



## **Representational Politics in Bollywood Sports Movies of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Empowering Women through Counter Cinema**

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### **Abstract**

In its bid to map out the portrayal of women in sports films in mainstream Bollywood, the paper would initially highlight the shifting paradigm of Hindi Film Industry post-liberalisation. As a by-product of this, one could also discern a marked change in the representation of women characters on screen. The paper wishes to concentrate on such representations in 21<sup>st</sup> century sports movies. In movies where the crux of the narrative rests on either a sport or a sporting event, as in *Lagaan*, *Stumped*, *Jannat*, *Kai Po Che*, *Patiala House*, *M.S. Dhoni* etc, women characters, even at the turn of the century, are ideologically constructed through dominant male gaze. Rather than independent individuals, they become mere signs that can be analysed as structure, code and convention. The paper would proceed next to take into account two movies centring around women athletes – *Chak de India* and *Dangal* – to puncture the pompous assertion of women power as depicted in them. The situation worsens here, for the female subjects are made to bear the burden of a male lack in order to provide the male subjects with the illusion of wholeness and unity. More than the feelings of women athletes, the directors tell stories of injured male egos which need to be nourished by feminine care and sacrifice. In this sense, they bask in the reflected glories of their male partners. Thus these representations are extremely gendered with little scope for women empowerment. The scenario, however, is not completely bleak, for there are male filmmakers interested to walk a divergent way, to tell their stories from the perspectives of women athletes. The paper would conclude with two such counter-cinemas – *Dil Bole Hadippa* and *Mary Kom* – that challenge the workings of power relations operative in other sports movies in Bollywood and give attention to feminist issues and views. The road, at times, is bumpy, for *Dil Bole Hadippa* didn't do brisk business; yet box-office success of *Mary Kom* and Priyanka Chopra winning National Award for the film point to the capacities of women athletes in Bollywood movies to look ahead of male strategies of subjugations and carve out a niche for themselves on individual merits.

### **Keywords**

Laura Mulvey, Kaja Silverman, Bollywood sports movies, post liberal, masquerade, counter cinema

With its torrent of IT and IT related careers, the rise of disposable income, growth of the media, flood of consumer products, expansion of communication and mobility within the country, the economic liberalization of the nineties was no less than a deluge that whitewashed the lifestyle of average Indians. In post liberal India, as Ravi Vasudevan states in 'The Meanings of Bollywood', "satellite broadcasting, cable television, new systems of distribution and delivery based on digitized formats came to define new types of production". These productions are available in the newly developed malls and entertainment spaces that replaced the "slum settlements, pavement dwellings and street vending". Consumers of the new products are the highly educated middle and upper classes. They could easily walk into the malls and pick and choose from a host of items. In 'No one saves for a rainy day now', Amrit Dhillion observes that this new wealthy people are now willing to spend on everything from "mobile phones to sneakers to French fries and this make India one of the few hot markets in the world". Easy loans and promising installments drive one to spend more and save less. In *Mother, Maiden, Mistress: Women in Hindi Cinema, 1950-2000* Bhawana Somaya, Jigna Kothari and Supriya Madangarli comment on the effect of this changed social structure. They opine that "Popular culture and traditional norms intermingle to create a bastardized class that became the ideal consumer for the branded products and services and ideologies pouring into the country through multinationals" (189).

## I

In this economic upsurge, the Hindi film industry, popularly known as Bollywood, also reoriented itself. In fact, the economic liberalisation of the nineties had been an earthquake in Bollywood which brought down almost all the pre-twenty first century structures and practices that had been concretized since the fifties. In the new millennium, Bollywood got an official recognition as an industry where films began to be financed and publicized by Corporate Houses. The old production houses (like Yash Raj Films, Dharma Productions, Mukta Arts etc), the new entertainment software companies (like UTV Motion Pictures Ltd., Prithvi Nandy Communications, Excel Entertainment setc) and actors-turned-producers (like Shah Rukh's Red Chillies Entertainment) aimed at backing scripts written to market the movie and make it a financially sound product. This new types of films or products are directed to entertain the new 'money class'. In 'World Cinema: Bollywood Forced to go Mainstream', as Iain Bell talk of the new money class constituting a new set of audience who are westernized, English speaking intellectual and who "wasn't there 10/15 years ago". For them, filmic materials are available through various mediums like television

