

Muscles and Margins: Embodied Femininity and Athleticism in Indian Screen Culture

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Abstract

Indian sports cinema operates within a continuum of resistance and containment, where female athleticism is both celebrated and regulated. This paper investigates the representation of female athletic bodies in Indian sports cinema through a comparative analysis of the Hindi film *Dangal* (2016) and the Malayalam film *Godha* (2017). Situating these films within broader cultural and theoretical frameworks, the study explores how gender, discipline, and agency are negotiated through the cinematic portrayal of women athletes. Drawing on Michel Foucault's concept of the "docile body," the paper argues that sports films construct the female body as a site of both control and empowerment, shaped by regimes of discipline, surveillance, and patriarchal authority. While *Dangal* presents a narrative where female empowerment emerges through coercive patriarchal discipline, *Godha* offers a contrasting model of self-motivated agency and autonomy. These films play a significant role in reshaping public perceptions of gender and sports, while also reflecting the persistent tensions between empowerment and ideological control.

Keywords: Femininity, Sports Cinema, Discipline, Gender Performativity

Films in India have served greater purpose than entertainment. It has had strong narrative on any thing that touches the lives of the people. Sports films on the other hand have long occupied a very important space in the scenario globally functioning as strong narratives displaying the cultural texts that shape and reflect social values. Traditionally if we, explore the evolution of films especially sports films, they have been dominated by male protagonists glorifying them and inspiring many. It has always managed to celebrate ideals of masculinity such as strength, endurance, discipline and national pride. The formation of the athletic body as a site of heroism aligns with individual achievement with collective national identity.

In the past two decades the popularity of Indian sports films have grown reasonably well. The quality of coaching and a slight increase in the basic facilities of Indian athletes have generated an interest in the youth to pursue their careers in the field of sports. The interest in sports have move beyond cricket centric narratives and have moved on to sports like hockey, wrestling, boxing and athletics. Films like Chak De India, Mary Com, Bhaag Milkha Bhaag, Chandu Champion have given priorities to other sports as well. Recently there has been a shift from the male centric sports films to female centric films gaining much commercial success in the recent decades.

Female athletes have been gaining increased prominence over the past two decades inspiring an entire generation and the parents have grown more apprehensive in sending their girls for formal sports training to academies. In the cinematic landscape Wrestling and its popularity has grown tremendously well in the fields of sports. Film like Dangal, Godha and to some extent Sultan have been particularly instrumental in bringing the sports narratives into the ordinary households of India. They have been a crucial transition in Indian cinema where women are not mere catalysts in the life of successful men by the change themselves. The bodies have become central protagonists and their performance make the central narrative.

Nevertheless, the representation of female athletes in Indian sports cinema has always been problematic and deeply complex. It is contradictory to the concept of representation. The films often challenge male hegemony present in the society challenging the traditional gender norms by showcasing women, in roles that are physically demanding. These roles focus on the female bodies as symbols of strength, which earlier used to be sites of passivity, domesticity and vulnerability.

The empowerment of women is always compromised for the sake of existing patriarchal structures in the media and film industry. Female athletes presented in films who represent the real struggles are often subjected to reassert and fight for the control over their bodies and identities. Their achievements are often subverted to the relationship they share with the male authority in their lives who could be father, husband, coach or their romantic partner. Sometimes their narratives are redirected toward domesticity, motherhood or emotional fulfilment leading to the societal acknowledgment of their domesticity. The society gives the nod only when the female body gives feminine attributes along with their athleticism. Even though sports films are directed to find a new voice for the female body, it has also proven crucial for the containment of the same.

Hindi film *Dangal* and Malayalam film *Godha* have representative of such ideologies and narratives where the analysis of the athletic body received in two different cultures are scrutinized. By examining the portrayal for each film representations argue that female athletic body in Indian Sports cinema operates within the continuum of control and agency. These films signify an important step toward inclusive representation. They also reflect on the persistent influence of the patriarchal and ideological frameworks in shaping embodied femininity.

Such films have influenced a large mass of audience beyond borders representing the cultural and social domains. Sports films have proved to be one of the mediums which regularly shapes public perceptions of gender and athleticism. They have normalized the presence of

females in the field of sports which has inspired participation and challenging societal prejudices. But at the same time, they are not devoid of societal expectations that a women ought to do while pursuing her dream. They are enforced with the expectations of balancing their capacities and align with that of the cultural frameworks.

