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## **Beyond Boundaries: Transforming Gender Ideologies in Patriarchal Societies in Laapataa Ladies and Thappad**

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### **Abstract**

*The study investigates the violence against women and the evolution of women from submissive to independent in the discourse of Hindi cinema borrowing from the concept of New Woman. This research paper examines the characters of Phool and Jaya from the film Laapataa Ladies (2024) and Amrita from the film Thappad (2022). The comedy/drama movie, Laapataa Ladies has a moral ending. The film deals with the journey of two newly wedded brides who inadvertently get exchanged, as a result of which both the women go through a series of misadventures. The movie Laapataa Ladies delves into the themes of women's aspirations, self-discovery and financial independence offering a new and refreshing take on feminism. Whereas the film Thappad deals with marital physical violence against women, Amrita, a housewife, shares a loving relationship with her husband and supports him in achieving his ambitions. But her life is shattered when her husband slaps her at a social event. Through the various primary and secondary sources, the paper examines how women step out from patriarchal ideologies, subjecting them to gender-based violence and domestic abuse. The paper identifies a shift from traditional, orthodox narratives to universal narratives centered around rights. The paper discusses the concept of the New Woman as she is challenged by gender norms and structures asserting a new public presence in the existing patriarchal society. This paper also represents how women, who once were limited to a domestic space have now evolved in every aspect of life viz., study, work, socializing, and financial independence.*

**Keywords:** Identity, Patriarchal ideologies, Violence, Orthodox narratives, New Woman.

“Feminism is the radical notion that women are human beings.”

- Cheris Kramerae

**Introduction:** Feminism is a broad phenomenon, a topic to be discussed publicly to make people aware of the need of such ideologies, often considered as overly emphasized. But the matter of fact is that Feminism is a perpetual topic, because women have always been oppressed in various forms in a society predominated by men. Many researchers and writers have meditated on Feminism. For instance, Mary Wollstonecraft stated in her work *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: With Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (1792) discusses how lack of education was one of the main reasons responsible for the violence against women. She opines “It is time to effect a revolution in female manners - time to restore to time. Their lost dignity - and make them, as a part of the human species, labour by reforming themselves to reform the world. It is time to reform the world. It is time to separate unchangeable morals from local manners” (113). She rejected the thought that women are naturally weaker than men. She believed and argued that it is society that gives the gender roles to the sexes to play their entire life. She also argued that education is the main reason for the predominance of women by men.

Writers, such as Margaret Fuller and Virginia Woolf also discuss violence against women in the fields of education, politics, employment, and literature. Margaret Fuller did not support the specific gender roles and believed that women are not confined to household duties. In contrast, on the other hand, Virginia Woolf stated that women’s writing was not acceptable and was rejected by the male critic. The status of women in India has always been a subject of matter; women have been regarded as a symbol of spirituality/empowerment in our scriptures. Yet they were denied many rights and were treated unequally in medieval civilizations. Women have suffered bigotry in the context of domestic violence, rape, harassment, dowry, sati system, child marriage, female infanticide, etc.

With the passage of time, the world was progressing as a result of which societies developed, and women thought about themselves as individuals rather than associated identities, which in a patriarchal society has more often than not been dependent on their relations with the male members in their life. “New Woman,” the term, was coined by Sara Grand in her article “A New Aspect of the Woman Question” (1894), it is a social movement that began in the latter half of the Victorian Era. This social idea describes the woman as independent, physically adept, having a political voice, mentally acute, who can work, study, and can socialize on a par with men. They stepped out of the house, breaking all the gender-biased taboos and myths forbidding/denying them freedom of will. There were movements started to bestow women with the same rights, power, and opportunities as Men, to be treated in the same way. Women in India have made significant progress in recent years and have contributed to Indian society in respect to education, teachers, science and technology, sports, police, arts and entertainment, etc.

**Vocalizing Against Old Customs:** Hindi cinema has also depicted the character of women as new and evolving. One of the most prominent is *Laapataa Ladies*. This film embraces domestic violence, the veil system (ghunghat pratha), patriarchal dominance, freedom of women and identity. This film revolves around two major female characters Jaya and Phool, two brides, exchanged in train rides while journeying to their husband's home. The names of the female lead and their role throughout the movie has also shown a metaphorical resemblance: that women are not like the flowers which can be only gifted and discarded once withered. The names of the two female protagonists have significant meaning, the name Phool means 'flower,' her character throughout the movie has maintained the position of a flower, not in a bouquet or in a private garden which always need to be looked after by a gardener (Deepak, Phool's husband). Instead she develops and evolves as nature's child, a wildflower, who could survive in the wild, which has its own beauty and own use rather than being bound and used as a decorative prop, a bouquet.