broadcasts, websites, advertisements, trailers, clips, countdowns, production stills, tapes, CDs, CD covers, DVDs, VCDs along with newspapers and film magazines. They are receptive to innovations and experimentations. Thus filmmakers introduced new ideas in filmmaking in order to cater to the needs of the audience. Rajadhyaksha defines this phenomenon as ‘Bollywoodization of the Indian cinema’ where Bollywood is seen as a culture industry. No wonder along with a changed format of the earlier heroes – dutiful boy/brother (Karan Johar and Suraj Barjatiya heroes), young adventurous lovers (*Saathiya*, 2002), police officers (*Dev*, 2004; *Dabangg*, 2010), army personals (*Yahaan*, 2005), transgenders (*Welcome to Sajjanpur*, 2008), comic heroes (*Khosla Ka Ghosla*, 2006; *Munna Bhai M.B.B.S*, 2003; *Lage Raho Munna Bhai* 2006) and suave villain/negative heroes (*Dhoom*, 2004), the new audience now geared up to accept new brands of heroes. Hence we encounter heroes who are urban youths searching for and recognizing who they are (*Dil Chahta Hai*, 2001; *Yuva*, 2004; *Rang De Basanti*, 2007), youths dealing with contemporary issues of terror (*Black Friday*, 2004; *Parzania*, 2005), incest and illegitimate issues (*Nishabd*, 2007), AIDS infected personnel (*Phir Milenge, My Brother Nikhil* 2005), Gangsters and Underworld leaders, (*Company*, 2002; *Sarkar* 2005; *Shootout at Lokhandwala*, 2007), ordinary individuals (*Amir*, 2008; *A Wednesday*, 2008) and superheroes (*Koi Mil Gaya*, 2003; *Krrish*, 2008).

In tune with the heroes, one notices a radical shift in the portrayal of heroines on screen. At the Book Launch of *Once Upon A Time In India – A Century Of Indian Cinema* by Bhawana Soumya, on January 18, 2017 Amitabh Bachchan, Megastar of Bollywood, observes a discernable change in the sets of Hindi films now-a-days: “During my time, there would be two women on set, the heroine and her mother. But now, almost 50 per cent of the work force on a film set is female. All managed by young girls. They are just looking after everything”. He further adds that women now are working in the key departments like camera, production, scripts, direction and he hopes that this continues. Interestingly enough, post-liberal Bollywood microcosmically represented the macrocosmic rise of women personalities in society. In twenty first century India women came to occupy top positions in diverse fields – as President of the country (Pratibha Patil), as a leading Party President (Sonia Gandhi), as a Jury member at the Cannes Film Festival (Aishwariya Rai), as CEO of Companies, (Indira Nyoori, Pepsi), Bank (Chanda Kochhar, ICICI), as Sports Champions (Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal) etc. Bollywood also witnessed a large infiltration of women directors (Kalpana Lajmi, Tanuja Chandra, Aparna Sen, Nandita Das, Deepa Mehta, Honey Irani etc) who redefined the representation of women on screen. Globalisation, therefore,

severely affected women portrayals in Hindi cinema and, perhaps, it was time to look at women with new eyes and through a new pair of glasses. Accordingly, many male directors along with female directors wrote scripts centring on women of substances. Movies like *Corporate* (2006), *Page 3* (2005), *Salam Namaste* (2005), *Band Baja Barat* (2010), *Fashion* (2008), *Jab We Met* (2007), *Paheli* (2005), *Dor* (2006), *Kabhi Alvida na Kehna* (2006) etc prove that these new women are in no mood to bear the mantle of Sita hood. Duped or dumped by men they are capable to move on with their life. On the other side, women are not averse to using their body and sexuality as a means to their ends. *Jism* (2003), *Hate Story* (2012) etc bear out the point.

However, it is disturbing to note that despite the above mentioned changes, traditional codes and conducts, as expected from women, continue to be sold in the name of moral values, family relationships and commitments. The impeccable success of the early movies of Karan Johar and almost all the Sooraj Barjatya movies makes one sceptical of the sustainability of gender equality in 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood. This is because these movies sell the 'ideal' image of woman as submissive, self sacrificing, chaste and controlled. The 'bad' woman, on the other hand, is characterized as individualistic, sexually aggressive, westernised, and uncompromisingly arrogant. True, this particular genre – romance with little violence, thriving on family values, songs and dance – upholds the typical 'masala' for commercial success. So women, playing the role of hero's love interest, are not always empowered to voice their views, perceptions and subjective realities, for that would challenge male stereotyping. However, there are some movies like *Kahaani* (2012) or *Haider* (2014) which have been appreciated by the audience. This is clear proof that the audience wants films to break away from stereotypes; yet both the number of such films made every year and the business they fetch are in no comparison with the category discussed above. In other words, women empowerment in Bollywood masala movies, despite the winds of change, is partial and at times, pseudo. This can be further argued if one considers the treatment of women in sports movies of 21<sup>st</sup> century Bollywood.

