

Visual Representation of Indian Sports Women taking stand against Patriarchy: A study of certain Indian Movies on Women's sports

Dr. Usnis Banerjee

Ph.D. in English,

Completed in 2024 from Central University of Jharkhand

Ranchi, Jharkhand, India

E-mail: usnis1996@gmail.com

Abstract: The study has its focus on some of the Indian movies based on women's sports where we can see them struggling against the very common patriarchal notion. But they become successful to fulfill their dreams. The study will mainly look into movies like, *Chak De! India* (2007), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Dangal* (2016) and *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019). A woman dreaming to make her career in sports has to go through so many difficulties in India. Because of the patriarchal notion and an orthodox mind set a sports woman face the lacks of support from the family as well as the authority. So far, the society is concerned, there are only a few numbers of people who are aware or concerned of this fact. Some filmmakers of the India have been putting their effort on representing this issue visually through their movies.

Keywords: Indian movies based on women's sports, patriarchal notion, visual culture, Elaine Showalter, Gynocriticism, Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.

Introduction

The study deals with some of the Indian movies based on women's sports where we can see them struggling against the very common patriarchal notion to fulfill their dreams. Some of the situations, dialogues delivered by the character and some activities by the male characters in those movies represent graphic descriptions of the male oppression and practice of patriarchy. Along with that the vivid description of the female characters aspiring in different sports games after so many hurdles equate their struggle with the struggle for aspiring of woman writers and critics.

The movies used in this study are *Chak De! India* (2007) by Shimit Amin, *Mary Kom* (2014) by Omung Kumar, *Dangal* (2016) by Nitesh Tiwari and *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019) by Tushar Hiranandani. *Chak De! India* is a fictional story about the Indian women's national field hockey team; the script is inspired by the team's win at the 2002 Commonwealth Games. *Mary Kom* tells the story of Mary Kom's journey of becoming a boxer to her victory at the 2008 World Boxing Championships in Ningbo. *Dangal* is based on the Phogat family, Mahavir Singh Phogat trains his daughters Geeta Phogat and Babita Kumari to become India's first world-class female

wrestlers. *Saand Ki Aankh* is based on the lives of sharpshooters Chandro and Prakashi Tomar.

Elaine Showalter's concept of Gynocriticism has been used to analyze the movies. Gynocriticism is, "A term introduced by American feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter to classify critical work such as her own which focuses exclusively on literature written by female authors. Its twofold aim is to recover 'lost' or 'neglected' women writers and to understand in its specificity women's construction of textual meaning. The term is not widely used today, but the two key examples of gynocriticism, namely Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of their Own* (1977), are still read today, so the practice of gynocriticism, if not the word, is very much alive." (Buchanan) Her essay *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* has dealt with the struggle for aspiring of woman writers, critics and women in academics, as the major issue.

"Quite apart from the extraneous similarities between screen and mirror (the framing of the human form in its surroundings for instance), the cinema has structures of fascination strong enough to allow temporary loss of ego while simultaneously reinforcing the ego." (Mulvey 365) So it is clear that cinema as a visual culture not only is inspired by the society but also inspires the society by time to time. Laura Mulvey in her essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* has described how the Hollywood cinema for years have portrayed a woman. According to her the suffering of the women in the is a matter of enjoyment for the audience. The woman in movies became the symbol of lack of the certain genital organ. It is a way of showing how women are not able of looking after of her own has to be backed and supported by the male. Male has been portrayed as the savior of female, a weaker part of the society. In the end woman in Hollywood cinema, "To summarize briefly: the function of woman in forming the patriarchal unconscious is twofold; she first symbolizes the castration threat by her real absence of a penis and second thereby raises her child into the symbolic." (Mulvey 361) The movies taken into account in this study are not the representative of this typical style of Hollywood. These Bollywood movies have proved that women does not require men to survive in the society. Though some characters like Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India* and the Doctor in *Saand Ki Aankh* were there to give backing to the women in their path, their only aim was to provide autonomy to them. The comment made by Mulvey has been succeeded by those movies, "The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked; not in favor of a reconstructed new pleasure which cannot exist in the abstract, or of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film." (Mulvey 363)

Research Questions

1. How the Indian Cinema portrays the image of a sports woman?
2. Are such movies accurate in creating the correct visual culture for the mass?
3. Can those movies really become the inspiration for the girls struggling for their dreams to stand against the patriarchal notion?

