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Reversing the Myth: Male Coach Behind the Success of Female Athletes in Dangal

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ABSTRACT

"Dangal" serves as a biographical portrayal of real-life female athletes Geetha Phogat and Babitha Phogat, ostensibly designed to raise awareness about gender equality and inequality. Mahavir Phogat, driven by a mission to secure a gold medal for the country, compels his daughters into submission. This analysis critically examines the film's depiction of a father's ambition to mold his daughters into world-class athletes. The narrative attributes the success of the women to the father's selfless efforts, highlighting how the male mentor, coach, nation, and filmmakers benefit from the achievements of the female athletes. Key themes include Dangal, biopic, women wrestlers, women athletes, Haryana, myth, women empowerment, subjugation, and gender discrimination.

Keywords: *Dangal, Women Athletes, Gender Equality, Father's Ambition and Female Empowerment.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Biopics recycle the life of famous individuals. The success and fame of Indian athletes in the national and international level has drawn the attention of the audience and hence of the film industry. The exceptional performance and the victory of women athletes including Mary Kom, Sania Mirza, Saina Nehwal, P.V. Sindhu, Mithali Raj, Hima Das, Tomar sisters, and Phogat sisters have paved the way to make biopics on these achievers. The filmmakers claim that life of such empowered woman subjects is chosen to inspire the women of the nation. Their triumph over the obstacles on the way to their achievement is intended to be imitable. *Dangal*, one of the highest grossing Indian biopics is a celluloid representation of the real-life wrestler-sisters, Geetha Phogat and Babitha Phogat. They have made India proud by winning medals in the Commonwealth, and the Olympic Games. The real-life based narrative of Phogat siblings ostensibly is about their father Mahavir Singh Phogat and his dangal with his failures.

II. DILEMMA OF THE ISSUE

The narrative projects how the naïve Geetha and Babitha under the rigorous training of their “haanikarak babu”(dangerous father) made their mark overcoming the challenges of patriarchal

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society, sport and nation. The biopic reiterates the myth that women cannot succeed without the guidance of male. Behind the success of women athletes there has to be male coach. The paper critically analyses how the biopic foregrounds the efforts of the male mentor behind the success of women wrestlers rendering the women and her hard work to invisibility.

Phogats are the natives of Balali village in the state of Haryana.² The state records the lowest sex ratio. Issues of crime against women; female feticide, female infanticide, high rate of maternal mortality, and girls' drop out of schools are rising in number every year. Sohini Chatterjee observes that "Haryana's identity, and its self-image, as a powerful, virile state is secured through how well it can invisibilize women...."

The ultra-masculine culture of the state has a bearing on the lives of the Phogats. Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler, hopes for a male child to accomplish his dream of winning gold medal for India in wrestling. His preference for the male child to carry forward his legacy of wrestling reflects the socially sanctioned gender biased practices of the Haryanvi society. Only a son would redeem his failures by actualizing a father's dream.

Amir Khan during the promotion of the biopic said: "He(Mahavir Singh Phogat) ...was content with his daughters, he also broke all social norms by believing in them, investing in them, raising them to be wrestlers in their own right rather than merely bringing them up to marry them off." ³ The claims of the filmmakers that the biopic celebrates women empowerment instead conforms to the "masculinist hegemonic practices". Mahavir begets four daughters in a row. He stands out because unlike his male counterparts he does not commit female feticide or infanticide, instead he aborts the gold winning mission for nation. He endorses the myth that a girl is a responsibility, to be m/carried off. She cannot shoulder the responsibility of bringing honour/glory to the father, family, community, state, and nation. His wife, Daya holds herself responsible for not being able to give her husband a son who would play macho game, wrestling, who would realize the masculine dream of success, and who would aspire to contribute to the nation. Like her counterparts she has no dreams, plans or preferences either for herself or children. The gender inequality in the household of Phogats reveals the socio-cultural norms of Haryanvi patrilineal society.⁴

² Sohini Chatterjee, 'Is Ghoonghat The Identity Of Haryana? Patriarchal Control Over A Woman's Body & Sexuality' (*Feminism in India*, 24 July 2017) <<https://feminismindia.com/2017/07/25/ghoonghat-identity-haryana/>> accessed 15 November 2023.