## II

Sports, sports personalities and events related to the world of sports have always been a favourite subject of the Bollywood filmmakers. Not only biopics on sportsmen and sports women but filmmakers have also managed to rope in sports personalities like Sachin Tendulkar (*Stumped*, 2003), Kapil Dev (*Chain Khuli Ki Main Khuli*, 2007), Anil Kumble (*Meerabai Not Out*, 2008) and M.S. Dhoni (*M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*, 2016) to do

cameos in their films. The year 2016 saw four sports movies releasing (*Azhar*, *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*, *Sultan* and *Dangal*) and doing brisk business at the box-office. Though it falls within the realm of popular cinema, the approach and treatment of characters in sports movies are expected to be more convincing. However, one disturbingly notes that in movies where the crux of the narrative rests on either a sporting event – like match-fixing in *Jannat* (2008) and *Azhar* (2016) – or on a particular sport – like cricket in *Lagaan* (2001), *Stumped* (2003), *Iqbal* (2005), *Patiala House* (2011) *Kai Po Che* (2013), *Azhar* (2016), *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016), football in *Dhan Dhana Dhan Goal* (2007), boxing in *Apne* (2007), athletics in *Bhag Milkha Bhag* (2013), wrestling in *Sultan* (2016) etc — there is seldom scope for gender equality and women's empowerment, for women characters are presented as objects satisfying the 'male gaze'. Especially in biopics, like *Bhag Milkha Bhag* and *M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story*, women, presented as protagonist's love interests, are almost non-functional. Whereas in *Bhag* women, both as lost love as well as rejected love, play second fiddle in the protagonist's journey, in *M.S.* they provide positive nod to hero's decisions. Dhoni's mother and sisters, for example in *M.S. Dhoni*, support Dhoni in everything and Priyanka and Sakshi patiently wait for Dhoni's approval for marriage. Thus the women dutifully abide by all rules and regulations of patriarchal society and in none of these their thoughts, feelings, views, opinion are shown worthy to be considered. Male are active while the women are passive. The stories unfold around the male subjects and the movies highlight the male points of view.

In fictional sports movies like *Laagan*, *Kai Po Che*, *Apne*, *Sultan* etc the passivity continues, for here too women have no significant part to play except for providing a support to male endeavour. For instance, in *Laagan* women as bystanders help men in their fight for freedom, in *Apne*, the wives are unable to bridge the yawning gap between the father and the son and patiently wait for time to heal the wounds and in *Sultan* female wrestler gives up her career once she becomes pregnant. Preoccupied with mannerism and expressions, women in sports movies perform household chores, bear children, are unassertive, affectionate, cheerful and strictly monogamous. These are no mean task but they do not create any room of their own. They are shown to breathe for men while the men strive to reach their cherished dreams, mend anything that cannot be mended by women and finally achieve the desired goal. Such conventional heterosexual division of labour, where men are active and women are passive, is jolting to one's sense, for post liberal affluent audience are found to appreciate such portrayals uncritically. This is because the basic objective of popular movies is to entertain the audience. One rightfully remembers Vidya Balan telling Emran Hashmi in *The Dirty*

*Pictures* “filmein sirf teen cheezo ke wajah se chalti hai – entertainment, entertainment, entertainment aur main entertainment hoon”. Truly, the passive portrayal of women characters as the bearer of meaning and not maker of it is employed to give pleasure to the post liberal audience. This pleasure, however, is the pleasure of viewing the ‘ideal’ image of women on screen, an image which is desired by majority of the post liberal audience. Moreover, the audience is also pleased to see sensual presentation of women characters on screen. Even in sports movies women are represented as physically attractive who either dance sensuously to songs or engage in suggestive gestures to titillate the male libido. In the biopic *Azhar* the issue of sensuality is carefully packaged inside the match-fixing scandal of Mohammad Azharuddin. By cashing in on Azharuddin’s personal life, his leaving behind of his wife for another woman, the film portrays how a cricketer gets swayed away by the glamour and glitter of a film star. This politics of foregrounding women’s body is a conscious demeaning of their intellect, making them mere display objects. So they do not feature in any significant ways in the sports movies mentioned above.

