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The Female Athlete and Spectacle in Bollywood: Reading *Mary Kom* and *Dangal*Shweta Sharma

Abstract:

This paper engages with the representation of the female athlete in Indian cinema. Specific references will be made to the cinematic portrayal of female boxers and wrestlers in Bollywood to argue that female boxers and wrestlers are portrayed as 'masculine'. However, the sportswoman's assertion of her femininity in a space exclusively occupied by men leads to 'gender trouble'. To enunciate this argument two biopics, *Mary Kom* (2014) and *Dangal* (2016), will be analyzed. It would be observed that when a female boxer/wrestler tries to reinforce her identity, she is either subjected to criticism or faces failure. However, the argument that sportswomen are termed as 'masculine' does not necessarily imply that female athletes aren't objects of the male gaze. The explicit sexual undertones which underline the spectacle of a female athlete competing with a male athlete reinforces gender lines instead of challenging them.

Key Words:

Sportswoman, Gender, Body, Masculine, Feminine, Gender Trouble, Boxing, Wrestling, Spectacle.

Bollywood has produced only a few sports movies before 2010 and most of them like *Lagaan* (2001), *Iqbal* (2005), *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (2007), except *Chak De! India* (2007), are male-centric films. Until recently, Bollywood hardly depicted females as competitors in sports. It has been a recent development that female athletes have become subjects in Bollywood films like *Mary Kom* (2014) and *Dangal* (2016). However, what is problematic about these two biopics is that they create a narrative about sportswomen which undermines a woman's agency and reinforces the 'male gaze' even when women have become active agents in sports at international levels. Before analyzing the representation of female athletes in the Indian cinema it is crucial to mention the history of women's participation in sports in the public domain.

Male dominance of sports in the Olympics until the 1960s was a reflection of the limited role of women in the public sphere. However, there was a surge of women's participation in the 1970s in tandem with the rising women's movement in the west. Title IX¹ in the U.S. paved way for equality in educational opportunities for women, and as the World War II witnessed women as active agents in the economy, a new female athleticism was witnessed in the public sphere. It was a result of a challenge posed to ideological binary categories of the feminine and the masculine. Thus, the arena of sports which was earlier considered as 'masculine', requiring physical strength and prowess, also witnessed a steady participation by females (Messner 1988).

Boxing and wrestling were sports which did not include female participants in the Olympics until wrestling was included as a women's sports in 2004 and boxing in 2012. When female boxing was included in the Olympics, guardians of patriarchy spoke against the inclusion of women. Amir Khan, a boxer from Britain, explains the reason why he thinks women should not wrestle: "Deep down I think women shouldn't fight. . . When you get hit it can be very painful. Women can get knocked out." Khan's statement exposes the belief that boxing as a strenuous sport is unsuitable for women as bearing pain is an ability associated with men. Women are considered too sensitive to bear the exertion which boxing demands. As Katherine Linder points out, boxing has always been a bastion of masculinity. The reason being that the aggression, violence and the physical

pro prowess, which boxing demands, has always been the defining features of masculinity. However, this is not the only reason why boxing is considered an unsuitable sport for women.

In her book, *On Boxing*, Oats draws attention to a much more covert reason for boxing being an exclusive sport for men, with its history going back to the gladiators in Rome. She observes that boxing attracted its audience by being a spectacle which brought forth the primitive instincts of man to kill and where pain led to pleasure. Thus, the female boxer held a subversive potential in a society where the binary of the masculine and the feminine not just limited the scope of a woman by limiting her domain to the home but also upheld her as an object of sexual desire and a machine for procreation. Since any activity which makes the female an object of destruction or pain is considered subversive in the society. The boxing ring, thus, is a metaphor for life where boxers fight for survival. The history of boxing reveals that boxing became a way to earn a living for men in need of money and slave fight in America was not an uncommon way for entertainment.

