

Challenging Stereotypes: Introspecting the Emotional Intelligence of the Characters of the Movie Thappad

ELISHA. I

Teaching Fellow, Department of English
Anna University: MIT Campus, Chennai

Dr. DEEPA MARY FRANCIS

Assistant Professor, Department of English
Anna University: MIT Campus, Chennai

Abstract

Gender discrimination has been prevalent down through the ages. In most of the Eastern countries, gender roles taken by women do put them in a submissive position. India is no exception. Stereotype is a concept that is generally associated with gender, as preconceived notions about how we speak, laugh, walk, behave, dress and groom based on our sex have been knowingly or unknowingly instilled in our brains. When stereotyping is taken as an excuse for discriminating against women by assigning submissive gender roles, some women with progressive thoughts or with great concern for their own selves make efforts to challenge the very basic idea of stereotypes. This paper aims to analyse how Anubhav Sinha makes the female lead and some of the other characters of the movie *Thappad* break the stereotypical behaviour and take very drastic decisions which do not fit within the so-called framework of 'normal or usual'.

Keywords: Gender stereotypes, trauma, gender roles, breaking stereotypes, discrimination

Introduction

Gender discrimination has been prevalent down through the ages. In most of the Eastern countries, gender roles taken by women do put them in a submissive position. India is no exception. Stereotype is a concept that is generally associated with gender, as preconceived notions about how we speak, laugh, walk, behave, dress and groom based on our sex have been knowingly or unknowingly instilled in our brains. It is a concept that is so much internalized at the societal and individual levels. Gender stereotyping is the practice of assigning specific features, characteristics or roles to an individual solely based on that person's sexual orientation. So we have words like 'manly' and 'womanly' to reveal the general societal expectations about how a man should be or behave and how a woman should be or behave. According to Teresa De Lauretis, the cultural perceptions of male and female are two complementary but mutually exclusive categories into which all humans are classified. They form a gender system, a symbolic system or system of meanings inside each culture that links sex to cultural material, based on social values and hierarchy. Although

the definitions vary by culture, each society's sex-gender system is always inextricably linked to political and economic issues. In this light, the cultural transformation of sex into gender, as well as the asymmetry that defines all gender systems across cultures, though each in its own unique way, is seen as "systematically related to the structure of social inequalities (p5).

Stereotyping of Gender Roles

The term stereotype goes hand in hand with gender, as every society has its own behavioural pattern attached with the specific gender. It will not be an exaggeration to say that there are certain stipulated norms, though transmitted down the generation only ideologically, inbuilt into the very notion of gender roles. Human behaviour is shaped by stereotypes set on the expectations of the members of a society. According to the social role theory, which emphasizes on the psychological implications pertaining to sex difference and similarities in social behaviour, gender stereotypes stem from the unequal distribution of men and women in domestic and professional occupations (Koenig and Eagly, p 372).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence can be explained as an ability to recognise, understand and channelize one's own emotions in a constructive manner in order to reduce stress, communicate effectively, sympathise with others, overcome obstacles, and diffuse conflict (Salovey, p). Emotional intelligence aids in the development of stronger relationships, academic and professional success, and the attainment of career and personal objectives. The ability to handle emotions in adverse situations is the key factor for building good relationships. An emotional outburst can lead to several consequences inducing social and economical loss. An emotionally intelligent person can be empathetic, persistent and very optimistic.

Breaking the Stereotypes

At times, breaking stereotypes seems impossible. Particularly, in countries like India where stereotypes are strongly blended with traditions and culture, it seems very difficult to break the constructs of stereotypes. The hierarchical structure of the family expects women to take subordinate roles and to take care of the welfare of the family, while men take roles of the breadwinners of the family. The combination of profoundly rooted cultural norms, economic changes and government policies determines the role and significance of patriarchy in East Asia. These norms have designed the gender roles of women to be submissive in the male oriented system. Only a few women break these stereotypical gender roles to stand out of the crowd and to make differences in the existing notions of gender equality.

The film *Thappad* (2020), directed by Anubhav Sinha, has depicted the breaking of stereotypes in several forms through its various characters. At some point, it makes the audience think that women have revolutionary points of view as they would want to break every limitation that is imposed on them. This paper aims to analyse how Anubhav Sinha in the movie *Thappad* tries to challenge the gender stereotypes which are so deep rooted in the Indian society and culture and make the female protagonist take a very drastic decision as she feels that a 'thappad' in front of a gathering is not just a 'thappad' but a huge negligence of her as a person or individual with equal self-respect. This paper also aims to see how the director

presents some of the other characters to behave or respond in a way and pattern which is not termed to be 'very normal'.