Incidentally, this mode of presenting women as visually pleasing for the audience was inspired from Hollywood classic cinema, which, in turn, was derived from the tradition of Western easel painting. Easel painting presented female body in frozen moments with the objective to encourage the male interests in erotic contemplation. This was taken over by leading Hollywood filmmakers who staged women as an object satisfying the ‘male gaze’. During the economic liberalization, the government liberalized the demand of films leading to the rise in the release of foreign/Hollywood cinema in India. As English movies were dubbed in Hindi and other regional languages, companies from Hollywood got a huge market in India from which they earned massive revenues. *Titanic* was the turning point in terms of revenues. Moreover, Bollywood commercial film makers recycled hit Hollywood formulas adding an Indian touch or ‘chutneyed’ them to suit the conditions and sensibility of their Indian audience. In *Dilwale Dulhaniya le Jayenge*, for instance, we see the hero, brought up in the material comforts of the West, is deeply rooted in the traditional Indian culture. Filmmaker understood that an Indian now is a hybrid who easily enjoys the material comforts of the West and the spiritual comforts of the East. In tune with this adaptive strategy, Hollywood’s classical fascination for sexuality, demeanour and appearance while portraying women on screen was easily corroborated within Indian condition where women have already been successfully playing stereotypical roles. Post-liberal fresh faces, therefore, are bold, westernized, young, fair skinned, slender having sharp features and extremely fashion conscious. The well placed heroines geared up for a complete makeover. Be it the sacrificing

mothers/dutiful daughters/compassionate wives/helpful sisters or the vamps/the whores/the other women who had been defying the codes and hence are penalised, what unite the contrary moulds is their compulsory qualities – of being beautiful and sensual – to satisfy the male gaze.

This idea of ‘male gaze’ has been extensively dealt by the British Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey. Incidentally, feminist film theories were influenced by second wave feminism and the emerging new theories. The initial attempts were taken by American scholars in the early 1970s which were largely sociological in nature, focussing on the role of women in film narratives and the stereotypical reflections of society’s view of women. Marjorie Rosen’s *Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream* (1973) and Molly Haskell’s *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974) are prominent examples. The British school, represented by Laura Mulvey, Claire Johnston, Pam Cook and Annette Kuhn, rejected the “US critics’ sociological approach to cinema which, they believed, considered only surface elements of story and character and failed to engage with the specificities of the film medium – for example, how lighting, editing and camera movement work together with or separately from the stories and characters to create hidden structures or subtexts of meaning” (Chaudhuri 8). In her epoch making essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ (written in 1973 and published in 1975), Mulvey examines the relationship between screen and spectators; she claims that men and women are differently positioned by cinema: men are driving agents of the narrative and women are objects of masculine desire and fetishistic gazing: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/ female” (Mulvey 19). Mulvey expands on the conception of passive role of women in cinema to argue that films provide visual pleasure through ‘Scopophilia’, and identification with the on-screen male actors. She identifies ‘Scopophilia’, “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (16), as one of the numerous pleasures that cinema offer. She opines that there “are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at” (16). The two types of looks that Mulvey points out – Fetishistic, by which women become Madonnas and are elevated to a higher pedestal, having glamour as its essential quotient, and Voyeuristic, by which women become whores and, are thereby associated with a fantasy of mastery and control – operate ingeniously in Bollywood sports movies. Obeying the patriarchal dictums and thereby reflecting the ideal image, women satisfy what Mulvey calls the fetishist gaze of the male audience and by her sensual appearance, which is also desired, women satisfy the voyeuristic

gaze. Male characters are placed at the centre of the narrative, which the audience is assumed to relate to, whilst women are marginally positioned for visual impact and erotic pleasure. No wonder Priyanka Srivastava in “Depicting Women in Bollywood: The mould never changes” notes that “Indian films top the list in objectifying women on screen”. Trapped in the unequal male dominated narratives, such films fail to empower women. Thus despite the success of *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) where an NRI girl relished her dream of playing football like her icon, David Beckham, by resisting her objectification, Bollywood filmmakers continued to trap women in sports movies by the dominant male gaze even at the turn of the century.