The film *Dangal* (meaning Wrestling bout) is a 2016 Indian Hindi language Biopic film directed by Nitesh Tiwari, produced by Aamir Khan, Kran Rao and Sidharth Roy Kapur under Aamir Khan Productions and The Walt Disney Company India. The film starts Aamir Khan as Mahavir Singh Phogat, an amateur wrestler in Haryana, training his daughters Geetha Phogat and Babitha Phogat. He trains his daughters to become India's first world class female wrestlers and they do. The roles are being played by Fatima Sana Sheikh and Sanya Malhotra respectively in their adult versions and by Zaira Wasima and Suhani Bhatnagar, their younger versions. Mother role is played by famous serial actress Sakshi Tanwar.

The film *Dangal* narrates the transformative journey of Geetha Phogat, foreground processing the countenance of female consciousness within a strict patriarchal society. Set in rural Haryana, a state notorious for female infanticide, depicts a young girl who is targeted by the conventional expectations of femininity, vulnerability and bodily modesty by the society and even the family sometimes. However, her father, Mahavir Singh Phogat interrupts these standards and conventions imposing a strict and eccentric training regime that pursues to reshape both her body and identity.

Mahavir's corrective methods function as a universal attempt to expunge socially constructed femininity. Geetha and her sister are forced to cut their hair short against their wishes, abandon their traditional attire and confine to male costumes, and undergo physically demanding wrestling methods in the male dominated spaces. Repetitive drills, constant surveillance and control over diet and routine, the film displays the transformation of Geetha's body and mind alongside from what can be understood. The docile body is transformed into a

disciplined entity. Crucially, this process demands Geetha to overlook her female body and vulnerability associated with it- biologically and socially. This is accomplished by snubbing the standards of delicateness and inactivity that define womanhood to the core in her regional and gender setting.

Initially without realizing the gender privileges they attain from their father amidst the strict patriarchal surveillance Geeta resists the coercive discipline received from their father. She perceives it as a denial of her freedom from a narrowed perspective. Nevertheless, the turning point occurs when she understands the oppressive forces that the society uses to target women, especially young girls in her village. Through the sub plot of the story, the societal vices are exposed which other wise Geetha would have endured if not for her father. This moment becomes decisive factor bringing shift in her consciousness. After that wrestling becomes not merely an imposition but a liberating pathway to attain self-realization on bigger canvas.

During the process of her growth, Geetha's maturity as a human being and as a wrestler springs her a sense of agency. Her competitions and her participation in competitive wrestling culminated into triumphs on a global scale signifies reconfiguration of femininity. Rather than antagonizing and resisting traditional standards, Geetha exemplifies strength, resilience and self-determination. Significantly, *Dangal* suggests that while patriarchal discipline initially shaping her transformation. It ultimately enables her to challenge and transcend the very norms it sought to implement.

One can comprehend that the film characterizes complex narratives where the disciplining female body becomes a contradictory site of empowerment, foremost to the emergence of a new, assertive female consciousness.

Most critical theories particularly focus on the male gaze, analysing the female body being visually represented. While sports films focus on shifting the objectification of women

to performance and other conventional cinematic gaze of the female body complicating the female agency. The beauty concepts inbuilt in the traditional framework of the society still persists in most of the Indian films and are evident in some portrayals of the female bodies in cinema. The concept of the female body as the docile body as conceptualised by Michel Foucault refers to the bodies produced by the strong and dominant regimes of discipline, surveillance and control:

First, much as we, as women and as feminists, may dislike the way we have been presented, may dislike the way we have been presented in film, we can learn a great deal about ourselves, and about how we have been oppressed through these images. It is crucial to understand clearly how men see us because we have internalized their ways of seeing. (Kaplan, 20)

The bodies in question are rendered as both useful and adaptable through repetitive training, societal observation and corrective techniques. In the context of sports cinema these concepts provide a powerful framework for realizing how athletic bodies are formulated, controlled and represented. Sports films always focus on transforming individuals into highly disciplined athletes. The transformation thus attained is not always impulsive but a result of laborious training orders emphasising on recurrence, steadiness and physical regulation. The athletes are subjected to the process of disciplining the body-early morning practices, controlled diets, under the relentless supervision of coaches and mentors. The body thus is exposed to inscription and the demands of the sports along with the authority of the instructor.

The role of the coach displayed in the majority of the sports films embodies the concept of power. Acting as both observer and a catalyst for change and transformation by enforcing rules and monitoring performance by making corrections. Through this vigorous process, the athlete internalizes discipline, thereby regulating their own physicality even in the absence of external surveillance. This paramount shift from an external code of conduct and control to

self-discipline is central to the narrative for understanding power and these narratives vividly dramatize the transition.

