



**The Multifaceted Nature of Silence: An Exploration Through Theatre
and Film**

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Abstract

This paper explores the profound psychological impact of silence, highlighting its transformative power in human lives. Silence has the ability to create space for greater creativity and self-awareness, ultimately leading to more thoughtful and impactful decisions. This psychological effect of silence is employed as a literary device in the film *Thappad*. Therefore, the paper aims to critically analyze the causes and consequences of silence as depicted through the lens of visual culture.

Keywords:

Theatre of Absurd, Silence, Visual culture, Position Theory/Positioning , Gender Relations, Social Conditioning , Self- Motivation, Transformational Power.

Paper

Silence is a topic rich with complexities, inviting interpretations across various contexts. At the elementary level, silence signifies the absence of sound or noise. However, its implications are vast, affecting individuals and societies in numerous ways. While silence often evokes notions of negativity or gloom, it also carries deeper connotations that warrant exploration. One of the most compelling arenas for examining silence is theatre, particularly in the Theatre of the Absurd context.

Emerging in the 1950s and early 1960s, the Theatre of Absurd reflects the existentialist philosophy articulated by thinkers such as Albert Camus in his essay "The Myth of Sisyphus." This theatrical movement represents the human condition as absurd and devoid of inherent meaning, a realisation that gained prominence after the World Wars. The absurdist playwrights

employed silence as a crucial narrative tool, transforming what is often perceived as a void into a powerful medium for introspection and revelation.

In Absurdist theatre, silence is not merely an absence but a reflective space allowing characters to confront their internal struggles and existential dilemmas. Here, silence serves as a conduit for self-exploration and a means to express complex emotions. This notion of silence as a reflective rather than a negative force resonates through various artistic mediums, including cinema.

Cinema is a powerful storytelling medium, that plays with sound and silence. It engages with silence in ways that can deeply resonate with audiences. But silence is something that cinema has used and misused in millions of ways. Many directors have used silence very effectively. *Pyasa* (1957) directed by Guru Dutt, *Saaransh* (1984) by Mahesh

Bhatt, *The Lunchbox* (2013) by Ritesh Batra, *Masaan* (2015) by Neeraj Ghaywan, *Chokher Bali* (2003) by Rituparno Ghosh, *Kahaani* (2012) by Sujoy Ghosh, *Kumbalangi Nights* (2019) by Madhu C. Narayanan, *Thappad* (2020) by Anubhav Sinha are few noted movies in this category. All these movies highlight the fact that silence can signal a major change or turning point in the story. It might mark the moment when a character makes a pivotal decision, or when the tone of the film shifts dramatically.

Over time, the depiction of women in cinema has evolved dramatically. Traditional representations often relegated women to simplistic, one-dimensional roles, where they beautifully live in cunning deception, deceiving themselves as well as the society.

It's a shame if you make it known that your husbands beating you and not only is it a

shame, it's like just get on with it. It happens, it's been happenin'—it happened for your grandmother, it happened for your mother. . . (raises voice) JUST GET ON WITH IT. That's life, that's men for you—and that's the kind of attitude –they kind of make you feel shamed and they kind of normalize the whole situation. (lines: 43–51)

But contemporary films increasingly offer multi-layered female characters with rich narratives. Hence silence becomes a pivotal tool in these portrayals, amplifying the depth of female experiences and emotions.

The recent movie *Thappad*, directed by Anubhav Sinha, intricately explores the concept of silence as a means of expression, particularly in the context of domestic relationships. The narrative centers on Amrita, a homemaker portrayed by Taapsee Pannu, who decides to file for divorce

after her husband slaps her at a party. The film raises important questions about the normalization of domestic abuse and the complexities of female agency within marriage. The movie also explores the domestic violence and gender dynamics in Indian society. In the movie silence is played as a multifaceted narrative device that enriches the film's exploration of domestic violence, gender inequality, and personal empowerment. It heightens emotional resonance, emphasizes societal critiques, and underscores the complexities of human relationships. Through its thoughtful use of silence, the film encourages viewers to reflect on the often-unspoken issues surrounding domestic abuse and the importance of addressing them.

The film opens with a seemingly mundane domestic scene, but when Amrita, the protagonist, is slapped by her husband, Vikram, the ensuing silence is deafening. This moment of

shock is heightened by the lack of dialogue, allowing the audience to absorb the gravity of the act. The silence that follows speaks volumes about the emotional turmoil and disbelief that Amrita experiences. Throughout the film, Amrita's silences reflect her internal conflict and growing sense of isolation. As she grapples with the implications of the slap, her moments of silence serve as a space for introspection. The film uses close-up shots during these quiet moments to emphasize her emotional state, inviting viewers to empathize with her struggle.

The film stars Taapsee Pannu in the role of Amrita, and it employs the weapon of a slap to show deep-seated flaws in a supposedly loving marriage. The director purposefully manipulates the tone of the picture to distinguish between the moments before and after the violent incident. He used recurrent views of Amrita's morning ritual to represent her decline towards unhappy marriage

realisations. The disturbance of the slap, in turn, affects her view of it, as her world mistakenly centred around the well-being of her husband and his family.