### III

There have been countless reactions to Mulvey’s essay, especially because she assumed all spectators to be male, ignoring the issue of female spectatorship. Therefore, the essay exerted a strong impact on the direction of feminist film theory that many subsequent works constitute a direct response to it. Not only later feminist film critics but Mulvey herself included the role of female spectatorship in ‘Afterthoughts’ on “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1981). Like the male audience, Mulvey contends, the female audience can enjoy a fantasy of control and freedom over the narrative world that identification with the hero affords and that she can cross the lines of gender in her identification because her gender is itself divided. In tune with Mulvey, American film theorist, Kaja Silverman, in *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (1988) further investigates on the effective operation of female spectatorship amongst other issues. Influenced by French psychoanalyst, Jaques Lacan (1901-81), Silverman contends that “the child, of either sex, is already marked by absence and lack *before* its awareness of sexual difference: “Its experiences of lack first arises during the Mirror Stage, which occurs before the Oedipus complex, when the infant is speechless (*infans* in Latin means ‘speechless’), usually aged six to eighteen months” (original emphasis; Chaudhuri 46). This lack arises during the Mirror stage because prior to that the child exists in a stage of ‘Imaginary plenitude’, of oneness with the mother, with no realization of a difference or lack. It starts learning itself as a separate being during the Mirror stage, different from the external world of objects. The child becomes a subject, positioned by his identification with the Father in terms of law, as it enters the realm of language and social code or Symbolic stage, characterized by absence and desire. Thus Symbolic Stage installs lack into the human subject. It is this subject formation that constitute all, male and female, by lack or ‘symbolic castration’. Silverman argues that Freud’s determination to tie castration to the ‘discovery’ of sexual

difference overlooks the child's earlier experiences of loss and lack; it also distances the male subject from the idea of a lack: "Freud performs an act of displacement, which deposits lack at the site of the women's body" (Chaudhuri 47-48). Silverman opines similar displacement occurs in films. Female subject is compelled to bear the burden of lack that properly belongs to both: "To compensate for his own lack, which he cannot bear, the typical male subject projects it onto the female, so that he can sustain a fantasy of being unified and complete" (Chaudhuri 48). In *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992), she carries forth this concept and argues that the typical male subject deposits his castration or lack at the site of female subjectivity, while refusing to recognise his own lack.

Two prominent Bollywood sports movies, *Chak de India* (2007) and *Dangal* (2016) are tales of male lack and loss, the burden of which is bore by women athletes. Amidst the saga of physical objectification of women in sports movies, the directors of the two films, Shimit Amin and Nitesh Tiwari respectively, seem apparently to have taken the road not taken before by opposing sexist ideologies. Thus the two movies impress one as mirrors reflecting changes in attitude of Bollywood film makers towards portraying women in sports movies. But a deeper penetration into the way the narratives unfold would inevitably prove that the mirror has always been limited in its reflection, and possibly, distorted. In both the movies, the matches are psychologically won by the dominant male protagonists, wounded by defective circumstances and nurturing a deep sense of loss and lack in their hearts. In *Chak de India*, it is Kabir Khan's psychological victory, won in the garb of women hockey team winning the final; it is a victory by which he rubs the dirt off his sleeves and, thereby, proves his innocence. Since he is the protagonist and not the captain of the women's hockey team, the movie, begins and ends with Kabir Khan. One evidently understands that it is a story from being an outsider to an insider, a journey of one's social rejection to his becoming a national hero. This main plot almost overshadows the life - stories of women hockey players, so much so that they appear as flickers amidst the glaring tale of Kabir Khan's scandalous exit from the national game. One shockingly notes that women hockey players, from diverse social situation, are shown to gain their individual identities by a collective victory. Again, in *Dangal*, we follow the life of Mahavir Singh Phogat – his unfulfilled dreams, frustrations when his wife could not deliver a son, subsequent training of his daughters and determinations. Mahavir's adamant and rigorous steps – reflected either in building a separate practice area for the daughters and cooking chicken in a newly constructed oven for his girls – convince us that he can go to any extent to achieve his lack through his girls. The narratives are constructed in such a way that the women athletes