Portrayal of a sports woman in Indian Cinema

i) *Chak De India:*

Chak De! India in the first half of the movie portrays a women's hockey team with a number of best-selected female hockey players of India, for team India who had almost forgotten what it means to be in team India. The aim of almost all the players of the team was to enjoy the benefits provided by the Government. The blame should not be put on the players only because the Hockey Federation of India itself seems to be unconcerned about women's hockey. The strangest thing about this was that there was a female member in the federation and even she is not in a mood to give any attention to the team. So here we see that the Movie portrays a world where India is the toughest ground for a sports woman to even fulfill all the criteria for becoming a real sports person.

Things started to change when the ex-captain of Indian men's hockey team Kabir Khan came to coach the women's hockey team with the vision of world championship. The movie is a representation of all the odds that a woman has to face to aspire in life. Discouragement from society, family, sometimes even from their life partners, that's all they get. The character of Kabir Khan though being male character has been portrayed as the one who helps and encourages them in overcoming all the hurdles in their way to success.

ii) *Mary Kom*

Mary Kom is the biographical account of Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom the only female to become World Amateur Boxing champion for a record six times and the only female boxer to have won a medal in each one of the first seven World Championships, and the only boxer (male or female) to win eight World Championship medals. The first half of the movie is filled up with a lot of actions by Kom's father whose actions prove that to become a boxer for a girl in India is not an easy job. He thinks that his daughter will spoil her face by taking punches on her face in boxing and will never be able to get married. (Kumar) But he never thinks of letting her make her own identity. Kom's father was too much reluctant to let his daughter enter the boxing ring that he put his daughter in a situation to choose between her father and boxing.

iii) *Dangal*

The movie *Dangal* shows the real-life story of a father who fights against all the odds that he had to face to make his daughters fulfill their dreams. Because of patriarchal notion remaining in the society caused him

not to realize the potential of his daughters. But later he started training them for wrestling ground. The society discouraged him by saying that wrestling is not for women. (Tiwari) Mahavir Singh's daughters Geeta and Babita were not allowed to enter the local wrestling grounds as they are girls. So, their father made his own wrestling ground to train them. At first the girls themselves were very reluctant of preparing themselves for wrestling and gain a man like physique. Because of the differentiation caused by patriarchy in rural India, the girls at the beginning were not able to understand two things. One is their potential and the second is the importance of their father's effort.

Later in the movie we see that Mahavir Sing by breaking the social stigma sets a new trend for other girls to learn wrestling.

iv) *Saand Ki Aankh*

Though belonging to rural India, where most of the women instead of going ahead in life, go to another house to become housewife, Sister-in-laws Chandro Tomar and Prakashi Tomar not only become the India's oldest sharpshooters but also prepare their daughters for world championship. The movie along with the fighting of women as sports person has really proved that age is just a number. In the movie we see that the eldest male member of the Tomar family thinks that only men have the right to touch the guns. (Hiranandani) But he was unaware of the fact that two female members of the family have far better shooting aim than him.

Instances of patriarchy in the movies

The movies *Chak De! India*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *Saand Ki Aankh* portray instances where the practice of patriarchy and the Indian sports women's stand against it.

In *Chak De! India* an officer of Hockey Federation stated that one who is having expectations from the women's team is making a big mistake. He also said that the team is only for official requirement. He thought the team would not be able to compete with the school teams of the European country. (Amin) But later we see that the team not only gives a tough competition to the men's team but also becomes world champion going beyond everyone's expectations. Later in the movie we see the father-in-law of the captain of the team and the fiancé of one of the strikers of the team forced them to avoid the women's world hockey tournament for the marriage and family function.

In the beginning the team did not have the confidence of winning but things started to change when they started to feel the importance of teamwork after a lot of attempts by their coach Kabir Khan. On the day of the match that was played between women's and men's team as a challenge, Kabir told the women's team that their match is not against the 11 men of the opponent team but their match is against all the people in the country who think that playing Hockey is not an Indian woman's cup of tea. One of the strikers of the team was so religious in breaking the social stigma that

she stated, she wants to make highest goals to show her boyfriend who was the vice-captain of the Indian cricket team.

In the movie *Mary Kom*, Kom's father states that boxing gloves are not toys of girls. When he came to know that other girls like her daughter were being trained by the coach, he was offended and said that one should not train the girls for fighting. But against her father's discouragement Kom didn't stop. In front of a reporter, she expressed that if girls are given the right opportunity, they can do anything. When Mary approached the street fight there also, she was told that the fighting ground is not kitchen.

