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EMERGING FEMINIST TRENDS IN REPRESENTATION OF NATION IN HINDI SCREEN NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT:

The concept of nation is one of emotional bond to a culture. Individuals bound together by the emotional identification to a culture constitute nation. Women are the strong foundation and pillars of a nation. The emerging feminist trends in screen narratives are bringing a new representation of the concept of nation. From characters as Gunjan Saxena of eponymous film to Amrita of *Thappad* (2020), they have defined the contribution of women to nation in unconventional ways by overcoming and demolishing the social norms and codes. However, the concept of nation goes much beyond the borders and boundaries of a political state to entail the quotient of many other parameters like gender equality, quality of life, opportunities for and independence of women. Portrayal of women emboldens the emerging national ethos.

This paper analyses screen narratives of selected popular and critically acclaimed recent web-series namely *The Test Case (2017)* and films viz. Gunjan Saxena: *The Kargil Girl (2020)* and *Thappad (2020)* for studying emerging feminist trends of screen / script narratives in representation of the nation.

KEYWORDS:

FEMINIST TRENDS, SCREEN NARRATIVES, DEFENSE AND MILITARY, HINDI WEB SERIES, BOLLYWOOD, OTT, FILMS AND NATION.

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INTRODUCTION

The homogenous notion of nation is produced culturally from heterogenous elements as language, race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender and sexuality. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam suggest that the movie audience is a provisional 'nation' forged by spectatorship.

The film *Gunjan Saxena* (2020) opens with the scene of Kargil Valley during Indo Pak war in 1999. She is being called to perform an emergency evacuation. The film disclaims to take creative liberties and is a cinematic adaptation of a real-life incident of almost three decades back. The film then takes the viewers into flashback of fifteen years when she was a child.

She is travelling in a flight and is excited to look out of the window but her brother, Anshuman, whom she fondly addresses '*Dada*' does not let her do that. All other windows are shut. Seeing this a flight attendant dotingly takes her to the cockpit so that she can see the view outside. She is enthralled and fascinated. The pilots there let her twist a knob and she thinks she directed the plane in that direction. She wishes to sit in the seat of the pilot. The pilot tells her,

"*Yahan baithne ke liye aapko pilot banna padega*"

Since then, she dreams of becoming a pilot. Her brother makes fun of her that girls do not become pilots. They are suited for the job of flight attendants. Her father, Anup Saxena, who is a Lieutenant Colonel in Indian Army supports her that she can become whatever she wants to but first she has to complete her education.

He lets her train for swim – diving. She is fascinated with her brother's toy of remote control

Airplane rather than with her dolls. She sneaks away the toy to operate herself. She is the butt of teasing by her brother when she has taken to wearing goggles even in the night because she had seen those pilots wearing them.

When she scores 94% and tops her X board examination, she is scared and hesitant to tell her family that she does not want to continue her studies and wants to become a pilot for which she will have to join Delhi Flying School. She wants to talk to her parents regarding this but does not get a chance to do so as she reaches home because they have organized a celebration for her on topping her class.

She happens to tell them while she is made to dance in an awkward moment in front of all the guests

Her brother and mother are not supportive of her. Her brother's concern is how will she live alone in Delhi. He dismisses it as her immaturity. Her mother wants her to pursue further education. According to her, Gunjan should be grateful for the privilege of financial affordability because when her mother wanted to study but could not due to the paucity of money.

Finally, her father supports her and accepts her wish.

When she applies in Delhi Flying School, the minimum eligibility has been raised from Secondary to Senior Secondary. Again, she has to return home to study and take her class 12 board exams. When she goes to flying school again, this time, she comes to know that minimum eligibility has again been raised to graduation. It takes her another three years to pursue her graduation and she applies again in the flying school. This time her application gets accepted but she is told to deposit a sum of Rs. ten lakhs. She was not abreast of the hike in fees and certain practicalities of the course like it could take six years for course completion, more than stipulated time of three years.

This sum of money is too huge for her family to arrange at that time. Her mother is very happy that whatever happens is for the good. Her mother is bothered that even if they are able to arrange the sum, when would she marry if she would train for six years and thereafter do the job of a pilot.

She asks her family if there is any way to arrange the money. She is disappointed and refuses to marry or do anything else before she becomes a pilot. After a few days, her father brings her attention to a newspaper advertisement for the first ever recruitment of batch of women pilots in the Indian Air Force. In a family in which he himself and his son are serving in the Army as Lieutenant Colonel, her father presents it as a chance to serve the nation. Her mother still thinks she has nothing to do with nation service or patriotism; she just wants to fly the plane.

Her brother again scoffs her that if she does not get through IAF, then she may join NASA as an astronaut, if not NASA then she may become Superman or simply inflate herself and float in the air. Her brother thinks that she is taking unlimited liberty as there is no one in the family to check or control her. In a candid moment with his father when he shares a drink with him, Anshuman shares and expresses his concern that his father has indulged every whim of Gunjan since childhood and never imposed any restriction upon her. He made him let her play cricket with friends of Anshuman when they would not allow any girl to play with them. He let her watch late night shows. He says that his father knows, being in army himself, how difficult it is in army.