become aware of the hard labour the male counterparts are putting in for them. For instance, during the mehendi ceremony of Geeta's friend, Geeta is made conscious by her friend how much Mahavir Singh Phogat is concerned about his daughter unlike her father who is in a hurry to unburden himself of his daughter's responsibility, and is, therefore, marrying her off at an early age of fourteen. Thus we see a changed Geeta, participating in training wholeheartedly. In *Chak de India* feminine trait of fighting amongst each other is identified by Kabir Khan as the reason for the dismal performance of the women players. Neither Balbir/Komal's journey from a rustic ambience to hockey ground nor Preeti's marginalization by her fiancée when she is determined to play for India, for example, were considered as serious issues for their maladjustments and distractions. This is because Kabir Khan cannot change their situation; all he can do is to provide verbal tonic so that little fights could be controlled. All geared up, the girls now fight for the country. It is in this way the male counterparts get the required female counterpart's understandings and compassionate zeal to achieve their unfinished task. So beneath the apparent victory of the girls lie the potent male winners - Kabir Khan and Mahavir Singh Phogat. They are focalisers around whom the women athletes revolve as satellites.

Moreover, women are cleverly shown to be incapable of fighting the odds alone. So a so-called betrayer, Kabir Khan, is called to coach a hopeless hockey team whom no one is willing to train. The sinking ship of women's hockey team where the girls are more interested in kitchen politics rather than playing as a team is rescued by Kabir Khan. Likewise in *Dangal* Geeta requires Mahavir Singh Phogat, who can dare to travel the road untraveled for training up girls for a so called man's game. Without Mahavir's skilled understanding of the game, in the later part of the movie, a national champion Geeta is shown to lose games. All the updated training and national coach's advice fall flat in the face of Mahavir's confident dictums to Geeta during the Commonwealth games. Thus we are forced to question whose story are we watching anyway? In both *Chak de India* and *Dangal*, women athletes strive less for themselves and more for their male tutors. Hence they fight 'displaced' battles, and provide the male subjects with illusions of wholeness and unity. They become channels through which the men taste vicarious victories, and, at the same time, nurse their wounded egos. This process of depositing the burden on female subjectivity is further shown in the movies by the deletion of feminine traits and attributes of the women athletes in both the movies. In *Chak de India*, Vidya comes out of the safety household, Preeti gives up her relationship with her partner, Komal and Balbir are shown as tomboys. In order to enlighten Mahavir Sing's name, Geeta and Babita have to give up wearing salwar kameez, cannot eat

‘golgappe’, achar’, cannot apply make ups and finally have to cut down their long locks of hair. This is because anything that will disturb the course of wrestling will be shunned forever. This assault on their being gets a temporary relief when Geeta goes to Patiala. But as she starts taking interest in male attention, in going out for late nights, movies, dinner, in growing her hair long and applying nail polish, we are shown Geeta losing focus, her game deteriorating as she is continuously defeated at international meet. This is a strategy of showing the uselessness of feminine attributes and to justify Mahavir Singh’s earlier decisions.

Erosion of feminine traits leads them to complete surrender on the altar of patriarchal coaching. It is this complete surrender that helps them to emerge as winners in the narrative. They neither question nor imply individual decisions in course of their matches. The motivational ‘Woh satta minute’ speech in *Chak de India* was written to gather claps not for the players who actually played those seventy minutes but for the coach. The match winning moment –the last penalty shot– which, perhaps, the able goalkeeper-cum-captain would have defended by herself is shown to be dictated by the coach. In *Dangal* Geeta is caught between her coach’s techniques and her father’s instructions. Before the crucial final match against Australia, Mahavir Singh gives a similar motivational speech to Geeta, asking her to play like never before, for all those girls who were looked down as the weakness by the society. She panics on not seeing her father in the final match, who had goaded her to victory through his instructions during the semi final. One doubts her decision making abilities as a player, for she is not shown as nervous but lacks the necessary push from her father. Like *Chak de*, the final moments in *Dangal* too are permeated with voice over of the dominant male protagonist, which is, in fact, their absent presence on the ring/field. The final moments of glory is thus achieved with an omnipresence of the dominant male protagonist. This is in contrast to, *M. S. Dhoni*, for example, which begins and ends with a male cricket captain who can exercise his own judgement and tell the coach that he is up next when another wicket falls down during the world cup final. Thus representation of men and women athletes in sports movies, even at the turn of the century, is different. Again, both the movies concentrate less on the problem of Indian women’s hockey and Indian women’s wrestling and are more interested in telling the unaccomplished tales of Kabir Khan and Mahavir Singh Phogat. Thus in all the above mentioned movies, there is almost no scope for gender equality and empowerment. More than concentrating on the feelings and views of the women athletes, the directors tell stories of injured male egos which need to be nourished by feminine laurels, care and sacrifice. These are extremely gendered representations with little or no scope for

empowerment, for the women characters bask in the reflected glories of their male care takers. To attain trophies of one's own, women characters in sports movies in Bollywood need a cinematic overhaul so that they challenge and question 'male gaze' and at the same time refuse to bear the burden of the male lack and loss. Possibility of gender equality and empowerment would perhaps arise through an understanding of the psychology and cultural experiences of women in cinema that challenge and question their subject formation.