In the movie *Dangal* Mahavir Sing is an ex-wrestler who has performed in international tournaments. His dream was winning Gold Medal for the country which he failed to do because of financial crisis and family responsibilities. Later he had the plan to fulfill his dream by preparing his son for the world championship. But all his children were girls. But he never realized that he can train his daughters for wrestling until they beat up two boys badly. Because of the patriarchal notion he had always thought that only a boy can have a career in wrestling. Added to that the patriarchal society at the starting never accepted and supported his decision of training his daughters for wrestling. The villagers started talking behind him. They stated girls' only destiny is becoming housewives. They found Mahavir's decision of training his daughters to be shameful. But now he knew that his daughters are not less powerful than anyone's sons.

In *Saand Ki Aankh*, we see that Shooter Grand-Mothers, Chandro Tomar and Prakashi Tomar have to trick their husbands to go for competitions as the female members of the family are not allowed to go outside the house without any male. Added to that they knew that their husbands would never allow them to participate in shooting competition. The eldest brother-in-law of Chandro Prakashi Tomar was such a hardcore patriarch that he was not willing to let them open a homebased tailoring business. He would not eat anything that is earned by the female members of the family. When the whole thing came in front of the village that Tomar Grand-Mothers were befooling their husbands to participate in shooting competitions, there was a heated discussion in the house. Prakashi out of sorrow and anger stated that there is no difference between the wives and the domestic animals of the house. But in the climax scene we see that the Tomar Grand-Mothers end up being the inspiration of many young girls to join shooting passionately. Prakashi's daughter in her jerky prints her mother's name instead of his father's name.

Women's sports in Indian Cinema through the lens of Eline Showalter's Gynocriticism

Showalter believes, "Gynocritics begins at the point when we free ourselves from the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the nearly visible world of female culture" (Showalter 217) She also stated,

“In contrast to this angry or loving fixation on male literature, the programme of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories.” (Showalter 217) So here we see that Gynocriticism is the area of study where the struggle of women as a critic, as a person and as writer is dealt with. Showalter's approach is towards the liberation of women from the stereotypes created by men. In the previous section we saw that girls have to fight against the patriarchal notion of the society to fulfill their dreams. Though being sports-person before entering the field a woman has to face the rules set by the patriarchal society. But end of the day they make their way towards the victory. Just like that in literature, women either as a fictional character or a real-life person will have to find its way towards the freedom and autonomy. The men's stereotypical depiction of woman as sufferer has to be changed. No excuse like male as the angry and loving person should be valid in that case.

She stated, “we have studied women writers in isolation that we have never grasped the connections between them. When we go beyond Austen, the Brontes and Eliot, say, to look at a hundred and fifty or more of their sister novelists, we can see patterns and phases in the evolution of a female tradition which correspond to the developmental phases of any subcultural art.” (Showalter 217) Just like that in sports as Kom in the movie *Mary Kom* has while giving an interview to a reporter said if you go in search of talent in India, you will get at least one from every corner. Here her statement was addressed for the girls and boys who remains undiscovered. This happens because the society is not yet ready to see sports as a career. Added to that when the question comes of woman as sports person, the society is not even ready to accept it as a side career. In *Chak De! India* Kabir Khan to one of the players stated that he thinks the society's problems is not with sports. It is okay if they play cricket but with hockey there are some problems. Just like in literature some women writers are read and some are not that much talked about and get lost day by day. In the sports ground too hockey is being ignored. In men's hockey there is some support from the federation as we have seen in the movie but women's team gets very less support from the federation. Just like some unread women writers the team stays only on paper for official requirement not on with the ground playing with real sportsman spirit with audience witnessing their performance and they being cheered by the spectators.

In all the movies discussed, we have seen that people against women sports gives one common excuse. They think, sports and women are not for each other. This tendency of stereotyping has been seen in literature too by the Showalter, “we must protest now as in the nineteenth century against the equation of the feminine with the irrational.” (Showalter 219) The tendency of seeing women as the irrational is not only bad for women but also harmful for the society which will never be able to see beyond the patriarchal notion.

chal mindset to note the potential in women. When half of the societies abilities are being ignored irrespective of different fields like sports and literature, one can't expect the society to become better.

