

## **Redefining the Concept of Equality in Indian Marriages: A Comparative Study of the Films *Thappad* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey***

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### **Abstract**

Cinema often reflects society, connecting people, sparking conversations, and broadening perspectives. Two Indian films, *Thappad* (2020) and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* (2022), highlight these aspects by tackling patriarchy, toxic masculinity, and domestic violence. *Thappad*, directed by Anubhav Sinha, follows the story of Amrita (Taapsee Pannu), who questions whether it's acceptable for her husband to slap her, even once. The film explores human ego and the broader implications of gender inequality. In *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*, directed by Vipin Das, Jaya (Darshana Rajendran), a woman without autonomy, fights back against her abusive husband Rajesh (Basil Joseph), challenging societal norms and the entitlement of men. Both films center around a slap that forces the protagonists to reevaluate the normalized injustices in their lives. These stories illustrate how gender discrimination is ingrained in the upbringing of both men and women. Through Amrita and Jaya's evolution, the films call for a redefinition of gender as a social construct rather than a biological inevitability.

**Keywords:** Cinema, gender equality, toxic masculinity, patriarchy, female identity

Marriages are made in heaven, or that is what we are told at least. In India, marriage is a sacred institution across religions. The rituals and customs differ as we move from one place to another, but marriage as an institution remains central to the Indian social structure. A historical study of marriage as an institution tells us that the idea developed as human beings started looking for greater stability in life. It eventually became problematic as a larger onus of maintaining this stability and sustaining this institution fell on the woman in the marriage. While they were expected to give up more, they were also held accountable, to a greater degree, for the failures or instabilities in the marriage.

In patriarchal India, weddings have always emphasised men's dominion over women, with rituals and ceremonies that extend to having the bride's parents washing the groom's feet, the bride touching the groom's feet, and the girl's father "giving away" his daughter, in *kanyadaan*, to the groom and his family, as if she were a possession. What is equality in a marriage? To some it means that both the partners need to make the same amount of money, to some, it means sharing the household duties equally, or to some, sharing the parenting responsibility, uniformly. To us, the concepts of equality are based on what we imbibed from our parents and our ancestors. When two people marry, each may carry a different notion of an equal, and equality in a marriage.

Equality in marriages can be a fluid process, and it may change over time between couples – as long as there is respect and effective communication between them. When a couple views each other as equals, treats each other with respect, is considerate towards the other's opinion, and supports each other, it shows the couple has an equal stake in their relationship. These kinds of partners have a common goal, and they work towards it, as a team. They are committed to their relationship, and they provide unconditional support for each other. Marriages "lasted longer" back in the day because women were socialized into accepting subjugation, subservience, weakness, financial independence and abuse as a way of life. "Long lasting marriages" were not a sign of happiness, but they were a symbol of helplessness.

*Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* and *Thappad* are the two socially relevant Indian films that discussing the myths and problems of Indian marriages. Commercial Malayalam cinema has for decades normalised violent husbands in various ways including by writing them as nice guys and their conduct as comical. It's easy to do this since the goal of such films has been to pander to misogynists. This is clearly not director-writer Vipin Das and his co-writer Nashid Mohamed Famy's mission in *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey*. The two have adopted comedy as a means to take down abusive men instead. *Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* is a 2022 Indian Malayalam-language family comedy-drama film directed by Vipin Das. The film stars Darshana Rajendran and Basil Joseph. It is a satire on gender stereotypes and also addressing manipulation and domestic violence. The movie revolves around the character Jayabharathi, a smart and ambitious girl from a middle class family. Her family, and her busy-body maternal uncle, under the guise of protecting her, take every decision for her. Her parents take an active interest in her brother's future and enrolls him in a college even though it was very expensive. But, when it was Jaya's turn, they give no importance to her interests or passion and enrolls her in a parallel college nearby.

*Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* illustrates the gaslighting that actual women face around everyday occurrences. From childhood to adulthood, Jaya is constantly told that she is loved, respected and free to make choices by the very people close to her who disrespect her, deny her agency, bully her and make all her decisions on her behalf. School is followed by a college of her parents' choice, a boyfriend (Aju Varghese) without their knowledge and a husband (Basil Joseph) whose home she shares with his mother (Kudassanad Kanakam) and sister (Sheethal Zackaria). In short, Jaya is just another woman on a conventional path in small-town Kerala.

Until a few years back, the slap was the most common weapon of choice for good-natured men in Malayalam cinema to put women who cross the 'limits' in their place. Most often, movies used to portray the men who slap women as doing the right thing. Times have changed, and the slaps have almost disappeared from our cinema. The movie takes a drastic shift in tone when Jaya decides to take things into her hand. From then on, it is a constant shift between over-the-top humour and a realistic portrayal of a violent marriage. Some of the bits, including Jaya's fight back, might seem exaggerated. However, the makers are clearly not presenting this as a solution to domestic violence, but as a cathartic exercise for the many who are forced to silently

endure violence in their daily lives and as a means to prick at those who see such violence as their right. It only slacks a bit in places, especially during a fight with a running commentary.

The movie questions the need of equality and understanding in marriages. Jaya's husband Rajesh treated her like an unpaid slave in home. She hadn't any right to rise her voice and to take decisions in the family. The movie is travelling through the lives of typical Indian wives who were the victims of patriarchy and toxic masculinity. In Indian marriages, especially long lasting relationship are considered as happy and peaceful but no one knows how much pain the women are suffering both mentally and physically. All long lasting marriages are not a symbol of happy and divine love but it might be a symbol of helplessness. They might be trapped like a caged bird. Equality is an inevitable thing in marriages. A slap is the turning point of this movie and Jaya starts to resist against the toxic attitude of Rajesh. Slap is not a thing to normalise in marriages. No one had the right to slap anyone. But some people considers that this physical violence are normal in marital relationship and women should tolerate this for the sake of their happy relationship.

The ending of this film is stupendous. Jaya was not ready to forgive for her husband even though her family support Rajesh. The ending makes the film remarkable and eye-opening one. In the end Jaya signs the divorce paper not before condescendingly asking the price for chicken as a parallel to their first meeting. The movie broke many stereotypes in Indian marriages especially the patriarchy, subjugation and toxic masculinity etc. In today's world, an ideal marriage is based on the notion of two equals, seeking love, stability and happiness together. However, the idea of equality in a marriage itself is barely 50 years old. The current day relationships are based on companionship, respect and mutual sexual attraction, a lot more freedom that there used to be.

*Thappad* is a 2020 Indian Hindi-language drama film directed by Anubhav Sinha, starring Taapsee Pannu. The movie *Thappad* which had completely deconstructed the stereotypical, confining notions of womanhood and Indian marriages. The movie is a journey through the life of the central character Amrita (Taapsee Pannu), who gave up all her aspirations and confined herself in a pseudo, happy married life with her husband Vikram (Pavai Gulatti). Amrita, a girl with lot many talents yet trapped in a confined institution of marriage, is a character who is

universal in nature. In *Thappad*, the first half of movie presents Amrita as a dedicated housewife. In movie, she appears as a loving and obedient daughter, a caring, affectionate daughter-in-law and a loyal, cheerful, loving and caring wife. She presents the picture of an ideal Indian woman who dissolves herself completely in the life of a housewife after getting married to Vikram. Vikram is doing a respectable job in corporate and proving himself well on this front. He also appears in the movie as a man of values who cares for his mother, loves Amrita, shares his all kind of feelings with Amrita, always shows respect and love for his in-laws, obeys his elders and is passionate, ambitious and dedicated professional who works hard to prove his ability and wants to get promotion in his Job.

All the female characters in the movie have faced the harsh realities of patriarchy at one point or the other. While some characters could identify the injustice done to them, some others aren't even aware of the injustice they are facing. One of the female characters in the movie named Sunitha who comes from a lower strata of society is a victim of constant domestic violence. However, she was forced to bear with it mainly due to economic dependency. So it is also a proven fact that, economically dependent females are more prone to face domestic violence than an independent lady. Vikram, seems to be a perfect husband from outside, but deep inside he is a typical dominating male. He doesn't expect his wife to be successful or independent. All he wants from his wife is a caretaker, who can do everything to make his life smooth and better. He never wishes to see Amrita as an independent individual capable of taking a decision her own. He never thinks of Amrita's career or her feelings.

