

# Thappad, An Insult or a Tonic of Disillusionment? A Study of R K Narayan's *The Dark Room* and the movie *Thappad*

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## Abstract:

Writer and director Anubhav Sinha in one of the interviews on the movie *Thappad* said that women are taught to be the canvas not the colour, the lemonade not the vodka. But here it is not my objective to deal with the gender discrimination or patriarchy flowing through the veins of the movie *Thappad* and R K Narayan written novel *The Dark Room*. Neither my objective is to point out the deep rooted prejudices and vices that were always been highlighted over ages. What connects the movie and the novel is that there is a shock treatment(as there in medical science) in both the movie and the novel called thappad (slap) that triggers a kind of disillusionment and provides a kind of clarity and visibility that was otherwise not present. The epiphanic realization is triggered by the climactic thappad that transformed both Savitri (the central character in *The Dark Room*) and Amrita (the protagonist in the movie *Thappad*) from a submissive common woman to a superwoman who can easily transcend the previous limitations with a blow. Though Savitri was not slapped literally but the treatment and insults received from her husband every day is not any less than a literal thappad. To be more accurate probably a literal thappad would have been far better than the psychological trauma Savitri undergoes through every day, every moment. Probably the both the writer and the novelist hints to the fact that a kind of catalytic thappad (not literally but the reasons that enables one to think the other person can be slapped)is needed for better vision and for one's liberty. And both of them strives to make the viewer and the reader to thappads visible and invisibilised. Not being judgemental to compartmentalize whether thappad is a malady or a cure, we will discuss the writer's way of giving an epiphanic third eye to the significant female characters.

**Key Words:** Thappad (slap), disillusionment, visibility, superwomen etc.

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“Thappad sirf wo nahi jo chehre pe aake lagta hai  
Thappad hai har wo shabd jo aatmasamman par hamla hai,  
Thappad sirf wo nahi jo haath utha kar maar diya  
Thappad hai har wo soch jisne jab chaha nazar se utaar diya” (“Taapsee Pannu Gives  
'Thappad' to Patriarchy and Gender Discrimination", 2020)

Tapsee Pannu, the lead actress in one of the video clips, to justify the purpose of the movie *Thappad* said this so that people do not take thappad (slap) as a literal one. According to her a slap is not mere hitting on one's cheek but beyond that. According to her those words that are an insult to the person, dishonour to self-respect, and is not less than a thappad. For the slapped body heals quicker but the gash it creates within is beyond the reach of the medicines, beyond the other people's comprehension, beyond everything. To justify the situation of the movie and the novel we must take cue from the given quotation.

“And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about.” (“A quote from *Kafka on the Shore*", 2021)

The quoted lines are taken from Haruki Murakami's *Kafka on the Shore*. The relevance of the quotation here is that if the slap is compared to a storm, then the person evolving out of the storm will no longer be the same person once out of the storm. Likewise, the slap metamorphosed them both. They were no longer the selves that they used to be. And that is probably the nature of the storm, the characteristic feature of the storm. Once she encountered the fateful slap, she no longer was the previous self. And according to Haruki Marakami, it is not much important that what led the person to that situation or how he or she managed to survive through it. But what is important according to him is that they no longer will remain the same self. And that the storm is all about. Amrita all of a sudden realized that she no longer loves her husband. People cared and respected her for being the wife of Vikram and daughter in law of Vikram's mother not for Ammu as a person. That is why Amrita says at one point of time that the moment she was slapped she could sense all the slaps already thrashed on her cheeks but she didn't realize it then. But the slap was like the opening of the third eye to her.

Amrita was literally slapped on her cheek in front of the guests invited on the occasion of the promotion that Vikram had just made through. When he came to know that we will of course be sent to London but will have to work under an Englishman. A single slap, the wound of it was probably not limited to the cheek but induced a lots of chain reaction. But one must remember one thing that Vikram is not a bad or villainous person personally who is a repeat offender. If the single black scar (the act of slapping his wife) is erased from his character then he is fine man without any folly. A man who does all the work only for the betterment of the house, to give her wife a good life in London in particular and attain a higher status in society

in general. And that was the motto of the writer cum director Anubhav Sinha. According to him had Vikram been a villainous character then Ammu would have got plenty of reasons to leave her husband anyway and left long before. But the director aimed to demonstrate something else. His objective is that even if it is single slap, it is not okay to 'fit in' and 'move on'.

On the contrary Savitri, the heroine in *The Dark Room* by R K Narayan faces different challenges in live. Incidentally the name Savitri refers back to the Vana Parba of the Hindu Mythology *Mahabharata*, where Savitri is a pious princess married to an exiled prince Satyavaan. Savitri was so much devoted to her husband that she would rather die but won't let the death god Yama take her husband. Satyavaan too was very much in love with his wife Savitri. Finally, by her wit and love, Savitri was able to bring back her husband from the grip of death god Yama. As a result, the legendary sati Savitri set an example for the later generations of women to follow. Narayan probably modelled his heroine based on the legendary couple Savitri and Satyavaan. But unfortunately, though Savitri had more or less some sort of similarity with the legendary sati Savitri but her husband Ramani lacks any such resemblance with the legendary Satyavaan. She (Savitri in *The Dark Room*) had to deal with an eccentric and whimsical husband. She had to 'fit in' always and work according to the whims of her husband. Though the routine of both Amrita and Savitri is not different but the situation is something different than that of Amrita. Savitri was not much educated a woman that is why to her it was okay to be insulted, abused and not given any kind of priority in anything. She was so blind in love with her husband that she considered that even questioning about the immorality, whereabouts and asking for an explanation from her husband is a silly question and shameful offence.