Another concept discussed by Showalter equates the struggle of women on ground and women with pen. Just like the Indian movies based on women sports give an account of experience of women of facing and getting over the hurdles caused by the male dominancy, feminist critique's subjects as explained by Showalter includes, "the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism, and the fissures in male constructed literary history. It is also concerned with the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience, especially in popular culture and film; and with the analysis of woman-as-sign in semiotic systems." (Showalter 216) She also came up with a problem with feminist criticism. She said, "one of the problems of the feminist critique is that it is male-oriented. If we study stereotypes of women, the sexism of male critics, and the limited roles women play in literary history, we are not learning what women have felt and experienced, but only what men have thought women should be." (Showalter 216) It means in field too if women focus only on their performance not on avenging against the domination of male, that will be a greater approach. In *Chak De! India* one of the strikers of the team was not giving pass to another striker for some matches. The reason behind that was she wanted to become the highest scorer of the tournament and showcase her abilities to her dominating fiancé who's also a sports person and thinks hockey is a less important game than cricket. In a world tournament setting goals to serve one's won ego can become harmful for the whole team. Instead of doing so from the very starting of the tournament, she would have focused on the teamwork. "Matthew Arnold also thought that literary critics might perish in the wilderness before they reached the promised land of disinterestedness;" (Showalter, Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness 179) It means, for the empowerment and the equality of male female the female has to act without the self interestedness. Because if women focus only on becoming rebel against men they will fail to do their work.

Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India* fought against all the odds caused by patriarchy. The same thing was done by Mahavir Singh in *Dangal*. In *Saand Ki Aankh* without the help of the Doctor, who trained the Tomar Grand-Mother's for shooting, the success story of them and their daughters could have never taken place. It was a male coach who in *Mary Kom* told that a mother is the most powerful fighter. So just going against the male is not what women empowerment leads to. It is common destiny of some people, who irrespective of their gender are fighting for the equality of men and women. Showalter stated, "I do not mean to endorse the separatist fantasies of radical feminist visionaries". (Showalter, Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness 184) Radically people need to work together. So, she said, "It is time for feminist criticism to decide whether between religion and revision

we can claim any firm theoretical ground of our own." (Showalter, Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness 184) What she suggests is to shift from focusing to only fight against male dominancy to focus on their own empowerment. She observed, "Feminist criticism has gradually shifted its center from revisionary readings to a sustained investigation of literature by women." (Showalter, Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness 184)

Conclusion

So, in this study we have come across some of the Indian movies based on women sports in India. Four movies, *Chak De! India* (2007) by Shimit Amin, *Mary Kom* (2014) by Omung Kumar, *Dangal* (2016) by Nitesh Tiwari and *Saand Ki Aankh* (2019) by Tushar Hiranandani, not only represent four different sports but describe women as warriors against the domination of male and useless rules made by them to construct the patriarchal power structure in the society where the free will of women does not exist. The movies *Chak De! India* displays the power of teamwork of a women hockey team. With zero expectation they started and with world championship they set a benchmark. The movie *Mary Kom* shows how a young Indian girl can go even against her father to reach her destiny. *Dangal* teaches us to keep equal faith and expectation from both our girls and boys. Mahavir unlike other fathers of the village goes against all the odds of the society to train his daughters for international wrestling championship. *Saand Ki Aankh* breaks the stereotype regarding women's age as a barrier. Not only the Tomar Grand-Mothers, they also make their next generation ready for international shooting competition.

Mulvey said, "The conventions of mainstream film focus attention on the human form. Space, stories are all anthropomorphic. Here, curiosity and the wish to look intermingle with a fascination with likeness and recognition: the human face, the human body, the relationship between the human form and its surroundings, the visible presence of the person in the world." (Mulvey 365) Looking at the movies from Mulvey's point of view, this study concludes that Indian Cinema creates a rebellious image of the sports woman, whose destiny comes only after the victory against the male supremacy. The movies dealt with in this study like other forms of arts are not free from the use of exaggeration. In some points of all the movies the dialogues portraying the practice of patriarchy are indicative of the fact that they have been used to bring the feeling of the movie strongly. Followed by that the fight of the sports girls against the patriarchy is eventually exaggerated a bit. But end of the day these movies can really inspire the young girls to grow in life. Except *Chak De! India* rest of the three movies are based on real events. So, these movies can set a bench mark for young girls, upon whom the future of the country lies. Specially the movies *Mary Kom*, *Dangal* and *Saand Ki Aankh* breaks the taboo for girls who think, boxing, wrestling and shooting are not for girls.

References

- Buchanan, Ian. *Gynocriticism*. n.d. Web. 17 August 2020. <<https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803095913896>>.
- *Chak De! India*. Dir. Shimit Amin. 2007.
- *Dangal*. Dir. Nitesh Tiwari. 2016.
- *Mary Kom*. Dir. Omung Kumar. 2014.
- Mulvey, Laura. “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” *Feminism and Film Theory* (2013): 57-68. PDF.
- *Saand Ki Aankh*. Dir. Tushar Hiranandani. 2019.
- Showalter, Elaine. “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.” *Critical Inquiry* (1981): 179-205. PDF.
- Showalter, Elaine. “Towards a Feminist Poetics.” Newton, K. M. *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. . Palgrave, London, 1997. PDF.