Anshuman loves his sister and wants her happiness but feels that her safety and security are more important than her happiness. He is afraid that to make her happy, their father may not be allowing her great risk of harm. Anup says he thinks Anshuman should not drink.

Anup always brought up his children with the mindset of gender equality. This comment of his is satiric in the way that it makes the audience think what if men were restricted in some ways though drinking is considered a male prerogative in conservative societies. Anshuman had taken the support of the argument that if he can drink with his father, he can talk openly to him as well. But he talked about not letting Gunjan fulfil her dream. So, this comment of Anup can also be interpreted as an implication that such biased thinking should not be there.

In Services Selection Board recruitment exam, she clears test of both physical and mental aptitudes like Tarzan rope swing, presence of mind, etc. For instance, she jumps on the spot on the platform placed alongside a window at much height when commanded to 'jump'. When asked to discuss about two major current issues of the country, she speaks of films and song lyrics being criticized by intellectuals of the country. Other girls discuss not so informed knowledge of pneumonic plague, scandals, etc.

She is the only one selected from all the girl candidates. After medical exam, she comes to know that she has a temporary and a permanent disability. She is seven kilograms overweight and one centimeter short of required height. She has an option of appealing within two weeks but the officer in charge says he has never seen any appeal get approved in case of permanent disability.

She returns home heartbroken. Her father shows her an article in a magazine about huge transformation of Bollywood heroine Rekha in terms of body weight loss. Gunjan says she may reduce weight by following diet Rekha's diet but how she would increase her height.

Her father motivates her to do what she can and leave the rest to God. It is better to shed sweat than tears.

"Jo mehnat ka saath nahi chhodte kismat kabhi unka haath nahi chhodti"

She follows diet, which includes bitter gourd juices and giving up of her favourite dessert, along with running, skipping and workout for two weeks. She is able to reach to required body weight but the selection officer explains to her that even though the difference from required height is one cm, it affects the reach of the pilot. But when made to sit on a model of the plane, she is able to hold the lever and reach the paddle. In further exam, it is revealed that her length of arm and feet are 1.5 cm more than requirement. What was lacked by height is compensated by the length of limbs. So, she has been selected for training.

She faces a moment of dilemma when she asks a question to her father if she is not being a traitor to the country. As she just wants to fly a plane while Air Force must have such personnel who have patriotic zeal. He asks in return what is the opposite of treachery. She replies, "Sincerity".

Her father says that if she is sincere towards her work, then she can never be disloyal to her country. IAF does not

need personnel who cry out "Hail Mother India" but such candidates who are focused, enthusiastic, hard- working and sincere in their training because only such citizens serve the nation best.

At the Air Force Academy, she undergoes rigorous physical and theoretical training. She achieves her dream moment when finally for the first time she gets to fly a chopper along with her instructor. Finally, her family is happy in her happiness at her passing out of the academy as Air Force Officer.

Her brother is still afraid that she has not yet seen the real world. He feels that he cannot change the outlook of the world but can counsel her. He tries to make her understand.

There is a hullabaloo in Udhampur AF station with the news of arrival of first lady officer in the station which has always been a male dominated territory. The Flight Commander first notices the disturbance created in gent's toilet because she used it on not finding any ladies toilet. The Flight Commander says she could not find it because there is no ladies toilet in the station.

For her first sortie (combat mission of an individual aircraft from defensive position), she is being called by on tarmac in 10 minutes by Commanding Officer. She cannot find a place to change her uniform in the men's changing room. She cannot find any other room which can offer her privacy. So, she has to rush back to her hostel room to change and then rushes to the tarmac but fails to reach in time. This excuse is not valid for the Commanding Officer and she is punished for the same. The next day, after missing her sortie again, she makes her own arrangement on the third day by adjusting the curtain on two parallel almirahs in the changing room. Other male officers make fun of her that she might be doing make up over there. She surprises everyone when she emerges in her overall from the curtains.

She reaches on time but on the request of fellow Captain officer, the Flight Commander cancels her sortie faking an excuse. She obviously finds her out of place in social get togethers of all these male officers. The officers think that she will not be able to handle the job of flying as she is femininely weak. So, day after day her sortie is cancelled on behest of these officers in the same manner. But she finds that either she is not on program or given an involuntary break.

She tells the situation to her father when he calls to know her well-being. When a male pilot sits with her, he does not let her take control and tells her to sit back and relax while he would manage.

Another time, her sortie is cancelled as it is an overnight sortie so all officers would be sharing a room. She ranks at the bottom in evaluation of the quarter. The commanding officer is dissatisfied and gives a final chance to her. She has to fly with him. He lands her in an emergency situation of engine failure. He tasks her to recover the chopper and go for emergency landing. She does that successfully.