Fitting into the Predestined Gender Roles

Irrespective of the gender of the children, parents are visionaries of their children's future. They dream, develop and work hard to get their child to a well accounted social status. They try their best to give them a good education and ambience. Whether women get equal opportunity as men in all walks of life is a question to ponder. In most Indian families, women are expected to take roles that would be satisfactory and comfortable for the groom's family. In most situations, women are expected to take those roles happily and work wholeheartedly. In some families, parents bring up their girl children so as to make them adaptable to the groom's family and situations. They often keep reminding about the life she would have in the groom's family. As the girl grows, she develops several interests and passions which form an important part of this movie. Though there are a lot of goals and passions, women are forced to conceal all those in order to live the goals of the groom's family.

The Soft Targets

Vikram Sabharwal, the husband of Amrita Sandhu, is not portrayed as a patriarchal figure. Though affluent, talented and high-profiled in the workplace, he is shown to be a family-oriented person who gives importance to the family. Except for the slap, he seems to have not shown any disrespect to Amrita. Even the slap is not depicted as a punishment to Amrita, instead it was to vent out the torture that he had endured in his workplace. The storyline is presented in such a way that Vikram is deeply disappointed in the way he was given an opportunity to work in London, yet the situations were twisted in such a way that his honour and commitments were disregarded. For a while, the movie revolves around the presentation Vikram is going to make to the delegates to get the opportunity to work in London. Every family member appreciates him and anticipates a favourable outcome and as expected he fulfilled it. Amrita seems to be very happy and dressed in a fashionable manner during the party Vikram had given to celebrate his success. Before the slap, Vikram seems to be carefree and never worried

about his reactions towards Amrita. But after the slap, things change and Vikram seems to feel guilty of his misbehaviour once he finds out that Amrita is deeply hurt by it. The sad part of the story is that the guilt that Vikram suffered through never yielded a proper recognition as every character paid attention only to mellow Amrita's feeling of shame but not to his efforts to recover from the impact of that incident.

People do live with reconciliations. There might be problems and damages. Despite that, they learn to believe and lead a life accepting the flaws of the life partner. Even God has created humans in such a way that the human body could heal any wound. It seems that Amrita has gone too far in failing to yield to any of Vikram's pleas for reconciliation, which has also challenged the stereotype as majority of the men in the Indian society would not take stances to reconcile. Why can't she ignore what has happened and move on? This is the question that lingers in the mind of every character. But if she had ignored this incident she would have been like any other woman because most women just ignore such outbursts that put their pride at stake and move on. She has represented the inner voice of a family woman in times of trauma.

Love and Honour

Vikram always gives respect to his in-laws. Everyone in Amrita's family seems to understand Vikram despite his behaviour in the party. It is only Amrita who refuses to accept him after the slap. The only reason that she gives for not accepting him is that she thinks they will not be able to lead a happy life together after this incident. But one big question of whether they will be able to lead a happy life if they drift apart is left unanswered. In one point of view, this movie stands apart from the rest, in stating a strong opposition to the rude behaviour of the groom. The superiority of the husband over the wife is deeply grounded in Indian tradition and culture. It is the husband who heads the family; he represents the pride of the family. But, does it give any right to the husband to rise over the wife? While this question has a reason behind it, there should also be some consideration to the point that there needs to be reconciliation to any problem.

In this movie, there is a tie between power and love. On one aspect, there seems to be a question of who is

more powerful - the husband or the wife. Amrita also seems to take the chance to emphasize that she is equally important and should be given equal power and respect as Vikram. Since she was denied of her respect, she is exerting the power at hand and taking the chance of making him realize that women are powerful and should be respected well. Even other characters like Nethra, her lawyer, and Vikram's mother had also eagerly emphasised the point that they are equally powerful to create an impact in the society. The only problem is that they are not recognised adequately or treated well. But, if Amrita's need to be respected is going to break the marriage, then the impact of the love that existed between Vikram and Amrita proves strengthless to hold them together. The love between them should have been the catalyst to handle this problem that had hampered their relationship. Though this movie projected the struggle between power and love, it has not ended well stating that love can cure all sins.

While everyone in the family understands what he has done is wrong and he is regretting the same, it is Amrita who seemed to have not understood him completely or it might be the case where she has understood but not willing to reconcile since she feels that he has no right to beat her. As to differ, the matter is looked at from a different perspective. What would have happened if Amrita had slapped Vikram? Then it would have been a matter of concern. Usually, if the groom slaps the bride, it is not considered to be an issue worth fighting over. The patriarchal stereotype emphasizes the bride to change herself to the whims and fancies of the groom's family. But, how much the family of the groom changes to accommodate the bride into their family is a concept that has never been thought of.

