



Empowering Narratives: A Feminist Critique of Physicality, Identity, and Representation in the Hindi Film *Mary Kom*

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Abstract

This paper, *Empowering Narratives: A Feminist Critique of Physicality, Identity, and Representation in the Hindi Film Mary Kom*, examines the biographical drama through a feminist lens, emphasizing its portrayal of gender, regional identity, and physicality. The film highlights Mary Kom's journey as a boxer from Manipur, exploring her defiance of societal norms and regional stereotypes. By integrating perspectives from Physical Education and English Literature, this study investigates themes such as women's physical strength, the struggles of motherhood, and North Eastern identity within a patriarchal and culturally homogenized context. Using feminist theories like intersectionality and embodiment, the analysis critiques the film's depiction of female empowerment, maternal sacrifice, and commodification of identity in Bollywood. While *Mary Kom* challenges gender norms, it also reveals the systemic barriers female athletes face. This interdisciplinary critique contributes to discourses on representation in Indian cinema, advocating for authentic, inclusive narratives.

Keywords: Feminist critique of Indian cinema, Representation of women in sports films, Bollywood and North Eastern identity, Gender stereotypes in sports media, *Mary Kom* movie feminist, Women athletes in Indian, Patriarchy and maternal sacrifice, Regional identity in Bollywood, Physicality and gender representation, Boxing, Sports, Biopic.

1. Introduction

The representation of women in sports within Indian cinema is an increasingly critical area within feminist discourse. The Hindi film *Mary Kom* (2014), directed by Omung Kumar, is a biographical drama that narrates the journey of Mary Kom, a champion boxer from Manipur, who defied gender norms and regional stereotypes to achieve global success. The film not only celebrates her sporting achievements but also highlights the unique struggles she faces as a woman from India's North East—a region often marginalized and stereotyped in mainstream media.

This research paper explores the intersection of physicality, identity, and gender representation in *Mary Kom* through a feminist lens. By combining perspectives from Physical Education and English Literature, particularly North Eastern literature, this study critically analyzes how the film portrays women's physical strength, regional identity, and the broader cultural implications of these portrayals. Key questions include: How does *Mary Kom* represent the physical and emotional challenges faced by women athletes? How does the film negotiate Mary Kom's identity as a North Eastern woman within the national narrative? And how do these representations align with feminist discourses on empowerment?

Through content analysis, comparative literary insights, and feminist theoretical frameworks, this paper argues that while *Mary Kom* challenges some traditional gender norms, it also reveals tensions in the portrayal of regional identities and the commodification of female empowerment in popular media.

2. Literature Review

Feminist Theories in Sports: Previous studies highlight the marginalization of women in sports, often focusing on how media representations contribute to gender stereotypes. According to Messner (2002) in *Taking the Field: Women, Men, and Sports*, sports films often emphasize masculinity, sidelining or objectifying female athletes. Theories of embodiment and physicality within feminist studies call for narratives that celebrate women's strength without reducing them to gendered tropes.

Representation of North Eastern Identities: Scholars like Sanjib Baruah, in his work *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality* (1999), discuss the frequent marginalization and stereotyping of North Eastern communities in Indian media. North Eastern literature, particularly works by authors like Mamang Dai and Tamsula Ao, explores the complexities of regional identity that are often overlooked or simplified in mainstream narratives. These misrepresentations contribute to broader social and cultural alienation, making the portrayal of North Eastern figures like Mary Kom significant.

Women in Sports Media: Research on women in sports media, such as Cahn's (1994) *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Women's Sport*, highlights recurring patterns of underrepresentation and stereotypical

portrayals. These studies emphasize the role of media in either reinforcing or challenging societal norms regarding gender and sport, stressing the importance of accurate portrayals to encourage greater participation and recognition of women athletes.

3. Theoretical Framework

Feminist Lens – Intersectionality and Representation Theory: Intersectionality, introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), is critical in analyzing how different aspects of identity—such as gender, ethnicity, and region—intersect to shape experiences. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of *Mary Kom*'s story, where her identity as a woman, an athlete, and a North Eastern Indian converge.

Cultural Studies Approach: Cultural studies, as articulated by Stuart Hall (1997) in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, provide a lens to critique how popular media shapes and reflects societal attitudes. In analyzing *Mary Kom*, this approach allows for a critical examination of how regional and gender identities are negotiated within mainstream Bollywood cinema.

Physical Education Perspectives: The portrayal of athleticism and physicality in sports films often reflects broader societal attitudes toward women's bodies. This section examines how *Mary Kom* engages with these themes, analyzing the representation of physical strength and the challenges that female athletes face in traditionally male-dominated fields.

4. Analysis of Physicality and Motherhood in *Mary Kom*

Mary Kom's journey as an athlete is deeply intertwined with her role as a mother, adding layers of emotional complexity to her character. The film captures the often-overlooked challenges of motherhood, depicting *Mary*'s struggles to balance her professional aspirations with the demands of family life. These portrayals reflect broader societal issues regarding the expectations placed on women to excel both as mothers and professionals.