The society assigns gender roles to the female sex, oftentimes sex and gender are mistaken as synonyms and substitutes, whereas the truth is that the two are two very different concepts. Pramod K. Nayar, too, states in *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism* (2010) that "Sex is biological, gender is social" (90). Thus, it is true that society, patriarchal society in particular, assigns gender roles to these sexes. Women are taught to accept that they are born to be a mother, housewife and are secondary to men. Women are made to follow the sets of rules, laws and customs. These womanly roles flow and are passed on from one generation to another, from one woman to the other, from one generation to the other, from a mother to a daughter. These passing of tradition can be seen in the Kiran Rao's movie *Laapataa Ladies*, when newly married Phool departs for Deepak, her husband's house a lady from her village advises her to be mindful of her veil "once you have adorned the veil, learn to keep your eyes down" (00:03:30). Phool at many intervals continues to be schooled by the females around her, for instance her conversation with Manju Mai where the latter comments on Phool's upbringing "your mother didn't make you smart, she made you a fool" (00:38:21 – 00:38:22). Phool defends, highlighting her domestic skills and responds "I am not a fool, I am good at household chores, I can sew, cook, sing, pray..." (00:38:25 – 00:38:29).

In recent times women are evolving, they are pushing against the walls of the roles assigned by society in the name of gender, carving a niche for themselves by claiming individual identities. They are changing the prevalent patriarchal ideologies and orthodox narratives. They are making themselves strong, they are setting a new meaning to a word called 'women'. They are showing what they are capable of by creating and earning opportunities proving that their roles, skills, and capabilities cannot be bound and confined under the homogenous umbrella of gender roles assigned by the norms of a patriarchal society. Manju Mai called all these teachings that pass from one woman to another "Fraud work" (01:19:12). In *Laapataa Ladies* Phool she was totally dependent on husband but after being left alone on the station she has no one to be dependent on. And after that only we get to know Phool's evolving character. She brings out her best, started earning, and started to

know how the world is and how it works. In the end, she made herself a new woman by realizing her own capabilities.

The New woman is witnessed in the character of Pushpa/Jaya in *Laapataa Ladies*. She was a progressive and educated lady with a modern mindset, who did not want to be dependent on her husband. One of the instances when Jaya proves to be a New Woman is when she defends Deepak for mistaking her as Phool, agreeing with his reasons that “this veil is nothing short of a tent, it conceals a lady’s face and doesn’t let her see beyond the shoes in front of her” (00:14:37). The word ‘conceal’ can be used as contrast to cosmetic concealer, used to camouflage the marks on face, similarly the veil helps conceal the marks not of acne or accidents alone but bruises resulting from abuse suffered by women. The misfortune of the change of veiled brides suffered by Phool, Jaya, and Deepak in the film shows that the practice of customs and rituals prevalent from old times is the cause for the problem discussed in Kiran Rao’s *Laapataa Ladies* (2023). Jaya as a new woman has changed the orthodox narrative not only for Deepak’s family but also of the grey character of Inspector Shyam Manohar, who on learning the truth has a change of heart and helps Jaya escape the clutches of her greedy and abusive husband, Pradeep. It is unheard of for women to address their partners by their names in many regions, especially rural spaces, and Jaya questions the practice by sharing her thoughts stating that “when the man has a decent name, why not use it?” (00:53:08). “Deepak...Deepak” (01:52:20), were the first words uttered by Phool, when she sees him at the station, addressing him by his name portrays Phool’s evolution as a woman, as she unlearns the age-old customs and teachings.

Jaya was educated, had a bachelor's degree and wanted to study organic farming. Her knowledge and ideas regarding the subject both shocked and impressed Deepak’s family and friends. Women, when given opportunities, can fly high like Jaya and Phool did at the end of the film. Phool who changed and added to her ascribed ‘womanly roles’ decides to step out for a job and help her husband towards the end of the movie. Whereas on the other side Jaya with a new thought and mindset was ready to fly high and achieve her goals. She even changed the view of Deepak’s family on ‘ghunghat pratha’ and ‘uttering husbands name’. Kiran Rao’s *Laapataa Ladies* embodies the concepts of a New woman through the characters of Phool and Jaya.