Roland Barthes calls sport a spectacle, and like theatre where everyone from the performers to the audience plays some part. However, boxing is not just a spectacle, but the manifestation of the corporeality of man and how life is a struggle while people act as observers (Oats). This leads to the implication that boxing was not only about whether women had the strength to fight in the ring but also a spectacle of life and death. From being a metaphor for life, the image of a female boxer and wrestler was repulsive to a society where a woman's essential qualities were considered to be the ability to love and nurture. This essentialism was at heart of Khan's argument, that made women unfit for fighting. This is why boxing as a game remained an exclusive sport for men for a long time though many women boxers like the Gordon sisters, the Bennet sisters, Louise Andler, Annie Newton, Laila Ali, and Mary Kom have proved that women could be worthy opponents.

However, as Judith Butler has argued in *Gender Trouble* that the qualities attributed to a particular gender vary according to time and place. Butler further mentions that the idea of 'woman' and 'man' is a construct. Being a woman is nothing more than performing the role females are ascribed in society, or qualities that are deemed as feminine. Indian society, which views female boxers and wrestlers in similar light, has only recently started acknowledging the presence of women competitors in boxing and wrestling. Since cinema plays a dominant role in shaping public imagination, the portrayal of the life and struggles of Mary Kom and the Phogat sisters, are making their presence felt in all public domain. However, women opting for such sports still face a challenge because discourses of femininity and masculinity govern the domain of sports. These discourses still form a dominant strain in the way female athletes are viewed by people at large. This is also reflected in the cinematic representation of the Mary Kom and Geeta Phogat.

Mary Kom, is based on the eponymous wrestler, a five-time World Amateur Boxing champion and a Bronze medalist in the flyweight (51 kg) category at the 2012 Summer Olympic. *Dangal*, on the other hand, is based on the career of the Phogat sisters who hail from Haryana. Geeta Phogat, freestyle wrestler won the first gold medal for India in wrestling at the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and Babita Kumari Phogat, was the winner of the gold medal at the 2014 Commonwealth Games.

Both the films take great narrative liberties with the storyline for the sole purpose of producing dramatic effect. The sequence where the women in the two films compete against men is the instance where gender ideologies are simultaneously broken and reinforced. It also fulfils the voyeuristic desire of the spectators/viewers by offering a voyeuristic pleasure from a fight of the two sexes. An analysis of the two films will further illuminate this fact. Thus, though the film comes at a time when the ideology of gender norms in the Indian society are being tested and subverted, the films fall short of this agenda. Both films try to portray that masculinity and femininity are exclusive

domains and any figure who occupies an ambiguous position on the gender spectrum is termed as a deviation.

The markers of identity (femininity or masculinity) are based on gender and these markers are arbitrarily assigned to specific categories of gender. Gender is thus, an unstable category because it is an improvised performance. As Judith Butler points out, society identifies certain actions as feminine and masculine, which are then reflected in sports in their exaggerated versions.

the life of gender norms cannot persist without the various approximations of those norms that constitute the bodily performances of everyday life, not to mention the idealized versions of those performances that we find in the athletic domain. Indeed, such ideals are also transformed in subtle and significant ways in and through their public and dramatic performances.

However, women's participation in sports, particularly those which are identified as exclusively masculine have led to the subversion and problematizing of these markers of gender. This is pointed out by Butler (19):

The athletic performance of gender is a special case, for women's sports, in particular, has shown us in the last few decades just how radically gender norms can be altered through a spectacular public restaging. Within the last fifteen years, certain women's bodies have gone from being perceived as "outside" the norm to being perceived, at least by some, as some of the most progressive instances of the norm, that is, as challenges to the norm that effectively unsettle the rigidity of gendered expectations and broaden the scope of acceptable gender performance.

Thus, both films challenge or to some extent question the norms of gender and at the same time at the end reinstate gender norms by limiting their protagonist's agency to occupy oppositional gender norms.

Mary Kom, a blockbuster starring Priyanka Chopra as Mary Kom, is a superfluous representation of the struggle of a female boxer. The effort to depict the Manipuri boxing champion is laudable as it brings to an uninformed Indian audience, to whom everything apart from men's cricket eludes the imagination, the little-known achievements of a sportswoman.