The social positioning of a woman happens involuntarily in every household. It could be subtle but very much present. The movie's gravity changes as the slap occur. Till then happy and content wife, Amrita realises every single inequality and subtle abuse that she brushed off and that is crumbling her inside out. From this point, her words are minimal and decisions and actions are evident. Till this the character was acknowledgeable and acceptable for her social positioning, "Position" can be defined as an individual's changeable set of views about their rights, responsibilities, and obligations. The technique by which duties are allocated or denied to oneself or others is known as "positioning." This positioning makes it so unclear for the person or character to see above their position. It's a subtle critique of patriarchy

in which a husband's slapping of his wife, whether in public or private space, planned or unplanned, humiliates and insults not just the victim but also the victimiser. It portrays him as less than a human being since, despite his amazement at his wife's desire to leave the house, he never thinks to apologise to her for his actions.

The movie moves around in silence, as it is the most effective way to showcase a women's mind. Women are expected to be quiet partners in partnerships, either by relinquishing their choices or living vicariously through their male partners. The absence of her typical spring in her step, accompanied by the dulled-down background score, portrays this realisation sinking in during the first half. With this revelation, a relationship of similarity with the other female characters emerges. Amrita is no longer apart from her fatigued mother-in-law, abused maid Sunita, or stifled mother in her happy bubble. She strongly stands by her

decision and she uses very few but powerful words to depict it. She stands strong against being subjugated and positioned below anyone. Thus silence that she carries underscores the societal norms and expectations surrounding gender roles. In conversations with family and friends, Amrita often finds herself met with silence or dismissive remarks when discussing her feelings about the slap. This silence from those around her highlights the pervasive nature of patriarchal attitudes and the stigma associated with addressing domestic violence.

As the story unfolds, silence becomes a symbol of the breakdown in communication between Amrita and Vikram. Their interactions are filled with unspoken tension, and moments of silence revealing their inability to connect on a deeper emotional level. This lack of communication exacerbates the conflict and emphasizes the emotional chasm that develops in their relationship. The climax of the film also features pivotal moments

where silence serves as a catalyst for change. Amrita's decision to stand up for herself and seek a divorce is punctuated by powerful silences that reflect her newfound strength. These moments convey a sense of empowerment, illustrating how breaking the silence can lead to reclaiming agency and dignity.

The interplay of power and silence can be understood through various theoretical lenses, each offering valuable insights into how silence functions within social, political, and interpersonal contexts. By examining silence as both a tool of control and a form of resistance, these theories illuminate the complexities of power dynamics and the ways individuals navigate and challenge them. This multifaceted approach encourages deeper reflections on the significance of silence in our lives and societies.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler explores the idea that silence can be

a productive, subversive process within the context of gender and identity. Her work delves into the ways in which language, or the absence of it, plays a crucial role in constructing and deconstructing identity.

"The act that one does, the word that one speaks, is not only a reflection of the self; it is constitutive of the self. Identity is not a singular, unified, or stable origin, but rather is produced in the reiterative and citational practices of gender." (Butler, 25)

In this context, silence can be understood as a form of resistance to performative expectations. By not speaking, not engaging in the established linguistic or gendered codes, individuals might resist the pressure to conform to a prescribed identity. Silence, thus, becomes a way of subverting the dominant narrative creating space for alternative forms of expression

and identity formation. In withholding conventional linguistic and performative actions, it disrupts or destabilizes normative structures of gender identity. In this way, silence itself can be seen as a space for potential redefinition or resistance.

Thappad utilizes silence not only as a narrative device but also as a thematic undercurrent that reflects Amrita's journey of self-discovery. The director skillfully contrasts the moments before and after the slap, employing silence to depict the weight of Amrita's realizations. The tranquil background score accompanying her morning routine transforms into a muted, almost oppressive silence, mirroring her emotional descent. This change signals her awakening to the inequalities that have pervaded her marriage, leading her to draw connections with other women in her life, including her mother-in-law and the domestic worker, Sunita. Their shared experiences become a collective

narrative that highlights the subtleties of female oppression.

As the film progresses, Amrita's silence evolves from a sign of submission to an assertion of her identity. The societal expectation for women to remain quiet and accommodating in relationships comes under scrutiny as Amrita confronts her husband's actions. She articulates her decision to leave him—not through a loud declaration but through quiet strength and unwavering resolve. Thus the film suggests that silence can serve as a form of resistance, challenging the status quo and reclaiming agency. According to Wartenberg (1990), this feminist understanding of power, which he describes as transformational power differs from domination that normally powers over women showcases, in this form of power strives to empower people who are subjected to it. Most feminists who support this transformative or empowerment-based

understanding of power, on the other hand, define it as a skill or capacity and promote it as an alternative to ostensibly masculine notions of power.