³ 'Aamir Khan Interview: The "Dangal" Star Talks About Raising Awareness – IndieWire' <<https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/aamir-khan-interview-dangal-bollywood-1201761472/>> accessed 15 November 2023.

⁴ 'Hegemony - Herrmann - Major Reference Works - Wiley Online Library' <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118955567.wbieoc094>> accessed 15 November 2023.

The conventional family of Phogats comes to terms with what fate had in store for them. Mahavir, an unfortunate father of four daughters suffers humiliation. He has to compromise with his dreams and passion. In a pivotal scene where Geetha and Babitha have beaten up boys bulkier than them for teasing, Mahavir is awestruck and asks the girls how they punched the boys. The girls demonstrate their moves on their cousin, Omkar. The incident enlightens Mahavir. He confesses that all these days he believed that only a son can win gold, but it never occurred to him that gold is gold whether a boy wins or a girl it doesn't matter. He claims, "... inke khoon main pehalwaanni-ai...". He owns them as his flesh and blood once the girls prove that they have inherent talent for the bout and can fulfill his dreams.

The episode rekindles Mahavir's desire to see India win gold medal. He enunciates that Geetha and Babitha would do just wrestling. Daya is apprehensive. She presupposes the objections from the society, monetary problems, body damages that can impair the chances of their marriage. Her concerns as to the fear of the society and anxiety about the marriage of girls mirror how women "appropriate an active involvement in their own subjugation".⁵ Mahavir makes a pact with his wife according to which she has to bear with his project of training girls for a year and if it does not work out he would bear the defeat for lifetime. The relatives blame Daya for all the idiosyncrasies of Mahavir. They say if you had given him a son he wouldn't have thought of unprecedented act of training his daughters to become wrestlers. The male dominance thus secures the consent from women who undermine their own interests and consolidate male hegemony in the process. If not for the incident the scion would marry off his daughters. It was purely accidental that the thought dawned on Phogat.

The discovery that all he needed was an agile athlete for wrestling transforms him from a father/bapu into a stern wrestling coach. Their hair is cut, dress code is changed, training is scheduled from early mornings to late nights, diet is modified and monitored, mockery and above all mother also joins hands with the tyrannical father. The father's dominance perturbs the young girls. Their resistance is subdued again. A friend of the girls who is about to be married enlightens them. She states that unlike my father your father has given you the stature of progeny. He is fighting the world for you to see you successful. The rhetoric renders them powerless to critically investigate their state. The façade of empowering women narrative falls off when the *Dangal* pits women against women to establish male hierarchy. The event substantiates victimization. A victim of patriarchy a girl who is about to sacrifice her life to keep father's honour indoctrinates her friends to uncritically submit to father's plan of action.

⁵ Andrew Herrmann, 'Hegemony' [2017] International Encyclopedia of Organizational Communication <<https://www.academia.edu/33291421/Hegemony>> accessed 15 November 2023.

The discourse gives a direction to the disgruntled girls. It constructs dutiful daughters following the footsteps of the bride-to-be friend.

Nitish Tiwari, the director of the film, answering to a question in an interview said: “If you look at the success stories of all the great sportspersons, there is either a father or a mother who pushed them towards that sport. You may not like it at the time, but later, you have your parents to thank.”⁶ This kind of belief system could be responsible for the country not winning as many medals as it is expected to. Ritika Phogat, a 17 year old wrestler from Phogat clan committed suicide for losing a match. Her death speaks loads about of pressure. Imposition of parents’ dreams on children is akin to taming them to servility. Discussing the sports biopics, *Chak De* and *Dangal*, Antara Mukherjee points out that both the films are distorted “tales of male lack and loss, the burden of which is bore by women athletes.”⁷ The siblings own their father’s dream as a token of gratitude for the favour Phogat had done by owning them in spite of their being daughters.⁸