On asking that why are her flying hours so few, when she can fly fairly well, she says if she would speak, it would be deemed as an excuse.

Commanding Officer (CO) Gautam Sinha decides that from then on, Gunjan would fly with him. He teaches her the nitty gritty of chopper - flying. The biased attitude of junior male officers continues as they change their way so that they do not have to salute her. She is top performing pilot for the next quarter, earns double promotion and is rewarded to lead the briefings of formation flying sorties and high altitude flying in the next quarter. The other male officers are a bit jealous that due to CO's favor, 'Madam' is becoming 'Sir'.

While taking the briefing, she is interrupted by the Flight Commander (FC) and a male officer holding second rank in that quarter is made to give briefing. She gathers courage to ask why she is not allowed to do it. He does give her a straight answer and chides her not to disturb the briefing. She persists in demanding an answer if she is at fault somewhere. The FC makes both of them engage in an arm wrestle competition where every time she is defeated by that male officer without any resistance by her. She is in tears. FC offers her his handkerchief. She is declared weak. There is no place for weakness in defense. Defense forces need someone who can shed blood and not tears. The enemy does not back off seeing tears in big eyes. FC says that the pilots have responsibility to protect the nation and not give her equal opportunity.

That night, she cannot sleep and encounters all the other male officers. She accepts that she is mad to believe that she can be a part of the unit if she works sincerely. Her father is also insane to tell her that a pilot is not determined by gender.

"*Cockpit me chahe ladka baithe ya ladki, dono pilot hi kehlate hain"*

She did not know she would have to arm wrestle to prove herself. She has not come there to be a wrestler. She has to fly a plane and not lift it.

She further says that she has realized what the problem is. The problem is not her weakness but their fear that they would lose their masculinity if they have to give respect a woman.

She promises to them that respecting her would not diminish their respect. But she lets them to be with their narrow mindedness, fear and hollow male pride. She applies for leave and comes back to home. She is dull at home. Meanwhile her mother takes Gunjan to her best friend's wedding. When she shares her story with her friend, her friend too relates her tale of failed attempt to go to Mumbai to become a heroine. Her friend says that she closed that chapter and began a new chapter by marrying to find happiness.

Watching her happy, she gets an idea that maybe she should leave AF and get 'settled'. She receives a letter of cancellation of leave and orders to report immediately to unit at the same time.

Her father gets ironic and says he is happy that she wants to abandon her career and make *paranthas.* He takes her to kitchen and asks her the names of spices. How will she manage after marriage if she does not know all this. Gunjan is baffled at what her father is doing. He makes her understand that she is submitting to the societal expectations from every girl to settle and abandon their dreams. Her father says that he does not know what her brother thinks or how difficult the world is for women. The solution is not to get caged but break fly from the cage.

He deems the thought of her settling as a nail in the coffin of her dreams and the defeat of both of them. She returns to the base to find that she has been posted to Kargil to operate from Srinagar base. Air Force has been activated in the war. She calls her father to tell that she would never let him fail.

Her unit has two major responsibilities – recce sorties and casualty evacuations. Her brother, too, is posted in the war. They face each other and he is concerned for her life. He saves her from a fatal blast but says that he will not be there every time.

She is on a recce mission where one of the choppers is targeted and the pilots are taken hostage. In media, it is discussed that what would happen if a lady is taken Prisoner of War.

"We do not want our daughters to be tortured. Are men short that defense now needs women?"

The issue of her safety becomes a national news so Wing Commander decides to send her back from war. Her brother makes her understand the pressure of the situation. She replies that she knows she is there because of her ability. Whether she should stay there or not should be decided on her ability.

Her brother again asserts the mindset and outlook of the people cannot be changed. She asks him to just change himself and maybe the world would change.

There is a call for emergency evacuation in thirty minutes. Then all the pilots were on their respective missions. So, the Wing Commander has no choice but to go himself in lead chopper for casualty evacuation and a follow chopper would communicate between lead chopper and the base because the signal may weaken in the valley. He has no choice but to take Gunjan in follow chopper.

The communication is broken and the lead chopper becomes the target of enemy. Despite orders to retreat due to very high risk, she takes a leap of faith by not following the instructions. She goes to the casualty spot to rescue both the officers – Wing Commander and the evacuee army soldier. She returns maneuvering through the shots.

The Wing Commander finally acknowledges her caliber in his wounded state by calling her to hold his hand and letting his hand fall down. All the male officers cheer and applaud her.

Her brother says to her that he may not be there to save her but if he ever needs her, she will definitely be his savior.

In entire duration of the war, by carrying out over forty missions, she served the nation. At that time, she was twenty-four years of age.

Flight Lieutenant Gunjan Saxena paved the way for equality in the skies.