Thappad powerfully critiques the social structures that perpetuate women's subordination. The slap serves as a focal point for Amrita's awakening, prompting her to question the normalized dynamics of her marriage. Her silence, once a product of her role as a dutiful wife, transforms into a means of asserting her worth and dignity. The film illustrates how societal constructs can silence women's voices, reducing them to mere background figures in their own lives. In this context, silence becomes a double-edged sword. On one hand, it signifies compliance and resignation; on the other, it can serve as a means of defiance. Amrita's journey reflects the potential for women to reclaim their voices and challenge the narratives imposed upon them. Her silence is laden with meaning, becoming a powerful

form of resistance against the societal expectations that seek to define her.

Traditional views of power often frame it as dominance and control, suggesting a binary between oppressor and oppressed. Foucault's emphasizes that power is intricately linked to knowledge production and discourse and silence in that sense can be read as resistance against dominant narratives. In *Thappad*, Amrita's character embodies this complex relationship with power. Her initial acceptance of her husband's authority is rooted in societal norms that dictate women's roles. However, as she confronts the reality of her situation, she begins to redefine her relationship with power. The film illustrates the transformative potential of recognizing one's own agency and the capacity to challenge oppressive structures.

The intergenerational dynamics portrayed in the film further highlight this struggle. Amrita's mother and mother-in-law, representing traditional

views, initially fail to comprehend her decision to seek divorce. Their silence reflects both their internalized beliefs and their recognition of Amrita's courage. Conversely, younger women in the film, such as Amrita's neighbour, represent a shift towards empowerment and the redefinition of traditional gender roles. This shows the stronghold that the social construct has and how the newer generations are attempting to remould the traditional idea of subjugation into power by staying inside the construct and deconstructing it from the inside. Wartenberg's concept of the possession of power is what can be seen. Even when the elders are not able to comprehend the fact that Amrita had chosen to leave her husband, inwardly it is clear to them that her decision is right. Their silence is their acceptance of the decision.

Thus, this in a way contradicts the position theory of Lev Vygotsky that highlights the interdependence of

positions, words, and other activities, as well as the storylines that emerge from them. By taking into account social, individual, and moral elements, the theory gives a framework for understanding a person's distinctive conduct. Individuals are socially conditioned to accept a variety of social constructs that reflect discriminatory ideas, faiths, conventions, and rituals. This places women under both subtle and overt limitations. Men are disproportionately entitled to structural benefits, and women's contributions are frequently framed as responsibilities with approved silence. The movie battles against this stigma with the approved silence itself. The lead never once raises her voice or throws tantrums to prove her point. With limited words and thoughtful actions, Amrita leaves the audience with space to think of the negative aspect of silence. Before the slap, her silence was the customary action of a devoted wife, which she did without any objection. That power deal was acceptable for her, the

ideal construct of her handling the home and her husband handling the office. But the slap changed that course as she feels the disproportionality with clarity. There also she uses silence as her tool. The constant silence and smaller but powerful statements leave an impression on the audience which gives the character more depth and relevance.

Amrita's journey culminates in a profound realization of her own power, facilitated by her understanding of silence. Her decision to leave her husband serves as a testament to her self-empowerment. The film poignantly captures the shift from silence as a marker of oppression to silence as a means of self-assertion. Through her quiet yet resolute actions, Amrita challenges the patriarchal structures that seek to confine her. Moreover, the film refrains from presenting a simplistic portrayal of male characters as villains. Instead, it offers a more nuanced perspective on the complexities of

relationships. The husband's actions, while reprehensible, are contextualized within a broader societal framework that perpetuates toxic masculinity and domestic violence. This approach encourages viewers to engage with the issue on a deeper level, fostering empathy .

Thappad can also be seen as a classic example of an absurd movie, as it raises many questions. The absurdity of *Thappad* lies around many things

- in how something as seemingly trivial as a slap—a single moment of violence—becomes the breaking point for a woman's entire existence, questioning whether society has normalized so much violence against women that we no longer see it for what it is."
- in how the world around her continues to function as if nothing has changed—except that for Amrita, everything has. She's not

just reacting to a slap; she's reacting to a lifetime of suppressed injustice."

- " how a moment of violence, something as seemingly minor as a slap, can open the floodgates to larger questions of equality, respect, and personal dignity. It forces you to confront how something so small can represent something so much bigger."
- "In its simplest form, *Thappad* feels absurd because it makes you wonder: Why does it take a slap to get people to see that a woman deserves respect and equality? The absurdity is in how long we've been conditioned to accept this silence."
- "The movie might appear absurd to some because of how it disrupts the usual expectations of how abuse should be portrayed—it's not loud, it's not dramatic. It's quiet and shocking in its simplicity."

On the whole, embracing silence as a transformative force, the film advocates for a reimagining of societal norms surrounding women's roles. It underscores the importance of acknowledging and amplifying women's voices, particularly in the face of violence and oppression. In doing so, *Thappad* contributes to a broader discourse on gender equality, encouraging audiences to recognize the power of silence in their own lives and the potential for change. Through its nuanced portrayal of female agency and the complexities of human relationships, *Thappad* stands as a significant work in contemporary cinema. It invites viewers to consider how silence, far from being a mere absence, can be a powerful expression of resistance and a call for self-empowerment. As such, the film embodies a hopeful vision for a future where women reclaim their voices and challenge the societal constructs that seek to silence them.

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