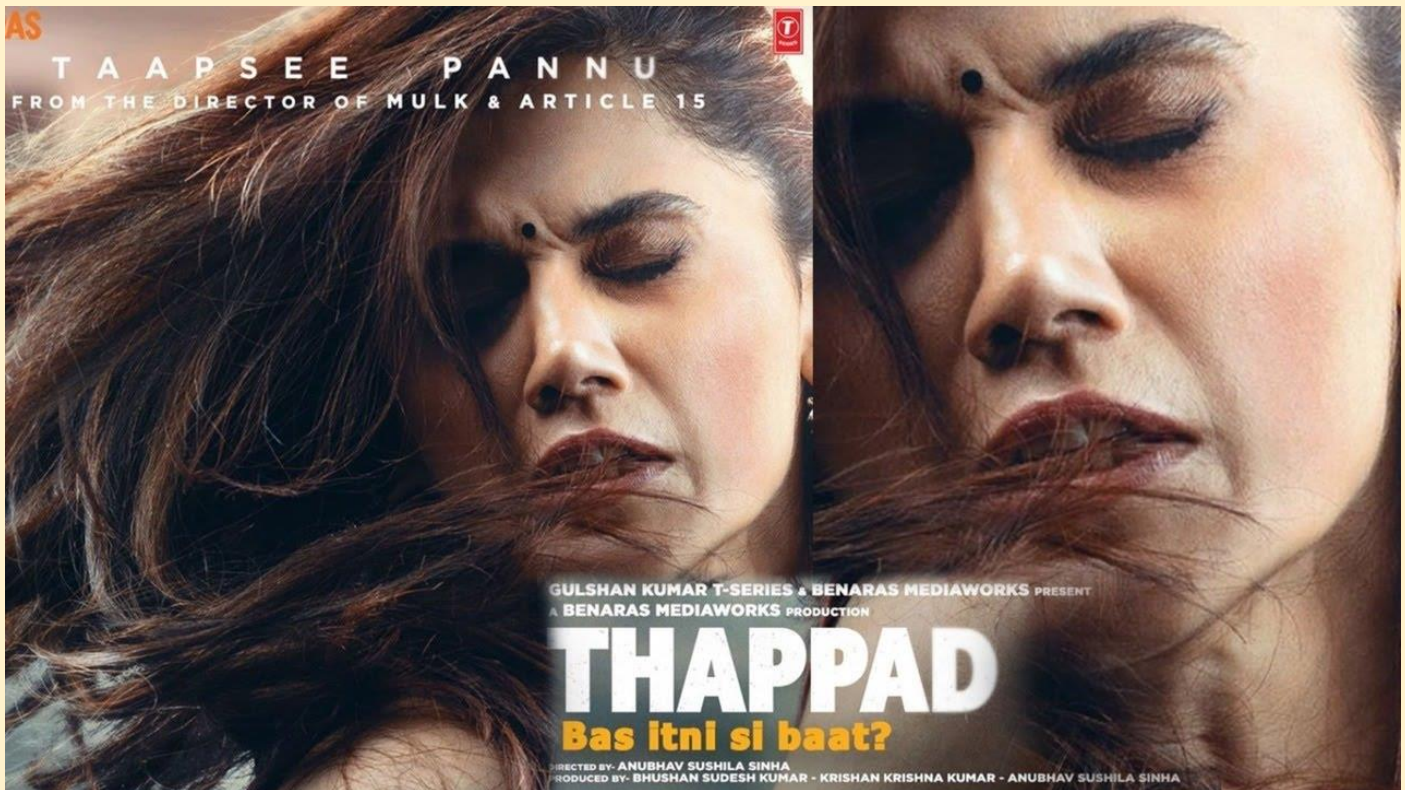


*Chidananda Dasgupta Memorial Competition on Film Criticism 2020*Certificate of Merit

Akshay Gouri

**Thappad**

At the outset, it must be said that ‘Thappad’ by Anubhav Sinha, which he co-wrote with Mrunmayee Lagoo Waikul, is a very important mainstream film in contemporary India. Precisely because of its chosen setting, ‘Thappad’ is designed to make us uncomfortable about our milieu and compel us to introspect about our own complicity in patriarchy as it examines gender-based violence across class divides. And this, it does in times when too few sensitive films are being produced, and with the current global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic enabling domestic violence to rise manifold across the world.