The trend shown with this film is cinematic adaptation of such real-life incidents and stories which constitute entry of women into hitherto restricted public space for women. Gender struggle and friction is very much inevitable when such entry happens which is impactfully shown in the film. Women do not earn this opportunity just based on their gender but on the basis of their ability for which they have to struggle with their families and society to hone. The acceptance is not there for women in the solely male dominated world but eventually the cooperation and support of men is indispensable for women to survive and thrive in such arenas.

The Test Case (2017-18) shows a troop of twenty-four volunteer soldiers for training of Special Forces in Kolipad Training Centre. All have come with the aim of becoming a commando of these forces and earn the maroon beret. They include Captain "Tank" Chauhan, Captain Bilal Siddiqui, Captain Rohan Rathore, Captain Avinash Walia, Captain Ranjit Surjewala, Captain Vishnu Soren and Captain Shikha Sharma among others. They are from different military units.

The series begins with a monologue of Shikha referring to bullets ants of Amazon forests whose bite lasts for twenty-four hours – one of the most painful inflictions I nature. Warriors of the tribes there have a ritual of putting hand in the nest of these ants as a qualifying test.

She remembers her father wo had told her, "You are my daughter, do not try to become my son".

This sets the tone and theme of the series – the story of first female combatant in Special forces as a test case – endurance of a woman in pursuit of this goal.

She catches a slogan that says, "We make men out of boys". They are welcomed with a physical ability task. She is not able to complete that. These forces are supposed to be elite of the elites- to operate without sleep, food and water.

Colonel Sathe, head of the center, asks her what would he make out of her. She replies, "A commando, Sir".

The defense minister, Mrs. Shraddha Pandit, has recommended, as per prior announcement of the President, to induct women in combat roles to reluctant Generals. The minister argues that women are able to endure stress of the physical conditions encountered by army. The Generals are concerned about the conflict arisen by security of the women and security of the nation in case of an untoward event like capture and subsequent torture. they say they respect women very much but have a strong argument against such a step due to the possible mishaps in such case.

The defense minister argues, "Patriotism does not choose gender".

As far as pain endurance is concerned, a Harvard study is quoted, about endurance limit of a human which is 45 units and a woman bears 57 units of pain while childbirth.

The Generals further say that high standard of the force is based solely on merit and not such considerations as reservations. The minister hands over a file to them having credentials of a person named Shikhar Sharma who is a state five-thousand and ten-thousand meter athlete champion, world class triathlete, awarded with sword of honor in academy and currently serving in Military Intelligence. She asks them if they think Shikhar Sharma should be given a chance. They reply that definitely the chance should be given and then she reveals that Shikhar Sharma is actually Shikha Sharma. If she passes the course of Special Forces, then army will have to open gates to more women.

"To battles not between the sexes but battles that shall be fought together". Therefore, she is the 'Test Case'.

She is being addressed as 'Ma'am' by the staff there. She asks to be addressed as the other officers – 'Sahab'. The other male officers have an opinion about her that she is a forced entry into the training as she has got some privileges like a separate room in Officer's Guest House. The rule of sharing a dorm is broken for her. They discuss that it is unacceptable if any of them gets defeated by her in the training tasks.

She requests Col. Sathe to cancel all her special permissions like staying in Guest House which he dismisses initially. She is addressed as 'Military Barbie' as she goes to interact with other trainees in the mess. They welcome her by playing a prank upon her. She discusses with them over why do strength associated with masculine genital anatomy.

Female genitals are used to connote a coward are actually the strongest part of a woman's body – it pushes out an entire human being.

In response to '*lihaaz'* (deference) being offered to her as lady officer, she says that she is used to such sexist comments masqueraded in chivalry. Meanwhile a fellow officer has locked himself on the roof with a loaded weapon. She rushes through alternate path and prevents the officer from committing suicide by talking him out of it and martially combating to snatch the weapon. she is rebuked by the training head that she is not trained enough to handle such situations. To his question if she thinks she is a special case or a nut case, she avers 'the Test Case, Sir'.

On the first day of training, in obstacle training, she faces a little difficulty and is not able to complete it in given time cut off. Consequently, the Entire unit gets the punishment of limited ration as per the rule in case of a trainee failing to complete a task. While the male officers hold her responsible, an officer trainee Captain Bilal is a bit supportive and amicable towards her. She practices and trains herself rigorously to build strength. Bilal asks her why it is necessary to prove a point by killing herself. She asserts that she has to give it everything in this do or die situation for her.

There is a bet among the boys that she will not be able to do it. In the last chance, she has to clear the obstacles with an additional load of ten kgs. She successfully does it.

Naib Subedar, Bhatti, their chief trainer, asks Colonel Sathe if they should be equally strict on her. Colonel says that Bhatti never asked this question for any other officer in all these years.