**Voices Against Domestic Violence:** “Worldwide, almost one-third of women aged 15 - 49, have been subjected to some form of physical or sexual violence. A majority of domestic violence incidents go unreported” (01:59:00 – 01:59:19) as conveyed in Shashanka Chaturvedi’s film *Do Patti* (2024). Currently, women have forged ahead from this violence and as is evident in Anubhav Sinha’s film *Thappad* (2022). The film narrates the tale of Amrita and Vikram, a married couple. In the movie Amrita is portrayed as a capable homemaker, she deeply loves her ambitious husband and fulfills the role of a supportive and caring wife and a friend towards her husband. This film portrays the journey of Amrita’s quest, realization and endeavour to reclaim her respect, identity and happiness as an individual on being slapped by her husband. This film portrays abuse (slap) as a form of domestic abuse and a violation of a female's rights to self-respect. In the opening sequence

of the film, Vikram decides to celebrate his appointment as Head of the London office by hosting a party at home. He engages himself in a heated argument with one of his employers and when Amrita intercedes between them, Vikram slaps Amrita. This is the catalyst event, where Amrita's life is turned upside down. The whole movie revolves around this incident. This incident was an eye opener not only for Amrita but for everyone associated with Amrita and her marriage with Vikram.

It is assumed that the only responsibility of a married woman is to prioritize others and their needs before herself and this is reflected in the conversation between Sunita and her husband "I take care of your home, tolerate your mother's tantrums. I cook for other people, then cook for you ... you beat me and then I sleep" (00:05:53 – 00:05:58). Women are always taught to be calm and tolerant. Women are only given the duty to nurture relations. These words of wisdom are shared as generational inheritance with women by their mother and grandmother since ages, this is how women were schooled to think, a practice evident in Anubhav Sinha's film *Thappad*. Amrita's mother and mother-in-law both shared their insights on the situation as in their opinion Amrita's reaction for just a slap, and not a repetitive event, was unreasonable. Sandhya (Amrita's mother) on learning the cause of Amrita's decision to divorce Vikram questions her parenting and nurturing her daughter "Where did we go wrong, we raised her, educated her, ... married her into a good family" (01:09:35 – 01:09:40); "women have to learn tolerance to keep the family together, one has to suppress one's feeling" (01:09:52 – 01:09:55); "my mother said a home is more important, her mother taught her a home is all-important" (01:10:52 – 01:10:55). Vikram's mother too affirms similar biased and gendered ideology on speaking with Amrita in attempts of convincing her to move on from the incident which she knows had shattered Amrita to the core but still suggests that "women must learn to tolerate" (01:34:19).

Inequalities and humiliations that a woman encounters in the domestic realm are considered natural, and acceptable. Netra is a wife and a successful lawyer and despite being very successful she is humiliated by her husband. Her accomplishments are narrated as validation of being the wife of a successful man and daughter-in-law of a successful lawyer. Rohit tells Netra "With only five years experience, you have the top cases. Why? ... its privilege, because you're justice Jai Singh's daughter-in-law, and you're Rohit Jai Singh's wife. My wife" (00:33:48 – 00:34:01). Amrita forged ahead and fought this battle herself. A slap is not just a slap rather it's time for women to wake up, to realize and think of themselves as individual, as human beings. Amrita realizes that women are significant, invaluable and deserve to be respected, and being questioned and told repeatedly that her reaction and decision to get a divorce over a small mishap was unreasonable. This new Amrita, fighting for herself, is portrayed in the conversation with Netra, her lawyer, when even Netra asks to know the real reason "one slap cannot be the reason" (01:04:34); "that's unusual, Amrita people may think you are unreasonable" (01:04:55). Amrita questions that "don't those people think slapping is unreasonable" (01:04:59), to which Netra answers "maybe but your reaction could be seen as unreasonable" (01:05:03).

Amrita's response gives us a glimpse of the effect of abuse, of any form, has on its victims, their predicament where they start questioning their existence and identity:

I can't respect myself any more, I chose to be a housewife, no one forced me, I was happy to be a part of his dreams and his life, but along the way I might have become the kind of person someone slaps, isn't that unreasonable, he cannot hit me, just a slap? He cannot slap me (01:05:09 – 01:05:41).