He has barely no idea that Amrita is an excellent dancer and she could be successful as a professional as well. This kind of ignorance from the husband's part is a common thing in Indian marriages, especially in arranged marriages. The society has the tendency to normalize such things as a convenient gesture from the so called "good house wives" for the sake of a successful married life. Amrita, being a house wife is not only burdened with the duties to her husband, but also to the in-laws as well. She is responsible of everything happens Vikram's house. Marriages usually demand a lot of sacrifices from women.

Women are constantly forced to sacrifice their career, their comfort zone, their interests and a lot more for the sake of a successful married life. Such kind of practices become so common to

the extent that the society started normalizing it. As a result, women became so socialised and in the process they forget to think about their own happiness. Amrita's life goes upside down all of a sudden when she receives a slap from her husband Vikram during a party hosted in her house. Even though Amrita was surrounded by her family and friends, no one was there to really backup her. For Amrita, the slap was not simply a physical form of violence but infringe of her self-respect. The slap also makes Amrita realize her value in the relationship and how she was pretending to be happy all these time.

The scene in which Amrita's husband slaps Amrita is a turning point in the movie which makes Amrita think about herself and her value as a person. She comes to the realisation that in process of being making herself a good wife, she forgets her true self and identity. Initially, Amrita's family was sceptical about her decision, however they understood the real reason. Amrita's bravery is portrayed where she showed everyone that why she couldn't tolerate the injustice done to her. As she said everyone consoled her saying it's just a slap. Literally everyone including her husband tried to normalize that incident.

The ending makes the film unique from other Bollywood conservative films. The audience may think that why Amtitha doesn't ready to forgive her husband because it is a silly thing. The answer is no one have the right to slap a person. Even though Amrita, isn't happy about the divorce, she doesn't convince herself for an adjustment. That is the point where she proves her worth. She can be identified as the true exponent of practical feminism. She doesn't preach big theories or ideologies, but her actions pass strong messages to the audience. Amrita is not alone in this journey. All the female characters in the movie have experienced the bitter side of patriarchy in some forms.

The movie delivers a strong statement of feminism. It clearly criticizes the traditional concept of Indian marriages. It also showcases the wrong norms traditional marriages propagate. It is a tendency to normalize the violence towards females or subordinate genders within marriages. The movie shows the need of equality in a relationship. The sad thing about the character of Amritha is that when Vikram slaps her no one will stand with Amritha even her mother. This shows the dangers of martial life. The Indian society still believe the preconceived notion that a woman after a marriage is responsible for the happiness and wellbeing of his husband even

though she sacrifices everything for him. The Indian marriages filled with many stereotypes and myths. The marital life will be peaceful if there is an understanding between partners. Otherwise it will end with unimaginable consequences.

*Thappad* and *Jaya Jaya Jaya Hey* present the harsh realities of Indian marriages. These films also discuss the myths and stereotypes still existing in the traditional Indian society. These two movies break the preconceived notion that a wife should be ready to suffer everything on the sake of their partners. Amritha and Jaya are the representative of strong Indian women that are undoubtedly needed in this patriarchal society. They are redefining the concept of equality in their marital life. The interesting things about these two characters are they were not ready to yield in front of their toxic husband and family. They fight and gain their self identity. They both were not ready to forgive for their husband because they aren't considered their pathetic life as a normal thing in a marital life. These strong decisions make these women as powerful and assertive.

In conclusion, Jaya and Amrita represent the opposite extremes of feminism, still they reveal the fact that modern woman possesses the decision-making power and is capable enough to go with the consequences of her decisions. They introspect about their strengths, weaknesses, their desires, their ambitions and the picture of their future. Then, they decide to move ahead in their life with firm determination. This form of feminism is not to blame the male counterpart rather it is to take the complete responsibility of herself with all the odds and evens.

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