#### IV

Interestingly enough, while women directors are yet to make sports movies, male directors of Bollywood sports movies have inaugurated the process of reorienting women characters. In *Dil Bole Hadippa!* (2009) and *Mary Kom* (2016) directors Anurag Singh and Omung Kumar respectively have left no stone unturned in challenging the mould and hence have inaugurated what could be called counter cinema in Bollywood sports movies. The uniqueness of these two counter cinemas is that they are not extreme feminist in nature. In her essay 'Women's Cinema as Counter Cinema' (1973), Claire Johnston argues that feminist films are counter cinema, for they have potentials to posit an alternative to the stereotypical presentations and ideological constructions of women. The male film makers have shown that their movies too can work against ideological domination that dominate Bollywood sports movies and address issues of gender equality. For this purpose, the male filmmakers have integrated thematic alternatives and experimental techniques to encourage the audience to see the other side of the coin.

In order to complement his vision with the form of his movie, Anurag Singh in *Dil Bole Hadippa!* employs the technique of masquerade which help him to challenge the dominant male gaze operative in movies mentioned above. According to British feminist film theorist, Claire Johnston (*Anne of the Indies*, 1951), female masquerade signifies not only a masking but also un-masking in the deconstructive sense of exposing and criticising. The American Feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane explores the notion further in 'Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator' (1982). She opines that masquerade is not cross-dressing; on the contrary, a feminine mask, an alternative masculine position. She argues that the female spectators watching the female object of desire on screen gets consumed by it, either by emotional over-involvement or by taking the heroine as her own narcissistic object of desire, instead of consuming; but a male spectator enjoys a distance between himself and the object of desire. The lack of distance can be avoided by manufacturing a distance from the image by reading the onscreen image of her likeness as a

masquerade. Thus the female spectator can create the necessary distance between herself and the screen image. Anurag Sinha slightly moderates this technique suggested by feminist film theorists. He makes her female character wear a mask to create a distance both between the two versions of the woman character on screen, the feminine and the disguised, and between the spectators and disguised image. He thus leaves scope for the viewers to critique the 'image' of woman, if necessary.

When Veera, a cricket crazy Punjabi girl who wishes to play in the Cricket World Cup in *Dil Bole Hadippa!*, disguises herself as a guy, Veer, the female actor gets an opportunity to switch between the two roles to suit her purpose. Audience see Veera, both as a girl who works in a nautanki and dances with an arrogant Shanno, as well as Veer, disguised as a cricket player. This Veera is a possible alternative to the represented femininity in Bollywood sports movies. The distance created helps the spectator to comprehend the difficulty of being a woman in a man's world. This, for example, is shown when despite having talent Veera is not allowed to enter the audition because players have to be male. This, however, can be a director's tool to justify the disguise, for that would function as an effective weapon to break stereotype or unmasking for exposing and criticising as Johnston claims. It is this disguise that also helps Veera to protect herself from adverse situations. For example, when Rohan, the coach, accidentally finds Veera in the dressing room, Veera makes up the story of being the sister of Veer. As Rohan falls in love with Veera, Veera shuffles between the roles of Veer and Veera, baring the male spectator from his visual pleasures and the female spectators from getting consumed by the object of desire. Veera's mask falls off only after cementing her position in the team and so even after the revelation of her identity she becomes an irreplaceable member of the team for the coach. No wonder the coach now knowingly asks Veera to put on her mask, for now winning for the village team is more important than her feminine status. Not only her talent is recognised in this big male world of cricket but at the same time the mask helped her to enjoy the alternative masculine position. Thus when she reveals her identity she can appeal for the recognition of talent irrespective of male female divide. Though the appeal, talented woman must be allowed to play in the men's team, is utopian what probably the director and his team wanted to establish is that women athletes require an understanding and support from their partners and not patriarchal control and regimentation to achieve their desired goals. If Veera needs a coach to learn the nuances of cricket, the coach also needs Veera (disguised as Veer) to win the match for the village. This interdependence of the male and female unit is the hallmark of counter cinema.