Men are always considered to be powerful, leaders, protectors of the house, this happens when Vikram realises that he is not getting promoted, his aggressive nature, impulsive reaction and violence breaks out. Vikram wants to leave the office where he is not respected but women doing the same would be wrong, if they do so then they have no shame and no manners. The fact that even after having slapped Amrita amidst a social gathering, Vikram doesn't feel remorseful or even apologetic rather his self-centered nature where he prioritizes his reputation over her wife's well-being is evident when he ponders and shares his thoughts with Amrita the same night he slapped her "I realized that I have no value ... this is ridiculous ... I cannot stay in a job where I am not valued" (00:41:22 – 00:41:30). Abusing women or slapping them is just a moment for men, it is their way to show love as Vikram's friend says to the lawyer "a little physical aggression is an expression of love" (01:20:35). A woman neglects herself, her preferences, her identity, her needs, and life in favour of prioritizing others before herself. This was when Amrita pondered on the established societal norms by questioning herself and mother in law "I was so busy keeping Vikram happy..., I even forgot blue was not my favourite colour, my favourite colour is yellow. Right papa?" (02:00:50 – 02:00:59). In fact, Amrita asks for valediction from her father for what she used to love.

We can also notice that Amrita was the one who was putting effort in the marriage but on the other side Vikram wanted to buy her apologies, trying to emotionally manipulate her by forcing her and buying jewellery for her. This shows that their marriage is a one-sided investment of emotions. Amrita too could have suffered like her mother and numerous other women in silence but she raised her voice against the injustice because her father, Sachin Sandhu, was very supportive of her decision to step out of a relationship that once was loving and had now turned abusive and manipulative.

Amrita's father is a progressive man, hence, he supports her, especially after Amrita's mother reveals her unfulfilled dreams and he realizes his unintentional and indirect involvement in her sufferings since he was unable to understand her dreams. Her mother's rhetorical question "Didn't I have desires" (01:10:05) inadvertently reveals her dreams, she stated that her father wanted her to sing on All India Radio, but she had to compromise after marriage. She questions "Should I have looked after the house and kids or sing songs?" (01:10:23) with Amrita, her mother, Sunita, Netra fought for themselves and changed their way of living. What these women wanted was their happiness, freedom, respect and dignity in their own home. Not only Amrita but other supportive characters have developed and fought for themselves, seeing Amrita fighting for herself, her respect and happiness Netra and Sunita both take stand for themselves in their marriages. This incident provides a

platform for Amrita to find her own identity and to fight against domestic violence. She believed that the slap was unfair and the most unfair is expecting a woman to move on because it was just a moment that happened because the man was drunk, irritated and frustrated.

Violence is not always physical and tangible; but can also be psychological and emotional as is evident in A. Jayaprabha's poem, *Stares (Chupulu)* published in her book *Vanamadi Modoo Paadam* (Third Foot of Vamana) in 1988, educates us on ways to fight against such attacks. A. Jayaprabha is a feminist poet and a critic, she is a pioneer in the feminist movement in Telugu literary criticism. Her poetry also depicts the feminist concerns. She embraced the problems that women faced but also the inherent strength and courage that women displayed in every aspect of life. In this poem she portrays how women are assaulted by the stares of men on a daily basis, men - who have no shame or regret about their gaze, look at women as a "drooling dog" (l. 16). In this poem she stated that there is no safe place on the earth where we (women) are safe. We have threats on each and every step of our life but this does not mean that the earth is not ours; "But the earth is mine too" (l. 34). We are also human beings. We have to make our eyes sharp and stare back at them. She stated "stares for stares" (l. 38) she made herself strong and fought for herself. A. Jayaprabha has shown an awareness and the courage of a woman, how she fought back for herself.

**Conclusion:** Every woman should live a life of dignity, respect, decency and equality, free from fear, violence and discrimination. The film *Laapataa Ladies* and *Thappad* embraces women's rights, and freedom and how they challenged patriarchal norms. Women are confronting the entrenched stereotypes and questioning the societal norms that confine them to predefined roles, thereby constraining their ability to assert their identities and pursue their dreams. In recent times, women are enjoying more liberty and equality than before. Many women are leading the society as teachers, doctors, and even entrepreneurs. Women have earned respect in sports, winning medals and setting world records. They have a great impact in every field, for instance - Indira Gandhi, the first and only female Prime Minister and the first woman to lead a democratic country. Kiran Bedi, the first female officer to join the IPS in 1972. Mary Kom is an Indian Olympic boxer and an inspiration for women in India. She broke the stereotype that married women, especially mothers cannot become successful athletes, through her grit and determination. Hence, women are becoming self-aware and are fighting for themselves, not only women but society is getting realization, their thinking is changing, and they are coming in support of/with women. Now women are physically strong, financially independent, and are socialising on a par with men.

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