Since the film is produced for a north Indian audience, it portrays a typical conservative father who opposes her daughter's dreams, whereas as expressed in her autobiography Mary Kom's father played an important role in supporting her passion for boxing. One cannot overlook the fact that Bollywood films are largely consumed by north Indian audience and a girl rebelling against her father's choice is highly dramatic. The scene of her father burning her gloves highlights the fact that patriarchy does not support a woman who challenges gender norms and aspires to become a fighter/boxer.

The opening scene in *Mary Kom* shows Mary in labour pain as her husband tries to take her to the hospital in midst of a curfew. Mary is then shown reminiscing about her first boxing gloves which she found on the streets. This shift in perspective reveals the position that Mary occupies in a patriarchal society. The imagery here is that of the active boxer posed against the passive mother. Mary is a mother and at the same time is the boxer who in the ring is considered a 'masculine' woman. This makes her a subject who inhabits two spaces of gender simultaneously. This highlights the volatile nature of gender identities as Mary questions gender fixities.

Mary Kom highlights the traditional gender expectations in the Indian society. When a woman enters a sphere where notions about gender have remained unchallenged for a long time, Mary, by becoming a boxer, highlights the fact that these formulations of gender are only part of gender performativity. Mary enters the boxing field as a 'woman', a category open to interpretation. However, the fact that Mary consciously defines herself as a 'woman' is reinforced when she is scolded by her father for behaving like a man. She chides him for calling her a 'man'. And though she does not consciously express herself as 'masculine', the very occupation of the space dominated by men means that she is defined as a 'masculine' female by society.

However, the possibility of gender fluidity offered by Mary, is limited by the film's narrative. Just before Mary is about to lead a life as a 'woman' by marrying her partner and embody the potential of queerness, her coach warns her and tries to dissuade her from marriage. Though this fact is a divergence from reality, it highlights the fact that motherhood and boxing are considered two separate spheres. It's not just the coach who opposes her decision. Her decision to take up boxing again after motherhood is criticized by the organisers of the boxing federation who advises her to take care of children instead of playing in the field. However, Mary never left boxing even after becoming a mother. As she relates in *Unbreakable*, her autobiography, the central tenet that drove her life was being a boxer and even motherhood could not pose a hindrance to that ambition. The reason why the film ignores this fact is that society views a female who subverts gender norms as a threat and thus, motherhood is the only way to contain such potential figures of disruption. Therefore in the film, she is first and foremost a 'woman', a mother, and an object of desire.

However, though deemed as 'masculine', female athletes are still objects of the male gaze. As Laura Mulvey has theorized the concept of the male gaze:

The man controls the film phantasy and also emerges as the representative of power in a further sense: as the bearer of the look of the spectator transferring it behind the screen to neutralize the extradiegetic tendencies represented by woman as spectacle. This is made possible through the processes set in motion by structuring the film around a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify. As the spectator identifies with the main male protagonist he projects his look onto that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look, both giving a satisfying sense of omnipotence.

The sharp focus on the female body places an extreme emphasis on the fact that any bodily injury is a threat for female boxers as it proves to be a hindrance to marriage. Mary's father and mother warn that her face will be ruined if she chooses boxing as her career leading to a loss of marriage prospects. The female athlete is seen only as an object who will eventually be a wife. Thus, her father warns her of going outside the house until her face heals and she obeys him by staying inside for a week.

Thus, even though the body of the female boxer is a sight contesting gender, however, the fetishization of the athlete's body is highlighted in the scene when she fights with a male wrestler. Since society views a female boxer as an anomaly and seeks to come to terms with it by making the body an object of desire. The scene where Kom fights the Lal boy (nickname given to the prize-fighting wrestler) to get some money and thus, steps into an arena which is an exclusively occupied by male spectators. A woman entering to fight a man and that too one whom no man has been able to defeat comes as a bit of a surprise for everyone. Men from the audience shout that she ought to go back and some mockingly say that they should get utensils for her to cook in. This scene, which is fictional complicates the argument regarding women and society.