The Mental Trauma

An analysis of Vikram slapping Amrita reveals that it was not intentional at all. It seems more like a reflexive action which has triggered the adrenaline rush. It is quite normal for any person to become emotionally unstable in such circumstances. How one reacts to such a situation determines the success in a relationship. Yes, Vikram has failed here. But who else would he pounce on to vent out his feelings is a thing to reckon. The Indian stereotypes favour the groom to exercise complete liberty on the bride.

As one can see, the maid's husband beats her frequently. Hardly a day would pass without her getting slapped or beaten by him. She used to lock him inside the house to escape from his beatings. She even shares with Amrita her fear about what she would do if he locked her out of the house one day. It is a recollection that a girl is always dependent on the male members of the family. In countries like India, women need security. Toarma quotes "Safety-security needs, as Maslow (1943) explained, are also basic to human beings, as can be observed in infants, who have an overt danger reaction" (Taormina, p 157) emphasizing the social dependency of children. But, Amrita wanting to break from the protective layer of safety and embrace individuality is a point to wonder.

On the other hand, Nethra's husband's chauvinistic stand of him having to be the only person to dwell in glory while she had to mutely spectate is challenged by Nethra. He says,

'When I was sixteen or so, I used to go with my Dad to public events, when people photographed him I wondered what I was doing there when people were there to photograph him.'

I wonder sometimes what I'm doing with you.

With only five years of experience you have the three top cases. Why? It is a privilege because you're Justice Jaisingh's daughter-in-law and you are Rohit Jaisingh's wife. My wife. Use this privilege and you will be successful like me. (33:19 - 34:07)

She was initially under the patronage of her father-in-law, but went on to become autonomously famous as she did not want to grow under the shades of the favours offered by the male members of the family. This is one universal stereotype which is quite apparent in countries like India. Any glory or fame for the woman should come only through the man. As the bride joins the groom's family, she completely lets herself to be consumed emotionally and psychologically by the groom's family after which they would start thinking on how they can uplift her according to their family's protocol. There would be little chance left for her to pursue her passion. Nethra takes a very bold decision to separate herself from her father-in-law's firm and to start a new law firm. The stereotype of women being a component of male bastion is challenged highly when every character decides to break apart from

the family roles to start a life afresh as the movie progresses. Nethra and Amrita were able to the individuality towards the end of the movie. Similarly, the maid also gains courage in due course to reciprocate her husband's harsh treatment in the same token. "You want to be a man? I want to be a woman. Go on. Kill me. If you don't, I will slit your throat when you're asleep" (2:08:10 - 2:08:36). These words function as the outburst of the emotional trauma that she has experienced throughout.

Pregnancy and the Stereotype

She even breaks the stereotypical tendency of women to stay within the marital confinements once they understand that they are pregnant. Even after knowing that she is pregnant, Amrita did not back down from her decision to part ways with Vikram. A well known stereotype is that women should control their emotions and behave well though men might outrage at times in the family even in front of a big audience. In some parts of the world, even a public display of harassment is not questioned. As the words of the maid, Sunita's husband "Do I need a license to hit you" (32:34- 32:37) reflect sharply the very basic notion that women are subordinates to men.

Conclusion

The emotional intelligence of every character in this movie is explored in the struggle between the duality of accepting and protesting the dominance exercised on them. The stereotypes challenged in this movie might have drifted to extreme levels. If not for a girl like Amrita who questioned the unprecedented social hierarchies and the male dominated cultural stigmas, there would not have been a revolting realisation that the women also have equal rights for self-respect as men. So, from the director's point of view, Amrita has attempted to challenge the standards set with regard to the due respect that has to be given to women by family and society.

References

1. DE Lauretis, Teresa. *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction*. Indiana University Press, 1987. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzmbz. Accessed 10 Sept. 2021.
2. Koenig, Anne & Eagly, Alice. (2014). Evidence for the Social Role Theory of stereotype content:

- Observations of groups' roles shape stereotypes. *Journal of personality and social psychology*. 107. 371-392. 10.1037/a0037215.
3. *Thappad*. Directed by Anubhav Sinha, performance by Topsy Pannu and Pavail Gulati, Benaras Mediaworks and T-series, 2020.
 4. Taormina, Robert & Gao, Jennifer. (2013). Maslow and the Motivation Hierarchy: Measuring Satisfaction of the Needs. *The American journal of psychology*. 126. 155-77. 10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155.