



One Slap, Many Wounds: Gender Justice and Feminist Narratives in Indian Courtroom and Domestic Dramas

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ABSTRACT

Indian cinema has long romanticized the role of women as submissive, gentle, and sacrificial. In spite of the gradual infusion of feminist voices into Indian cinema, mainstream films still persists in upholding the stereotypical portrayals that reinforce patriarchal structures. However, recent entries in mainstream cinema such as *Pink* (2016) and *Thappad* (2020) question the constructed socially sanctioned model of the woman institutionalized by mainstream cinema. These films move beyond the stereotypes to illuminate the adversities faced by women against the patriarchal norms. In recent years, the Indian film industry has offered a range of cinematic texts that engage with critical gender issues, casting attention to women's independence, sexual assault and domestic violence. *Pink* interrogates notions of consent and the culture of victim-blaming within a courtroom context, whereas *Thappad* interrogates domestic violence and the silencing of women within marital spaces. Taken together, these films articulate a powerful feminist discourse that interrogates patriarchal structures in both private (home, marriage) and public (law, social judgment) spaces. They showcase narratives of women's struggles and triumphs while emphasizing the role of domestic life, marriage, and legal institutions in shaping gender equality. These films hold considerable cultural importance in their ability to shift Bollywood's representation of women from submissive figures to independent agents of change,



thereby envisioning cinema as a potent site of cultural and feminist interrogation that challenges patriarchy and reshapes discourses on women's rights.

Introduction

PINK: WHEN CONSENT DEFINES THE TRUTH

The film *Pink* (2016) is a *powerful feminist text* that directly addresses **victim blaming, consent, and patriarchal double standards**.

Victim-blaming remains among the most enduring forms of injustice that women encounter globally. It refers to the tendency to hold the victim, often a woman, is held accountable for the abuse or harassment inflicted upon her. Society turns its gaze away from the wrongdoer, choosing instead to judge the victim's actions, attire, and perceived morality. Feminist writers from Simone de Beauvoir to bell hooks have consistently challenged this mindset, exposing how it sustains patriarchal power structures. A woman's life under patriarchy is one of constant scrutiny, where every choice is weighed and judged. The moment they step outside traditional boundaries, they are considered responsible for any harm that befalls them. This is precisely what happens in *Pink*.

The 2016 Bollywood film *Pink*, directed by Aniruddha Roy Chowdhury compellingly communicates these feminist ideas in a cinematic terms. *Pink* revolves around three young independent women—**Minal Arora (Taapsee Pannu)**, **Falak Ali (Kirti Kulhari)**, and **Andrea (Andrea Tariang)**—who live together in Delhi. After attending a rock concert, they go to dinner with three men they met not long ago.

During this momentary encounter, one of the men, **Rajveer (Angad Bedi)**, attempts to sexually assault Minal. Cornered and terrified, she summons her courage, smashes the bottle against him, and runs away with her friends before danger can close in again. Rajveer's act is devoid of affection or passion, rather it emerges as a cruel manifestation of power, entitlement, and the deep-rooted arrogance of male dominance. By resisting and defending herself, Minal challenges the patriarchal order that dictates female submission. Brownmiller would interpret this scene as a moment when a woman refuses the role of the victim, rising to challenge the very system that nurtures and excuses male violence. Rajveer's attempt to assault Minal reflects his belief that she has no right to say "no," because He perceives her not as an autonomous individual but merely as an instrument for male gratification. Minal's act of defending



herself by striking him with a bottle is her way of **reclaiming her subjectivity**. **Claiming ownership of her body, she refuses to yield to domination.**

The structures of power grant Rajveer the liberty to assault Minal without consequence. This reflects MacKinnon's critique of how the institutional and societal structures uphold patriarchal authority and shield male dominance.

Later, the scene darkens as Rajveer and his companions turn their aggression upon Minal. Their act is motivated by a desire to **punish and control** her. Minal's prior defiance bruised Rajveer's sense of masculine entitlement. The rape becomes his attempt to reassert **male power and entitlement**. After the assault, Minal's mental and emotional condition exemplifies the trauma framework outlined by Herman's **"double trauma."** The act of violence is followed by **social betrayal**, when authorities and society fail to protect or believe her. Minal's attempt to seek justice meets **suspicion and victim blaming**. Herman says that the second wound—the disbelief—is often more damaging than the first.