Women are desexualized on the playing field when they fight against women. However, when they grapple with men they are sexualized to state and conform them to heterosexual norms. The sight is a sheer spectacle because it is the fight of the two sexes. However, the man's defeat gives the female boxer a respectability because she has proved herself worthy enough to rise above their 'femininity.' However, this does not imply that women who have proved herself of as a 'masculine' can inhabit the space of the two genders simultaneously as highlighted before. Thus, Mary has to retire because of motherhood which goes against her coach warning against marriage. Thus, the patriarchal society controls the female athlete's body – motherhood or the complete forgoing their feminine identity.

Dangal seeks to break the stereotypes around sports traditionally considered 'masculine' like dangal (traditional wrestling in India, played on sand), and also seemingly advocates gender equality. It is set in a Haryana, notorious for its skewed sex ratios. The film thus, not only comes at a time when government is promoting gender equality but when female infanticide in north India is one of the pressing issues. The film tries to portray the traditional mindset of a conservative village where girls are not allowed to venture into the domain of men. Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler, dreams of making his sons famous wrestlers. However, the dream comes to an end when his wife gives birth to three daughters consecutively. Thus, he starts training his girls, who have no desire to become wrestlers as it is a masculine sport and demands a lot of exertion and a complete alteration of their lifestyle.

However, as detailed in his biography, Mahavir, who never had such ambitions for his children and only aspired to make his girls world champions when he saw a female champion receiving twenty-five lakh rupees as award from the government for winning bronze in an international tournament. It was only then, as he relates in his biography, *Akhada*, that he started training his daughters to become wrestlers. The father's desire to make his daughters world champions as depicted in the film has nothing to do with challenging gender norms but simply a motivation to fulfil the male characters' ambitions.

The movie constructs a new reality and falls short of mentioning that Mahavir's wife was a sarpanch. The movie presents women as passive and men as active agents of their fate. The film essentially represents the female athlete as a figure who should be devoid of the traditional markers of femininity, because a woman on the playing field should be desexualized as femininity is a threat for her success. The father, imposes strict regulations on the girls and their role is limited to that of the passive objects, who do their father's bidding. Though they try strategies to resist, however, in the end, the realization that their father has the power to dispose them by getting them married, is the instance when the girls choose to take up wrestling. This decision is problematic as it is one that is chosen by the patriarch of the family and the girls never showed a desire to be a wrestler. Thus, wrestling becomes an escape from the fate that awaits every girl in a conservative society like India: marriage.

However, the girls find the procedure exhausting and an outrage to their identity. When they are required to cut their hair short forcibly and wear shorts, traditionally considered as markers of masculinity, they feel humiliated. Just like Mary Kom's coach who warned her not to venture into the domain of the 'feminine', the father, controls his daughters' 'femininity'. Thus, society taunts and calls them 'masculine' women and eventually men fear their strength.

This control is also brought to fore when Geeta wins the national championship and in the moment of celebration her father says that they will resume their training tomorrow, to which Geeta says, "what for, now that I have won the nationals?" Mahavir replies that he wants her to

win an international medal. This is an example of the limited control that the female wrestler enjoys over her body. This point is emphasized when the girls go to the training camp for official coaching. Geeta, is shown to be a failure without her father. In the Training Institute, she gains independence for the first time and when she grows her hair like other girls, her father feels that it is defiance of his authority.

Long hair considered a symbol of femininity leads to failure. However, when Geeta cuts her hair short in the international tournament, as her father had wanted her to, she wins the bout. The movie enforces the notions that a woman who remains feminine, isn't fit to be a wrestler because wrestling is a 'male' sport. Society thus, limits the female wrestler to the image of a 'masculine' woman. Her desire to be femininity while being a wrestler is a subversive move which has the potential to expose that gender is not something fixed but fluid.