As per her request, Colonel allows her to live in the same dorm with other officers. On arriving in the dorm, the officers say that she will have to compete with the strongest drinker to find herself a bed there. Captain Rohan and Captain Shikha compete in the drinking match in which Shikha loses and accepts defeat. Captain Rohan is unable to reach the ground in time the next morning due to the hangover. Consequently, he has to face punishment. He says he wanted to show her, her place. His mate refutes him by stating that rather she played him by showing him his place. She laid a trap and he fell into it.

The colonel is of the opinion that she has done much better than expected in area of physical training, she might be able to clear strategy and tactics training but Camp *Dozakh* would not be her cup of tea; where the failure rate of male officers is 40%.

She is getting late to catch the bus when she has to wait outside the bathroom for all the boys to come out. But when emergency is there, she chooses to use the same bathroom with all other men. There is a stir among the men but eventually it gets normalized.

"It is just anatomy, get used to it"

They are granted a recreation break for an evening. Vishnu, Shikha and Bilal are talking together. She is asked by Bilal which girl does she like when two white girls walk into the bar. She gives compliment to them, then she is insinuated to be 'into girls' by them. She says that it is a sad stereotype that just because she is in the army and deals with guns means that she is 'into girls'.

She goes to meet her partner, Shivalik, during the break. He is supportive of her when she shares how tough the training is for her- physically challenging and above that senior officers are doubting her caliber.

Captain Bilal and Captain Rohan who have been intimate friends are rifting apart because of former's friendship with Shikha. Rohan says, "She is playing you. She is playing everyone" which refers to the perceived notion that women are femme fatale – meant to play men.

The same night, they are given wake up call for *Dozakh*. This is a task to test not only physical and mental strength but passion, survival instinct and will power also. *Dozakh* implies netherworld or hell. The first part is thirty kilometers night march. She falls down during it but refuses to sign exit form. In a flashback, it is revealed that her father wanted his son to join the army while he was reluctant. She was willing but her father thought that girls cannot become commandos.

Next, they are tasked with rescuing their buddies (mates) from an airborne chemical hazard with limited Oxygen supply with them to be shared between the mates. After qualifying that task, she remembers how she had to go against the will of her father for joining the army when her mother was concerned about her marriage. Her parents had agreed to her marriage with the man of her choice, Shivalik but she postpones that step for her dream.

She clearly draws lines and boundaries about her space when she refuses to discuss about her relationship status with Captain Bilal. Other challenges in Camp *Dozakh* are passing through a fire trench laid with broken glass and one-hour uphill march. For the next task of a live mission with live ammunition, they are divided into two squads. On Colonel Sathe's suggestion, Shikha is made the leader of her squad as he thinks that the real test of a commando is leadership skill besides efficiency in individual, partner or group activities. Her squad comprises of Rohit, Manit, Bilal, Vishnu and Tej Bahadur beside her. Till then after almost twenty-two hours without sleep, water and food, she has become a bit unstable and is not able to stand erect. Naib Subedar asks her if she thinks she would be able to lead the squad. She remembers the advice of her mother that girls may be evolving but boys are are not. Men do not like when women surpass them.

They are shown a map for a few minutes to navigate their way. Captain Rohan says to Captain Vishnu, "*Back seat driving tujhe karni hai. You know how good are women with directions."*

None of the male officers like and accept Shikha being their team leader. All five of them choose not to sit with her but opposite her in the army truck. Shikha has a tiff with Vishnu over navigation and Shikha asserts her authority for everyone to follow the direction she thinks right. They find out that it is the wrong path and they have reached the same spot that they had marked an hour ago. Shikha apologizes to her team and agrees to halt there till daybreak. Meanwhile, Captain Manit advises Captain Tej to not report his missing magazine to Captain Sharma but to search it out himself during the halt. This implies incredulousness upon the team leader and violation of team spirit and integrity due to individual interest which they presumably might have avoided had the leader been a male officer. They took it upon their ego to report a negligence to a woman leader.

After thirty-one hours, they come across their target point where they can get their ration. She maneuvers the strategy to reach the target point. But squad members find that it is a trap. In order to reach to the supposed ration, Captain Vishnu steps over trigger of an IED bomb which can explode in hundred-meter radius in about three minutes. In this stressful situation, Captain Manit and Captain shikha get into an argument over the wire which should be cut.

Captain Shikha has an instinct that this is a test of reverse psychology and orders to cut the blue wire while Captain Manit favors logic. However, he successfully inactivates the bomb. He tells everyone that he had cut the red wire. Despite that, Shikha calls it breach of orders.

Though not resembling real life explosives, the wire cutting sequence is a staple of action films. The point, however, illustrated here is men find it unacceptable to acknowledge a woman authority over them in roles and tasks which have been their prerogatives for long.

Shikha asserts that chain of authority should be followed. All other squad members get into a verbal dual regarding two terrible judgements in a row. They all agree that their team leader is not made on merit and she is not the right leader.