What follows is a **nightmare of social judgment**. In the aftermath of the assault, Minal and her friends are subjected to societal scrutiny, moral policing, and widespread disbelief. Society treats the incident as a question of "decency" rather than **justice**. The later scenes, where the women are shamed and disbelieved, also mirrors MacKinnon's idea that the **legal system reproduces male dominance, a world that turns its gaze on the suffering, doubting their words, while granting impunity to wrongdoers**. After Minal's assault, the social reaction mirrors Solnit's point: instead of condemning Rajveer, people question Minal's choices. This reasoning exemplifies victim-blaming, suggesting that her choices—leaving home, consuming alcohol, or being sociable—somehow justified the crime. This encapsulates the core of victim-blaming, a point that *Pink* illuminates with the same clarity and force as Rebecca Solnit in her essays. This is the very practice Menon challenges in her work: patriarchal societies **shame the victim instead of the criminal**.

Leveraging their political influence, the men initiate a counter-case, falsely charging Minal and her friends with prostitution and assault. Society immediately labels the women as "characterless," and "immoral." The case eventually reaches the courtroom, where **Deepak Sehgal (Amitabh Bachchan)**, a retired lawyer, defends them. His closing argument **"No means no"**, stands as a pivotal declaration confronting consent and challenging the entrenched patterns of victim-blaming on screen. MacKinnon argued that the **law and social institutions are built from a male point of view**, where women's consent is often ignored or reinterpreted. She emphasized that **sexual harassment and assault are not about desire but about power**. **The utterance of "no" by a woman demands recognition as an unequivocal**



assertion of her autonomy. Deepak Sehgal's statement "*No means no*" resonates with the core tenets of MacKinnon's vision of law through a feminist lens that women have the absolute right to control their own bodies, and that **consent must be explicit and respected.**

In a society shaped and constrained by patriarchal power, where the tendency to blame victims runs deep within society, this line challenges the very structure of how society and law interprets female sexuality and consent. The courtroom speech becomes a **performative feminist act**, articulating truth through words to break the silence imposed by patriarchal authority. Deepak's advocacy in court foregrounds and empowers voices of women like Minal who are often silenced by shame or social judgment. His "No means no" is a symbolic reclamation of space and voice, directly challenging structures that seek to silence women.

The film is not only a courtroom drama but also a **social commentary** that deconstructs **the logic of victim blaming** deeply rooted in Indian society. By examining *Pink* in the light of feminist theories, we can see how the movie challenges patriarchal narratives and echoes the writings of thinkers like **Susan Brownmiller, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, Judith Herman, and Nivedita Menon.**

THAPPAD: ONE SLAP, MANY SILENT WOUNDS.

Thappad centers on **Amrita (Taapsee Pannu)**, a devoted wife whose life seems perfect. During a party, her husband **Vikram (Pavai Gulati)** slaps her in a moment of anger. Though it's a single slap, Amrita realizes that her marriage has been unequal and that this act of violence is **unacceptable.** She decides to **leave her husband**, challenging family, friends, and societal norms that insist that a **single slap is trivial** and that women should **forgive and maintain the marriage.**

In *Thappad*, Vikram's slap operates as a potent symbol of patriarchal authority, exposing the systemic imbalance of power within the household. Feminist readings of the film reveal that domestic violence functions as a mechanism to control women, even when it is socially framed as a "momentary lapse." Amrita's statement,

"Usne mujhe maara; pehli baar. Nahi Maar Sakta. Bas Itni si baat hai aur meri petition bhi itni si hai" ("He hit me; for the first time. He cannot hit me. That's it. My petition is just this simple")

— asserts the unacceptability of violence in any form, regardless of its frequency or perceived severity, thereby challenging entrenched male authority. Through this declaration, Amrita refuses to minimize or rationalize the abuse despite societal pressures to forgive or overlook it. Drawing on bell hooks' critique



of patriarchy, the film illustrates how systemic domination operates through subtle, normalized acts of control. By foregrounding Amrita's insistence that even a single slap warrants objection, *Thappad* interrogates cultural norms that trivialize domestic violence, emphasizing the necessity of individual agency in resisting gendered oppression and redefining societal perceptions of justice and accountability.