The life of Savitri (The heroine in R K Narayan's *The Dark Room*) and Amrita (otherwise known as 'Ammu' in the movie) is like an eternal death circle. Incidentally a death circle is a path that leads one to the same place after one has travelled a livelong path. As a result, the whole journey leads one to nowhere. The futile journey leads but to the same damn place again and again and all the hardship one goes through is but a mockery of his futile striving. Both of them dedicated and sacrificed their lives to be the best housewife possible, lead a circular monotonous life (Though Amrita in one of her elaborate monologue directed to her mother in law said that "I don't remember if I have ever said that I want to be a housewife. If anyone ever asked me what I wanted to be in future. But when she became a housewife, she tried to the best housewife in the world possible. She acknowledges the very fact that she was not compelled to pursue to the status of a housewife by force. It was a chosen status but that too demanded a minimum respect all the same). Amrita could have been a successful dancer in life had she pursued what she loved the most i.e. dancing. Her father certified that she had been very good in dancing and could have prospered well had she pursued dancing as a career. But she chose to be a housewife, a subservient in Vikram's (her husband's) house. To be a 'sanskari bahu' and a 'dutiful wife' she choked her passions to death. All day long from waking up till going to bed she dedicated 23 precious hours of her day for the wellbeing of the household. From making tea from a particular herb and breakfast, waking her husband up for office, ready him like a kid prepared for school, to measure the sugar level of her mother-in-law she did everything. Only one hour did she devoted to what she loved, the last flicker of her spoilt dream. But ironically, she was happy woman being too happy in her husband's prosperity, being too happy in her husband promotion with a future promise to settle in London

when he is promoted enough. She had no complain to herself for not pursuing her career. That's why being reminded by her father about her career she only tells her father that 'papa London to ja rahi hu or kitna aage jaun mai' (roughly translating: "father, I am going to settle down in London. How further you want me to progress.") But the irony is that she could have gone London based on her own talent (if destination London is what prosperity meant), not merely depending on her husband's promotion.

Now the question comes that where from comes the courage in a meek and submissive woman like Savitri to transcend her limitation, leave her husband's house and journey to the unknown, to argue with him, to live independent without being sponsored by her known persons. Where from emerged the super human qualities in a woman who even won't say boo to a goose. It is probably because the dormant volcano was gathering strength and waiting for its right time to erupt. And the slap worked as a catalyst. This realization is reflected in thinking when she leaves her house and was about to commit suicide: "Am I the same old Savitri or am I someone else? ...And I must be posing as Savitri because I couldn't have had courage to talk back to my husband." The symbolical slap here made her visible everything which she couldn't see or pretended not to see. That is why she angrily says that: "...What possession can a woman call her own except her body? Everything else that she has is her father's, her husband's or her son's. So, take these too..." This dialogue reminds us of the last monologue in Vijay Tendulkar's *Silence! The Court is in Session*, where she says that: "Only one thing in life is all-important--the body! You may deny it, but it is true." (Tendulkar & Adarkav, 1978)

And the slap of Amrita all of a sudden showed many invisible slaps that was thrashed on her but she didn't notice or pretended not to. Immediately she realized that she probably pretended to love her husband but actually she didn't. She couldn't even respect herself. So, she decided to remain separated from her husband till she realized that she loves her husband. Finally, they got separated via divorce. And this single slap disillusioned many. Amrita's mother suddenly bursts forth into saying that she sacrificed her career as a singer for the sake of the house. She too could have been a singer singing in radio shows. Amrita's father who till that time was portrayed as the best husband was questioned by his wife. The maid servant who was slapped every now and then suddenly mustered courage out of this incident and protested very violently. This is the first time that she reacted, for the first time she protested against the injustices done to her, for the first time she paid her husband back with equal power and courage. The lawyer Netra for first time set her feet on self-dependency. The burden she had always been carrying with her because she was always reminded by her husband that she is successful because she was the daughter in law of a successful lawyer and a wife of a successful lawyer. From the utter dependency on her husband and father-in-law to an earned identity was taught to her by the single slap experienced by Amrita. The about to slap moment for Savitri also enabled her to sense the dependency she had over every person. The self-realization, the gained also was gift of the thappad. Though Narayan didn't provide any solution to the problem of women like Savitri but Anubhav Sinha clearly states that it's the time for women to know their worth and decide whether to fit in the situation she already was and move on or to reflect and be gone.

Slap induces domestic violence and at any cost this cannot be supported or promoted. Nor even once. The Hindi saying: "kheecha hua kaan se mila hua gyan hamesha yaad rehta hai" (roughly translating, the knowledge and experience gained through punishment can never be forgotten) won't be appropriate here as well. Slapping one's own wife is a criminal offence.

Therefore, Amrita kept saying: “It is just a slap. Par nahi maar sakta”. What if a single slap. The very act testifies the fact that women is a property or commodity and therefore can be treated the way their husbands want. The disillusionment and the courage gained in the process is a rather a by-product of the heinous act. But unfortunately, it triggered the emergence of a new super woman which was ‘always already’ there. Thappad was but a spark that caused the self-realization in most of the women characters in *The Dark Room* and the movie *Thappad*.

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