However, as depicted in *Mary Kom* the female wrestler becomes an object of male gaze when she fights in the dangal. Earlier not given a chance to fight boys in dangals, the organizers of the local dangals rethink their decision and allow the girls to wrestle with men. The sole reason for letting them fight is that it will be financially rewarding as men will come to see a the spectacle of a woman fighting a man. This film sequence seems to offer a potential for inverting gender norms, which it fails to achieve as by depicting a women wrestling with a man carries sexual undertones. The main concern of the scene is not to challenge gender but to entertain people.

Though these films on female athletes have emerged of the changing position of women in the recent decades, the films try to limit the control women have over their bodies. Transgression by the female into the sphere inhabited by men, is something that has to be corrected by making the woman forgo her femininity. Thus, the film limits a female athlete's agency by depicting that she has no control over her body. Her choice of femininity is seen as a danger which exposes the instability of gender. Thus, Mary and Geeta's choice to identify themselves as feminine is in opposition to the sport they choose, which demands them to be 'masculine'. Both the athletes reveal an in-betweenness while fulfilling their/society's dream which leads to gender trouble.

Notes

1. Title IX was a federal law enforced in the United States of America which protects people in America from discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal assistance.

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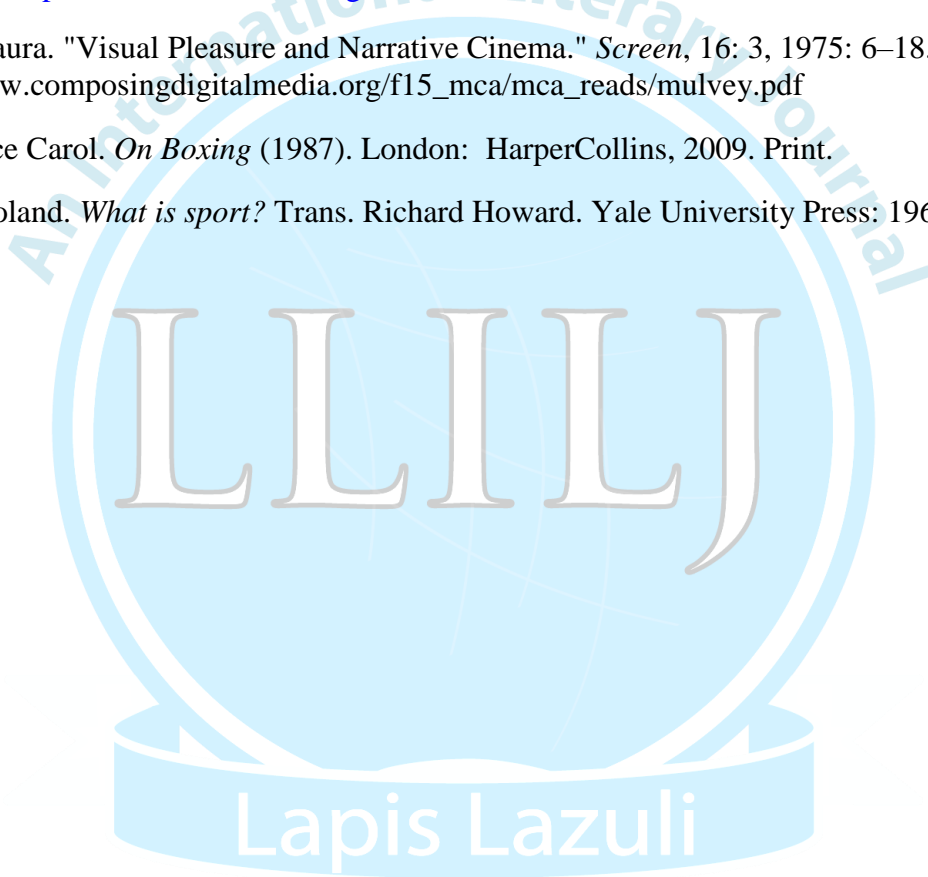
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