In a similar vein Mary could come back and become national champion after a hiatus in *Mary Kom* because her intense determination is well complemented by her husband's constant support and encouragement. She leaves behind her twins and trains herself, for now, in her postpartum phase, she requires to work doubly hard. In order to concentrate only on shaping up, her husband insisted that she needs to go back to the Academy, for at home she is distracted by her twins. To say this is not to suggest that she ignores motherhood; rather she keeps faith in her husband's repeated assurance that he will take care of them in her absence. As Mary fights the most important game of her life, Onler travels to Chandigarh to get the baby, diagnosed with a heart block, operated. We see a promising football player turned coach setting his priorities and adjusting his life to give space to her wife to regain her lost pride. If we salute Mary for her unimaginable achievement – from being the elder daughter of a poor paddy farmer in Manipur to winning an Olympic medal – we also thumb up at Onler, for keeping up to his words. Thus unlike the *Chak De* cricketing couple whose relationship died in the tassel between two egos, here we see a sportsman valuing and understanding the mental condition and physical requirements of another.

Whereas *Chak De India* and *Dangal* show the crushing of feminine traits to achieve a greater goal, *Mary Kom* votes for the possible maintenance of both. Unlike her boxing coach who opines that a player must surrender her happiness, time and practically everything to boxing, Omung Kumar shows that life for Mary is not restricted within the boxing ring; she looks after her family, does household chores and is very proud of the woman she is. During a fight with her father, she categorically tells him that he may call her anything but not a man. Later on, while applying a tricolour nail polish at night, she informs her husband that there is no fixed time for girls to apply nail polish. The spectators are shocked to see her decision of getting married at the peak of her career, thereby giving a free reign to her desires and feelings. That a sports personality has a private life of her own is emphatically stressed in *Mary Kom*. In fact, the film begins with a pregnant Mary and then we are shown her accidental discovery of a glove and her gradual inclination towards boxing. This way of telling the story of Mary Kom is enough proof of the importance the director gives to both the private and professional spheres of a sport personality. Thus, on the one hand we as spectators, see a national champion grappling with motherhood as she confuses between her twins and over feeds one of them. On the other we also see the boxer Mary, critiquing the Federation, protesting the lack of basic facilities and regional bias, reacting adversely to petty politics at camps, getting banned for misbehaving, suffering while submitting the apology letter and rigorously training. What ooze out is her mental strength and her supreme

determination to regain the lost glory. In contrast to *Apne* where the national champion gives up boxing and becomes a businessman because boxing has no future in India and *Dangal* where Mahavir takes up a petty job because he was forced to, *Mary Kom*'s Mary counter such ignominious passivity and refuses to do a the job of a Hawaldar. Rather she trains up herself for a comeback. Whereas Baldev in *Apne* makes fun of his wife and jokes that he can make a housewife like her a boxer, Onler in *Mary Kom* makes an astonishing promise before marriage that he will not be an impediment to his wife's boxing career.

## V

*Dil Bole Hadippa!* and *Mary Kom* are counter cinema that subvert the patriarchal viewpoints and break through the ruling ideology. Thus they provide a space for a cinema to be born which challenges the basic assumptions of mainstream sports movies and are politically and aesthetically radical. It is the woman who becomes co-active with the man on screen. The active/man, passive/woman binary gets dissolved, with the man making space for the woman to exist in the cinematic space. This is done to restore the visibility of woman's experience along with that of the man on the screen. Such women hardly take into consideration male lack or loss and give free reign to individual zeal for the game. As counter cinemas, they further destroy the visual erotic pleasure of the spectators, liberate a woman athlete from her looked-at-ness and accommodate the woman's point of view which, again, is not an essential feminist point of view. Moreover, the approach to the issue of women's empowerment is more holistic in counter cinema than the classic ones. These counter sports movies show that woman's empowerment is not simply a feminist concern; they highlight that gender equality is possibly achieved through male encouragement and support along with feminine consciousness. Thus, by extension, they also voice for the reconstruction of male-female relation where there will be hardly any watertight compartments of labour. In tune with the views of the socialist feminists, Bollywood filmmakers of sports movies, therefore, are trying to insert equilibrium in man-woman relationship in their portrayal of women characters. True it's an uphill task, for there is every chance of a box-office massacre, as it happened in the case of *Dil Bole Hadippa!*. But Priyanka Chopra's National Award for *Mary Kom* is a silver lining for the mass acceptance of counter cinema.

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