Societal responses to domestic violence illustrate pervasive patterns of victim-blaming, as friends and relatives repeatedly urge Amrita to ignore the slap, question her behavior, or prioritize "family honor" over personal dignity. Such responses reflect deeply ingrained patriarchal norms that normalize male aggression while minimizing the psychological consequences for women. Judith Herman emphasizes that even seemingly minor acts of abuse generate trauma, as they signal vulnerability and a lack of safety. Dismissing the slap as "just a slap" not only neglects the emotional and psychological harm but also reinforces societal tendencies to blame the victim. This trivialization presumes that minor violence against women is acceptable, reflecting a male-centric worldview in which women's suffering is subordinated to male authority. bell hooks argues that patriarchy operates by silencing women and compelling them to internalize blame, while Nivedita Menon highlights how, in the Indian context, women are socialized to uphold marital reputation at the expense of their own dignity. This is a classic form of victim-blaming. Similarly, Rebecca Solnit notes that women are conditioned to anticipate and prevent male violence, and when they fail, societal structures hold them responsible for the aggression they endure. Through Amrita's experience, *Thappad* exposes the intersection of cultural, psychological, and systemic forces that perpetuate gendered oppression, illustrating how even a single act of domestic violence becomes a site for broader societal negotiation of power, blame, and moral accountability.

Andrea Dworkin emphasizes that women often internalize patriarchal values, blaming themselves for men's actions; this is reflected in Amrita's moment of self-doubt: "Am I overreacting?" The film illustrates how patriarchal norms teach women that tolerance and forgiveness are inherently feminine virtues, even in the face of abuse. Judith Herman's work on trauma highlights that even a single act of violence can have profound psychological consequences, including fear, anger, doubt, and shame; society's minimization of such trauma compounds the suffering, a point exemplified by Amrita's struggle. Drawing on bell hooks and Simone de Beauvoir, the film critiques marriage as a system in which women's labor, patience, and tolerance are expected in exchange for security. hooks observes that patriarchy enforces compliance by valuing women's roles over their rights, while Beauvoir notes that traditional marital structures often reduce women to objects or caregivers rather than recognizing them as autonomous subjects. *Thappad* foregrounds how violence is normalized within marriage and underscores that questioning such violence constitutes a challenge to patriarchal authority. After leaving her husband,



Amrita refuses her lawyer's suggestion to claim alimony or maintenance, asserting that financial dependence on a man she considers abusive would compromise her autonomy; by choosing to live independently, she asserts her right to self-determination and challenges culturally sanctioned norms of marital submission. Through this narrative, the film foregrounds the intersections of psychological trauma, societal pressure, and structural patriarchy, emphasizing that even a single act of violence can catalyze a broader feminist critique of power, gender, and agency.

The line, "Pata hai uss Thappad se kya hua? Uss ek thappad se mujhe woh sari unfair cheeze saaf saaf dikhne lagg gayi jisko main undekha karke move on karte ja rahi thi," encapsulates Amrita's awakening of consciousness, assertion of agency, and critique of normalized patriarchy. Throughout her marriage, Amrita has endured subtle forms of patriarchal oppression, including expectations of self-sacrifice, tolerance, and emotional labor. The single slap serves as a catalytic event, forcing her to recognize the cumulative injustices she had previously overlooked or internalized. In this context, the slap functions not merely as an act of violence but as a symbolic trigger for self-realization and resistance. Simone de Beauvoir contends that women often live in self-denial, internalizing patriarchal norms and failing to acknowledge their own oppression; Amrita's realization reflects this "conscious awakening," as she becomes acutely aware of the systemic inequities that structured her life and marriage. The event prompts her performative resistance: by refusing to tolerate injustice, she actively disrupts the cycle of patriarchal expectation and compliance. This line captures the pivotal moment when previously invisible everyday oppressions become legible and intolerable, marking a decisive shift from passive endurance to active assertion of autonomy.

The line, "Thodi bahut maar peet toh expression of love hi hai naa, sir?" ("A little bit of hitting is just an expression of love, right, sir?"), illustrates the casual normalization of domestic violence in society. Spoken by a character attempting to justify abuse, it reflects how cultural narratives often minimize violence within marriage, framing it as acceptable or even affectionate. Such normalization perpetuates patriarchal control by trivializing the physical and psychological harm inflicted on women. Kaplan's critique of social and cultural narratives underscores how oppression is reinforced through everyday discourse; the phrases "just a slap" and "expression of love" exemplify the subtle ways in which abusive behaviors are rendered ordinary and permissible. *Thappad* systematically interrogates this mindset, highlighting the urgent need to challenge societal complicity in tolerating and excusing violence against women.

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