Suffering of Motherhood and Athletic Ambition: One of the most poignant aspects of *Mary Kom* is its portrayal of the suffering associated with motherhood, particularly the physical and emotional sacrifices *Mary* makes to continue her boxing career. In one memorable scene, *Mary* is seen training with her baby strapped to her back, underscoring the challenges of balancing her professional aspirations with her responsibilities as a mother. This image powerfully conveys the societal pressure on women to prioritize their familial roles over their personal ambitions.

The film further emphasizes *Mary*'s internal conflict through dialogues like, "Maine apne baccho ko kabhi samay nahi diya" ("I have never given enough time to my children"), reflecting her guilt and the emotional burden that many working mothers experience. This suffering is not just physical but deeply emotional, highlighting the often-invisible labor of motherhood that is rarely acknowledged in narratives about successful women athletes.

Physical and Emotional Toll of Motherhood: The film portrays the physical toll that motherhood takes on *Mary*'s body, impacting her training and performance. After giving birth to twins, *Mary*'s struggle to return to peak physical condition is depicted through intense training montages that are both inspiring and heart-wrenching. These scenes highlight the physical realities of postpartum recovery and the additional hurdles that female athletes face compared to their male counterparts.

One particularly striking moment occurs when *Mary* collapses in the ring during a practice match, overwhelmed by the physical demands of her training. Her coach's frustration and the judgmental stares from onlookers amplify her sense of inadequacy, reflecting the broader societal expectation that mothers should seamlessly juggle their professional and personal roles without showing vulnerability.

Motherhood as a Double-Edged Sword: The film portrays motherhood as a double-edged sword—while it is a source of strength and motivation for *Mary*, it also becomes a site of conflict where her dedication to her sport is continually questioned. This is evident in a scene where *Mary*'s husband, Onler, tells her, "Tum bas ek boxer nahi ho, tum maa ho" ("You are not just a boxer, you are a mother"), a reminder of the conflicting societal expectations that women face. This line encapsulates the broader cultural narrative that often positions motherhood in opposition to personal ambition, particularly in demanding fields like sports.

Comparison with Feminist Theory on Motherhood: From a feminist perspective, *Mary Kom* offers a critical commentary on the glorification of maternal sacrifice in patriarchal societies. As Adrienne Rich discusses in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), the societal expectation for women to prioritize motherhood above all else often becomes a mechanism of control, limiting their opportunities for self-fulfillment. In *Mary Kom*, this theme is evident as *Mary* grapples with the guilt and societal pressure to conform to traditional maternal roles, even as she strives to achieve her own dreams.

The portrayal of Mary's suffering as a mother and athlete resonates with the feminist critique that women's pain and sacrifices are often romanticized rather than questioned. While the film celebrates Mary's perseverance, it also highlights the emotional labor and invisible suffering that accompany her journey—a reality faced by many women who strive to balance career and family.

Impact on Public Perceptions: The film's portrayal of Mary's motherhood challenges conventional narratives by presenting a realistic depiction of the struggles faced by working mothers in demanding professions. By showing the dual burdens of motherhood and athletic ambition, Mary Kom contributes to a broader conversation about the need for societal support and recognition of the unique challenges faced by women. However, as feminist sports scholar Anne Hall (1996) argues in "Feminism and Sporting Bodies: Essays on Theory and Practice," such portrayals must be careful not to glorify suffering as a necessary path to success but rather as a critique of the systemic barriers that force women into these painful choices.

5. Representation of North Eastern Identity

Mary Kom negotiates Mary's identity as a North Eastern woman within the broader Indian context, often using her regional background as a narrative tool to highlight her outsider status. The film touches upon cultural markers such as language and traditional attire, but it also occasionally slips into tokenism, using Mary's regional identity as an exotic backdrop rather than engaging deeply with the socio-political realities of the North East.

Comparative Analysis with North Eastern Literature: Comparing the film's portrayal with literary works like Temsula Ao's *These Hills Called Home* and Mamang Dai's *The Legends of Pensam* reveals a disparity in authenticity. These literary works explore themes of resilience, identity, and marginalization with a depth that the film often glosses over, focusing instead on a more homogenized portrayal of struggle and triumph.

Stereotypes and Authenticity in Mainstream Media: The film attempts to highlight Mary's regional identity, but often simplifies her background. For example, dialogues like "Main Mary Kom hoon, Manipur se" ("I am Mary Kom, from Manipur") serve to assert her identity but do little to unpack the layered socio-cultural context of her home state. Critics like Dolly Kikon (2015) argue that such representations in Bollywood reduce complex regional narratives to simplistic markers of identity, failing to capture the lived realities of North Eastern communities.

6. Narrative and Feminist Critique of the Film

Empowerment, Resistance, and Resilience: The narrative of Mary Kom positions her as a figure of empowerment, showcasing her resilience against various odds. The film's portrayal of Mary's defiance, such as her decision to return to boxing after motherhood despite societal pressure, resonates with feminist themes of agency and resistance. In a powerful scene, Mary declares, "Mujhe medal jeetna hai, sirf apne liye nahi, poore desh ke liye" ("I want to win the medal, not just for myself, but for the entire country"), emphasizing her role as a trailblazer and a national icon. This framing positions Mary not only as a personal success but also as a symbol of broader societal change, challenging the traditional patriarchal structures that limit women's potential.