It should be noted that in the opening credits of ‘Thappad’, the core crew members have used - what appear to be - their mothers’ names as their middle names. This adds to, and sets up-front, the entire feminist theme of the film.

Before the protagonist, Amrita, is introduced, several other related characters and their situations are introduced first, bound by the lovely graphic match cut with the Orange Ice-candy. Amrita’s brother and

his fiancé, the domestic help whose husband assaults her on his whim, the lawyer who finds solace away from her husband with an old friend, and Amrita’s lovely neighbors in a Christian-single-working-mother and her daughter and of course, Amrita’s parents. All these characters will make the world of ‘Thappad’.

Just 10 minutes into the film, with a masterful 4-minute Montage, the film brilliantly establishes the hassle that the married woman has to go through each day. This montage, for good reason, repeats itself twice later in the film. Amrita is a stay-at-home wife whose feelings for her husband, Vikram, are intense. They are a traditional couple until this point. He has a busy career, she makes his dreams her own. While he labours over office assignments, she labours over his every need, serving him meals, chasing him up to the car with his wallet and a beverage while feeding him his unfinished breakfast, caring for his elderly mother, maintaining the house, entertaining guests. The regular upper-middle class, Urban couple - seem to be happy. Amrita switches off after a single slap - most

people can't understand this. As Vikram himself puts it, "Shit happens. It happens. People move on." The one slap changes everything for Amu. Her whole world comes crashing down. Her feelings for Vikram turn from devotion to indifference. No matter how much others in her world tell her to move on, Amrita can't reconcile with the fact that it happened. And why should she?

Amrita's neighbor greets the latter and her husband and leaves for work just like every other morning. The husband exclaims, "*Is ne fir nayi gaadi le li!... Kya, karti kya hai ye?*" - This is one of the many ways patriarchy works. Women's labor remains usually unrewarded, but when it does get compensated, it is subject to such lude remarks by most of our patriarchally conditioned minds. Or when Vikram says later in the film, "*Mai to bohot kuchh kar raha hu hamare liye, par tum kya kar rahi ho? Ye ghar chhod ke aa jana?*" - is another strong example of all the unaccounted labor that the woman puts in - whereas the man gets compensated for his labor both by his job and gets free Seva and free fulfillment of sexual needs at home.

The morning after the slap, Amrita goes about her daily duties at the house, but there is no spring in her step anymore. Here comes the masterly use of the same montage for a third time. Only this time, the Editor paces it slightly slower in pace and Amrita's body language is very different.

This film one has just one big twist - the slap. Before I watched the film, upon hearing about its possible content, I thought, "How can one build a whole film around a single slap?". Well, 'Thappad' pulls it off extremely well, turning a solitary slap into a larger exploration of male entitlement. It is impressive that the film that has revealed its core in the title itself sustains the audience's interest for over two hours. A concise narrative is woven, one that, even while focusing on one woman's life, turns it into the story of every woman - and of every man.

It is significant that the protagonist is placed in an educated, well-off family in a city rather than a poor or illiterate household in rural India, which would have allowed sections of the audience to pat itself on the back and pretend that such things do not happen among "people like us". Also, the characterisation of Vikram, which would have been one of the trickiest jobs in writing 'Thappad', is brilliant. Vikram has to convey arrogance yet also help us understand why Amu might have loved him,

and at the same time, not command the audience's empathy. Instead of demonising him, Sinha and Waikul write him as precisely the sort of chap about whom family and onlookers tend to say indulgently in real life, "C'mon, he's not such a bad guy. Shit happens."