Malayalam film *Godha*, is a 2017 Malayalam movie, a sports comedy film directed by Basil Joseph and written by Rakesh Mantodi. The film is jointly produced by AVA Productions and E4 Entertainment. The film stars Tovino Thomas, Wamiqa Gabbi, Aju Varghese and Renji Panikkar. The film has been released in 2017. The main protagonist is Aditi Singh, played by Wamiqa Gabbi, a Punjabi wrestler whose journey emphasizes a self-driven discipline and mutual respect.

In the film the training scenes reflect autonomy and self-discipline, while the cameras avoid female objectification to some extent. Her athleticism is displayed with much significance, making the spotlight clearly on the athleticism of Aditi. It is presented without symbolic burden and her identity always confronts gender binaries. The film sustains a female agency throughout the film which offers a more egalitarian representation.

The film offers a distinctive reworking of female athleticism and consciousness through the character of Aditi who enters a culturally foreign space of rural Kerala. Unlike *Dangal*. Where discipline is drastically imposed by a patriarchal figure, here patriarchy exists in a different manner. *Godha* presents a female athlete who already has imbibed strength, self-assurance and self-awareness. She is deeply self-motivated and battles a prescriptive edifice of femininity not through transformation but assertion which is self-developed.

Aditi's female realization is marked by a rejection to internalize and imbibe the idea of the female body as a weak, modest or subordinate agency. Her physique which has attributed the masculinity asserts a demeanour which is unapologetic and challenges the visual and cultural codes which are traditionally associated with women in Malayalam cinema. When she enters the male dominated space of the 'akhada' her body is not disciplined into submission,

rather it asserts dominance and skill. This inversion undermines the notion of the frail and docile body by proclaiming something that regulated and commands authority.

Though, the film also subtly engages with the idea of discipline not as coercion, but as self-regulation. Her athletic experience is a result of rigorous training which is self-motivated and a result of sheer ambition. It suggests a voluntary form of bodily discipline which is rooted in only personal ambition fighting the patriarchal mindset of her family and her culture. The distinction between Aditi and Geetha is specific as she is not forced to forget her female identity and has not been forced. Instead, Aditi reaffirms it and shows that her female identity and consciousness can co-exist with physical power, aggression and competitiveness prescribed by wrestling as a sport.

The film also displays a transformation of the male perception through different characters especially the male protagonist. Rather than becoming subdued by the male authority she exercises her female agency to control and acts as a mentor and catalyst to the male counterpart. This shift highlights a broader reconfiguration of gender dynamics where female body is no longer an object of male gaze but an agency of control and authority inspiring ambition.

Ultimately the film constructs a model of femininity that is neither weak or docile nor imposed but a blatant site of self-realization of empowerment. It celebrated the female athletic body as a site of autonomy, confidence and protest, thereby offering a progressive reimaging of gender in contemporary Indian cinema. Here Malayalam film narrative can be exemplified for the other industries, in the way male gaze is carried out in each film focussing on female protagonists.

In movies featuring female athletes, the concept of vulnerable and docile bodies becomes more complex. The body is not only subjected to the discipline but also the mindset also undergoes significant changes depending on the cultural expectations of femininity.

Training sequences often involve the reconfiguration of the body. The body undergoes the process of building strength, durability and aggression- potentials conservatively associated with masculinity. This transformation is recurrently accompanied by machineries that normalizes and contain this unconventionality from normal femininity accept by the society.

For instance, the disciplining of female athletes may involve the suppression of traditional markers of femininity such as long hair, certain form of dressings in favour of efficient athleticism. Yet the whole process is framed within patriarchal authority, where male figures like father, coach or other institutions gain the supreme authority and control and regulate the terms of transformation. Thus, the female athletes' body is labelled as a site of decile and vulnerable state not only in relation to the sports but also within the gendered control constructions.

Moreover, sports films often connect with self-controlled bodies to a larger philosophical framework such as nationalism. The athlete's success is mounted as a representation of national pride where their bodies become a representative extension of the state. In this sense the vulnerable body operates within the perceptions of biopolitics, where individual bodies are delimited in the provision of the collaborative goals. Says:

While, on one hand, the sport film reflects the cultural and linguistic diversity of the subcontinent, on the other, it is also used by filmmakers to create images of national unity and to maintain connections with NRIs abroad. And while it adopts many international genre conventions, South Asian sport film nonetheless reflects the values and interests of India's diverse population. (Ransom, 330)

Nevertheless, sports films also present moments of confrontation. Athletes may initially resist the training procedures and question the authority or assert autonomy over their physical existence. These moments are often absorbed back into the narrative of discipline, reinforcing

the obligation of control for success. Even acts of rebellion are reconfigured as phases in the process of fetching a well-organized and efficacious endeavour.

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