Before setting on to reach their last and most difficult target, ten kilometers ahead, they are given sleeping pills masqueraded as vitamin pills. This is to prepare them to execute operation in lack of sleep for days. They will have to take alert and right decisions even in state of lack of sleep. They feel dizzy and hallucinated due to effect of pills. They are fired with live ammunition and their communication unit gets destroyed.

For fifteen minutes, there is no communication between this squad and their control center. They return with Bilal and Shikha unconscious on their shoulders. Manit says that they were injured and got unconscious so he had to take the charge. Shikha is hospitalized for few days. She has nightmares, anxiety, increased heartbeat. The doctor interprets these symptoms as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The doctor asks her to report what happened in Camp *Dozakh* with her.

All trainees have to write their debriefs about the Camp. When Shikha is reading the file of debriefs in the absence of the doctor in the hospital, the doctor arrives and tells Shikha that there is nothing written in debriefs which would justify her injuries. Captain Bilal had to exit the course due to injuries. The doctor is surprised that Bilal did not come to look her up before leaving as Bilal was Shikha's friend. She denies that there is any friendship in the training but competition. Meanwhile Generals have received an anonymous mail reporting sexual assault on Captain Sharma during the camp.

Colonel Sathe tells Shikha that he thinks it would be difficult for her to catch up again after recovery with others with same passion and commitment as before. He offers her a glib chance to leave the course. The Generals are alerted due to added threat of news leakage into media and consequent media witch hunting. They suspect an official complain may be suppressed due to vested interest of Col. Sathe (any such incident would hamper his promotion and career). Also, the Defense-Minister wants to attend the passing-out parade which is due in three weeks. They call Colonel Sathe to inquire about Camp *Dozakh*. From his reply, they think that either he is hiding the truth or he genuinely is unaware. So, the Generals choose to go for unofficial inquiry due to these constraints. They deploy a trustworthy officer who would investigate objectively and unbiasedly – Lt. Colonel Imtiaz Hussain. After watching the complaint, he concludes that from the

stylized abbreviations and time stamp that the mail has been sent by someone from Special Forces Training Centre.

Shikha has filled the exit form but then recalls her mother's advice to never give up because she may have earned uniform but she is yet to earn status. This is an opportunity that neither her grandmother nor her mother got. She tears the non-volunteer form.

The doctor forbids her to resume training as she needs more time to heal. She says those are her injuries, so story would also be hers. Imtiaz adopts the route of direct inquiry from Shikha's squad by asking them to write debriefs again. There is a stir among the male trainees about who sent that anonymous mail. When all the debriefs are worded exactly the same, Imtiaz still thinks that the truth is yet to be known. After inquiring from the doctor, he comes to know about Shikha's partner. He then visits the cyber-café from where the mail was sent, tracking the IP address. The entry of that time being missing in the register and CCTV being out of order, he just gathers the clue that the sender was a tall man wearing a red muffler.

In a confrontation with Col. Imtiaz, she says, "Women are emotional but smart as well". She comes to know from Imtiaz that blue wire was to be cut in the bomb test but everyone's reports said red wire was cut. She confronts Captain Manit regarding the same that why he lied to every other squad member.

"*Ek ladki ke samne aap harna nahi chahte the…aapki male ego ye handle nahi kar pati*" "Our deeds define us and not sexuality or gender", says Shikha in another context.

Imtiaz thinks he has tried stealth and surprise but Shikha is a tough cookie so he will have to try some guerrilla tactics. He hacks the phones of Shikha and her partner to message each other to meet. When Shivalik tries to give a comforting touch, she gets defensive and has a rude argument with him.

"Is this the only way to relax…hotel room, candles and massage oils are all a means to an end"

Outside the hotel, she meets Imtiaz and says that he can never hack into her brain. She still maintains that nothing happened in Camp *Dozakh* and her injuries are regular combat injuries. Imtiaz throws an allegation upon her that she is a woman of the type who chooses ambition over self- respect. She has become the poster girl of a minister and champion of feminists countrywide but she is perfectly fine with sexual assault at workplace. He calls it convenient feminism and less of feminism and more of opportunism. She gives an ironic reply, "I am here to make history, Sir. *Kuch paane ke liye kuch sacrifices karne hi padte hain"*. She says that he does not want to help her but to save her, to be her hero. But this is her story and it has only one hero – she herself.

When interrogation with Capt. Bilal also fails to yield any lead, Imtiaz proceeds to inspect the luggage of Capt. Rohan only to find a red muffle there. So, he infers certainly that Rohan was the sender of complaint mail. Rohan confesses that Shikha and Manit had an ugly argument over whether to retreat or move forward towards the final target. Shikha did not want to move ahead with one of her squad-member (Bilal) in injured unconscious position. Capt. Vishnu was also not fine. Manit thought that logic and not emotion is required in such situation. He was determined to finish the exercise and win points. Shikha was not willing to risk the lives of her men. He alleged her to be a coward. She threatened to sue him under Army act for misconduct, desertion, disobedience and use of force. He could be court marshalled. She even threatened to fire on him to save her squad. He, in reaction, plunged upon her and thrashed her. She gave it back but he pinned her down with his feet and unbelted her. She screams which draws the attention of Rohan and he intervenes to protect her. He was fastening her belt when Bilal regained consciousness for a moment and sees Rohan doing this act. Manit finally hit Shikha with the butt of his gun to make her faint. Manit explains to Rohan if she had been conscious, she would have charged them with disobedience and they would never have become Special Force Commandos. After this, it would be her word against them and no witness.