Portrayal as a Feminist Icon: While Mary Kom portrays its protagonist as a feminist icon, it also risks oversimplifying her identity into a symbolic narrative of empowerment without fully exploring her complexities as a character. The film often leans on tropes that romanticize her sacrifices, emphasizing her maternal strength and resilience in ways that can overshadow her individual struggles and triumphs as a sportsperson. This simplification reflects a broader trend in media representations of women, where complex female characters are often distilled into singular narratives of strength or victimhood.

Analysis of Narrative Techniques: The film uses a variety of narrative techniques, such as flashbacks, training montages, and intimate family moments, to construct a multifaceted portrayal of Mary. Flashbacks to Mary's early life and her training highlight the roots of her fighting spirit, while montages of her intense workouts emphasize her physical prowess. The intimate moments with her family, particularly those depicting her role as a mother, add depth to her character but also reinforce the film's central theme of maternal sacrifice. These techniques contribute to the film's feminist potential but also highlight the tension between celebrating Mary's independence and reinforcing traditional gender roles.

Critique of Gendered Storytelling: Despite its feminist overtones, Mary Kom occasionally falls into gendered storytelling clichés, particularly in its depiction of motherhood as inherently conflicting with professional ambition. While the film does an admirable job of highlighting the unique challenges faced by female athletes, it also reinforces the narrative that women's success comes at the expense of their personal and familial happiness. This portrayal aligns with the broader cultural narrative that positions women's achievements as secondary to their roles as caregivers, which can inadvertently perpetuate the very stereotypes the film seeks to challenge.

7. Discussion

The discussion synthesizes the findings, exploring the broader implications of the film's portrayal of Mary Kom. It examines how the film contributes to public discourse on women in sports, motherhood, and regional representation, highlighting the potential for cinema to influence societal attitudes.

Broader Implications: The representation of Mary Kom in the film serves as a reminder of the power of media in shaping public perceptions of women athletes. By centering a female athlete from a marginalized region, the film challenges mainstream narratives and brings attention to the often-overlooked stories of North Eastern India. However, the film's tendency to romanticize maternal sacrifice and the commodification of female empowerment also underscores the ongoing challenges of achieving authentic and diverse portrayals of women.

Influence on Public Perceptions of Women in Sports: Films like Mary Kom play a crucial role in inspiring and empowering young women, particularly those interested in pursuing careers in sports. By depicting the struggles and triumphs of a female athlete, the film contributes to a broader conversation about the need for greater representation and support for women in sports. However, as noted by Shohini Ghosh (2010) in her analysis of Bollywood's portrayal of women, it is essential that such portrayals move beyond individual stories to address the systemic barriers that women face in sports, including gender discrimination, lack of access to resources, and societal pressures.

Challenges of Regional Representation: While the film highlights Mary's North Eastern identity, it often does so in a superficial manner, focusing on her distinct appearance and regional background without fully engaging with the socio-political realities of Manipur and the broader North Eastern context. This partial representation reflects a broader trend in Indian cinema, where regional identities are often used as exotic backdrops rather than fully developed narratives. To achieve more authentic representations, it is crucial for filmmakers to engage with regional stories in their complexity, incorporating the voices and perspectives of those from these communities.

The Need for Structural Change: The portrayal of Mary Kom's struggles as a mother and athlete underscores the broader societal need for structural changes that support working women. This includes advocating for policies that provide greater support for mothers in the workplace, increased funding for women's sports, and societal recognition of the unique challenges faced by female athletes. As feminist scholars argue, the burden of balancing career and family should not rest solely on individual women but should be addressed through systemic changes that promote equality and inclusivity.

8. Conclusion

The portrayal of Mary Kom in the film offers a complex, layered view of the challenges faced by women who balance motherhood with demanding careers. By highlighting the emotional and physical toll of motherhood, Mary Kom contributes to the feminist discourse on the invisibility of maternal suffering in narratives of success. The film ultimately underscores the need for more supportive structures that recognize and alleviate the burdens placed on women, challenging the romanticized notion of maternal sacrifice.

This research emphasizes the importance of critically examining media portrayals of women, particularly in roles that defy traditional gender norms. As cinema continues to evolve, it is essential that stories like Mary Kom's are told with depth, authenticity, and a commitment to portraying the full spectrum of women's experiences. Future research should explore other sports films and their impact on societal perceptions of gender and region, with a focus on how these portrayals influence young women's participation in sports.

Ultimately, Mary Kom serves as both a milestone and a mirror, reflecting the aspirations, struggles, and stereotypes that continue to shape the narrative of women in sports. As cinema evolves, it is crucial that stories like Mary Kom's are told with greater authenticity and sensitivity, ensuring that the empowerment portrayed on screen resonates with the real experiences of women everywhere.

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