The film breaks the myth of what an 'abuser' looks like. From a celebrated journalist who rapes his wife, and a daily wage worker who hits his wife to Vikram. The film dismantles the myth that domestic violence is restricted to a certain class or that a wife beater looks like a Stereotyped thug. 'Thappad' beautifully spotlights various shades of men, from the haughty hero to another far more likeable person who is astonished to discover that he - like so many men - is a feminist for his daughter but unconsciously patriarchal with his wife. Patriarchal conditioning, the film shows, grows in the most unlikely of places, and in the most unlikely of people.

Till the night of the slap, the colour palette of the film is vibrant and warm. The first morning after the slap, we see a clear change to a slightly dull and gloomy shift in the colour tones, with a slight tint of Green in the image. So far, so good. But, this lasts till about the time Amu goes to her neighbor's house to teach the neighbor's daughter dance. Thereafter, the colour tone becomes slightly inconsistent. It makes me unsure, whether or not this was deliberate in the first place.

The last 20 minutes turn very preachy - 2 long monologues, 2 short ones and the domestic help Sunita's violent outburst (which was completely out of character) - and very idealistic in both situation and dialogues. The film has a romanticised ending, where the auteur tells how things should be. Vikram finally redeems himself - explains everything, accepts everything. Every female character rejoices at the end. All the idiot males have changed and mended their ways and are now better people and it is a better world to live in now. This doesn't happen in life.

On why it might have been made idealistic - there is one strong possibility that comes to my mind. That is - returns on investment. Unfortunately, for the business to keep going on and for the Director to land another film, their film has to have returns greater than the investment. Another reason could be that the perception of the audience's minds in the industry is such that the audience wants to be happy at the end of a film and that no one wants to pay to get depressed. While this is not entirely wrong, it works in the

adverse way and encourages Production companies to maintain a kind of status-quo in the content that they produce where on the one hand they proclaim that they want something new, something that hasn't been done before and yet at the same time on the other hand they pressure Filmmakers to follow a certain formula which they deem fit to give them favorable monetary results, reflecting poorly on the changing mindsets of the audience and a fast-evolving zeitgeist.

The real problem with the film, however, is that the film pointedly blames mothers for the way daughters are conditioned to accept mistreatment from spouses and de-prioritise themselves, with a mention of a father almost as an afterthought. Brief though this is, surfacing only twice really, it is a rather conservative stand from an otherwise liberal film. Of course, women can at times be enablers of patriarchy, but it has led to the film slightly playing down the accountability of the actual beneficiaries of patriarchy: men.

Having said that, I'd reiterate that 'Thappad' is an extremely important film in contemporary India. And a well-made one too. The dialogue has been written extremely realistically - suiting the characters

perfectly. Casting for the film is brilliant, barring only Sunita's husband and mother-in-law, who may be good actors, but clearly can't speak Haryanvi even when Sunita herself speaks it so authentically. The actors - from veterans Tanvi Azmi and Ratna Pathak Shah to newbies Pavel Gulati and Ankur Rathi - have performed pretty well. I'd have to especially mention Tapsee Pannu (Amrita), Pavel Gulati (Vikram) and Geetika Vidya (Sunita) from their brilliant performances.

The film can appear to be a little two-paced and generally a bit slow considering that audiences' attention-spans are getting shortened every day. However, to my mind, the slight slowness that there is - was essential. The Edit of the film is, therefore, quite mindful. Also, the Cinematography and the Sound Design are pretty decent and work well to stitch the narrative the way the narrative itself demands. The Production Design is stellar, with extremely detailed and seemingly natural Art-direction. Costume as well is quite appropriate and relatively subdued, suiting the narrative and the setting perfectly. All of this combined, makes for a good watch.

■ *Mr. Akshay Gouri is an independent Screenwriter and Director who has made 8 critically acclaimed short films, both fiction and non-fiction. He is an alumnus of Satyajit Ray Film & Television Institute, Kolkata.*