Rohan says he did not complain officially because Bilal had seen him with Shikha and Manit would have put the blame on Rohan and then, it was just Bilal's word against him. Talking to his little daughter over video call who dreams of wearing a maroon beret like her father prompts him to take some action as he must have realized what kind of environment would be created if women have future in Special Forces.

In the second last exercise of training, which is shooting multiple stable and moving targets, she takes permission to perform the last. She intentionally misses the last target. Imtiaz tells her later that he knows she did this to slip from rank two to rank three as she knows according to Special Forces rules, alternate ranks on leader-board are paired as buddies to perform in the next task. Imtiaz says she wants to end what Manit had started and that he knows the culprit and the truth.

She says that her truth is that she is in the Special Forces because she deserves to be there and not because of or in spite of her gender. Any feudal, misogynist, criminal and un-officer-like man cannot snatch away her dream from her nor her sense of justice.

"I am enough for myself"

Imtiaz urges her to set an example for future women in Special Forces by punishing the culprit.

"I may be a poster girl but I am not a puppet of any politician", says Shikha. She thinks the authorities have their valid reasons for not inducting women in Indian Special Forces yet.

This is her only chance to prove them wrong.

"I deserve to die for this country as much as any man".

The future women officers will enter the forces because

women will earn their right to be here. To Imtiaz's statement, "We must name and shame the bastard", she replies, "I, not we. It is my honor, my self-respect and I do not need any man's help to protect it". She does not want to complain because she is sure he would confess himself. She demands twenty-four hours from Imtiaz which he demands from Col. Sathe. He quells Sathe's doubts of any other act of injustice by Manit or severe step on part of Shikha during this period by asserting that she deserves a chance and he would get both his complaint and confession.

It is also revealed in flashback that her brother had shot himself as he could not fulfil the dream of his father for him to go into the army. This explains her perseverance in purpose. In the final exercise of hostage rescue operation, Shikha and Manit successfully complete the exercise. While they are returning, she slows down which irritates him. She further provokes him. He makes comments as women first cry out slogans of 'I love my country' and when faced with tough situations, they want cushy postings.

"*Tum bachche sambhalo na.. guns hum sambhal lenge. Ladki ho, ladki ban ke raho."*

He gets offensive that the reason why she did not complain of sexual assault is because she was ashamed of what would people say or she was scared of failing her test and career or maybe she enjoyed what he did. She threatens him with her gun pointing at him. He snatches away her gun from her and shoots at her but it had a simulation magazine. She had hidden a camera in her uniform and has recorded his confession. He attacks on her but she takes her revenge from him by overpowering him in martial defense. She was waiting for this opportunity so that she could deal with him alone. And teach him a lesson that any person like him can never dare to think of this.

Col. Sathe and Col. Hussain arrive and order him to be arrested. He is dismissed from the Special Forces and the army. In the Passing out parade, in the presence of her proud parents, Shikha is not only pronounced with the honor of maroon beret but also presented with Commando dagger as topper of her course.

The defense minister remarks, *"Auratein to hamesha se hi Special Forces ke liye taiyyar thi. Ab Special Forces auraton ke liye taiyyar hai".*

Though *The Test Case* is not based on real life event like the previous film and is a completely fictionalized account the web series shows the emerging feminist trends in screen narratives. Such an induction into combatant role has not yet happened in Indian Special Forces though women have long back entered all wings of the armed forces in combat services and supervisory roles. The series shows that it can, not only get hostile in a male dominated arena but also threatening to her honor. Body remains an aspect of her existence to be infringed upon and annexed to perpetuate the masculine authority. The series powerfully shows not only the ability of a woman to develop her physical strength to enable her to perform the hitherto denied role on the basis of association of the female body and fragility and inability to endure pain but also her ability to guard her honor based on that strength acquired. This is in contrast to such prevalent tropes in narratives like 'damsel in distress' who needs a 'knight in a shining armor' to be her savior. Support from the other sex is desirable and necessary to a certain extent but as far as her dignified and safe existence is concerned, she is able and enough for that. Supporting the theoretical claims of Beauvoir and Judith Butler the series portrays that it is the social conditioning, norms and expectations which define and limit a woman's abilities and not her biological constitution. Some roles and performances have been repeated to be naturalized like men in combat roles which can be challenged by changing the performance. The series aims to break the myth that female body is unsuited or unable as far as physical pain endurance is concerned. Through Shikha's character, the rationality of decision making is also affirmed in a woman continuing to falsify a perceived notion that women are essentially sentimental and sub-rational.