An attempt is made to foster national feelings through apparently empowering real-life story of women. Probed deeply, it comes off as highly dramatized narrative of devoted daughters that is consciously served for the consumption of national polity. Phogat reveres both the sport wrestling and the nation. His vision is to win a gold medal for India in wrestling. He is positive about his passion and his patriotic mission. The narrative reengages with the “honour” of family, community, and the nation along with other significations. His girls bring him and the nation laurels. Mahavir is not patriarchal because whatever he did was done in the name of nation. Nationalisation and emotionalisation of the narrative insulates it against rendering it gender hierarchical. The biopic aggrandizes the Phogats for their contribution to the sports and nation. It advocates that women who passively endure male domination will be rewarded. The father and the nation overcome the lack and revitalize with the victories of their women in sports.⁹

Dangal, a saga of woman emancipation, reinforces the negative gender stereotypes. The subjects are trapped, coerced, controlled, trained, tamed, and gendered. Dunja Antunovic points out that “Representations of sportswomen have reinforced harmful gender stereotypes, trivialized athletes’ accomplishments or, in the very best case, presented mixed messages about female athletes’ competence.” Geetha and Babitha win if they follow their father’s advice and

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ ‘Q&A: Nitesh Tiwari on “Dangal” and Humour | Reuters’ <<https://www.reuters.com/article/dangal-nitesh-tiwariidUKKBN14A11P>> accessed 15 November 2023.

⁸ ‘postScriptum – An Interdisciplinary Journal of Literary Studies ISSN: 2456-7507’ <<https://postscriptum.co.in/>> accessed 15 November 2023.

⁹ ‘Q&A: Nitesh Tiwari on “Dangal” and Humour | Reuters’ (n 7).

loose if they ignore.¹⁰ The competence of the women athletes is negated and the influence of the father is manifested. They are shown to be disoriented if the father is not around. They are indecisive, dependent, always need assistance, exclusively from Mahavir. The real-life coach, P.R. Sondhi commented on why Mahavir was kept out of the CWG camp, “While we salute Mahavir for what he has done for the sport and for the society, we could not let him run things his way for the good of the girls.”¹¹ Sondhi acknowledges Mahavir’s zeal for wrestling but also identifies overhauling presence and influence of the father. The coach and the father contest for the credit. Women athletes are not born but made by male mentors.

The reel Mahavir Phogat, Amir Khan occupies most part of the screen time in the biopic just as Mahavir in the real-life. He is in every frame of the movie. *Dangal* depicts Mahavir’s life and his vision. The gender politics in casting is blatant.¹² Less known or debutantes are cast around Amir Khan to validate the predominance of Mahavir. During the bouts the camera focuses less on the athletes and more on Amir’s reactions and instructions. The coach is fictionalized to be a baddie. The actors who played the part of siblings depend essentially on Amir. He guides them through their fitness regime and acting workshops. During the promotion for the film the female crew parroted that the biopic is meant to raise awareness and that their co-star Amir helped them to perform better. The biopic belies the claims both of the Mahavir Phogat and of the filmmaker that it is a saga of women empowerment.

III. CONCLUSION

Legitimizing the authenticity of the film, Geetha Phogat told *Filmfare*, “There is no question of the film not being close to my life. While watching the film, we felt our life was rewind and then the video was played out on the screen.” The retelling of their journey appealed to the phogats and to a large number of audience and many might have believed it to be real and therefore inspirational. The perpetrator of gender discrimination is loved and respected because the exertion was not for his pride but to bring honour to the nation. He trained the girls to be world-class athletes. What did girls do? They did nothing but follow his instincts and instructions. The male mentor, coach, nation and filmmakers live-off the women athletes’ achievements.

¹⁰ Dunja Antunovic, “‘Turned into the Women’s Journal’: Representation of Sportswomen in Hungary’s Sports Magazine” (2019) 54 *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 63.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² “‘Dangal Is Not Real’: Geeta Phogat’s India Coach Says Why Mahavir Had to Be ‘Banned’” (*Hindustan Times*, 29 December 2016) <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/other-sports/dangal-not-real-geeta-phogat-s-india-coach-says-why-mahavir-had-to-be-banned/story-FHsx2qwx7WT1MrX9XshhM.html>> accessed 15 November 2023.

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