The narrative of *Thappad* (2020) has the theme of finding of her own place by a woman. A woman's identity usually gets blurred by patriarchal privileges in a marital relation. What it is that a woman actually wants. The protagonist of the film is Amrita whose husband Vikram is ambitious to get a London posting as head and is emotionally invested in the company where he works. Amrita is a housewife who may not know how to cook but looks after the house very well along with taking care of her ailing mother-in-law. She has a mechanical routine in which she finds an hour for her passion - dance. The film portrays women of different generations and different classes from Amrita's mother to Amrita, from elite class to middle class to lower class. Amrita has learnt to adopt Vikram's dreams and find happiness in his happiness. Can women find happiness in the happiness of their family, husband and kids?

She is a girl who replies 'I am beautiful' whenever asked 'How is she?'. This shows self – love, self-worth and self-recognition. Someone who acknowledges her existence and values her existence. But even women like her ignore themselves – their health, their injuries, their dreams. Either they are conditioned to do so by their mothers or expectations or in – laws after marriage conditions them to be so. When Vikram is told at the last moment in his celebration party that though he would go to London but would have to work at a lower position than he wanted under a white guy, he gets into an argument with his office superior which gets so bitter and ugly that he slaps Amrita who intervenes to assuage him by pulling him apart.

She tries to get along but cannot. She continues to serve him mechanically and seldom utters a word. When no longer able to hold herself together from the shock, disbelief and humiliation of that one slap, she decides to shift to her parental house. When her husband sends her legal notice to bring her back, she decides to file for divorce without any other expectation, claim or charge on mutual consent. The legal battle gets ugly from Vikram's

side who almost proves her drunkard, gold digger, torturous, negligently irresponsible and psychotic. Things get complicated when they come to know that she is expecting a child.

Amidst all this, Vikram just thinks about the slap as a simple venting out of his frustration and as something that just happened once.

This 'once' does not get out of her mind. She is not able to respect herself. Being a house wife was her choice. Maybe she allowed herself in all this to be someone who could be slapped. Her lawyer asks her what she wants. She answers she wants to be happy. She wants to mean it when she says she is happy. She refuses to pretend being happy. This way she will turn bitter and begin hating him. She even admits her fault that she let this happen. When Vikram asks her to move on, she reasons that when he was so emotionally invested in the company, he could not move on, how can she move on when she has invested her whole life in him. That one slap clarified her vision. She could see clearly what she had been ignoring and had been moving on. She could see all the unfair things. That slap made her realize that she wants just respect and happiness from life like the Amrita in college. Her father supports her in this journey. In a moment of doubt, when she asks him whether she is right or wrong, he explains her that the result of right is not always happy. Choosing this right over happy shows the emerging trend of choosing or prioritizing reason over emotion.

According to Scholz, "definition of a human comprises rationality as an essential component or trait that distinguishes a human from a brute or animal…In history's course, woman's rationality or humanity has been questioned" (40-41). '*Bas itni si baat hai aur meri petition bhi itni si hai*'.

She declares she can only stay with him if she loves him. She does not love him in the moment.

In his office party for celebrating his appointment in London as head, when finally, Vikram got what he wanted, his superior tells him that it was Vikram's fault. Hitting one's wife is not done. Would Vikram have hit him or his boss because he was very upset with them. It is some sort of strange race – to win, to improve timing, to break the world record but family is not running that race.

She expresses her heart out in front of both her families that no one came to meet her that night. No one told Vikram that he was at fault. Everyone thought that Vikram may be right and even if not, Amrita was expected to forget it and move on. He realizes eventually that he was responsible for what happened. He did not have the right to slap her. He truly apologizes to her and promises to deserve her next time.

Their divorce is finalized on her terms. This act of Amrita has rippling effect on multiple storylines in the narrative which converge to bring out that happiness of a woman is not essentially dependent on a man nor does a woman has to compromise her happiness to be in marital bond.

The concept of nation goes much beyond the borders and boundaries of a political state to entail the quotient of many other parameters like gender equality, quality of life, opportunities for and independence of women. Portrayal of women emboldens the emerging national ethos. Women like Amrita show an emerging trend of awareness not only for their legal social rights but also for their self-realization. Women by being in touch with sense of individuality, personal freedom and original desires free from conventional dictation and imposition are scripting their new existence. Such script narratives as *Thappad* script the evolving face of nation by redefining the roles and contribution of women to society and nation as a whole. For identifying with the nation, it is not mandatory for women to be in leadership roles at the helm of a society or to serve on borders. If a woman in domestic sphere or sphere of her social existence carves a niche for her by challenging and subverting the hegemonies – patriarchal or otherwise – she is the narrative instrument for the ever-dynamic ethos and concept of the nation.

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