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**“Patriarchal” Feminism: A Study of Bollywood Sports Films
*Dangal, Chak De! India and Saala Khadoos***

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Abstract

The global popularity of the Indian film industry, particularly Bollywood, is now an established norm. In the past, Bollywood predominantly produced male-centric films, a trend influenced by the male-dominated composition of filmmakers. Consequently, these films, whether consciously or unconsciously, often exhibited patriarchal themes, portraying men as heroic figures capable of saving people, assisting people, and even eliminating threats. During this era, a hero was someone capable of extraordinary feats on Earth. The Indian film industry and media seldom categorize a production as explicitly "patriarchal," but films featuring women in lead roles or addressing women-centric issues are promptly labelled as "feminist." This research paper will examine how, despite recognizing certain Bollywood films as feminist, many do not authentically embody feminist values. Films taken for this research are Nitish Tiwari's widely acclaimed Bollywood sports drama, *Dangal*, Amit Shimin's *Chak De! India* and Sudha Kongara's *Saala Khadoos*. All three films are patriarchal at their core. The central protagonists of these films are male and dominate the female characters in the entire film. **Keywords** – patriarchy, women sports, domination, Bollywood films, career, coach, opportunity.

In today's rapidly evolving society, numerous changes are evident, yet progress toward gender equality remains sluggish. An article on the official UN website sheds light on the current state of gender equality:

At the current rate of progress, it may take close to 300 years to achieve full gender equality, the Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG): The Gender Snapshot 2022 shows.

In the realm of sport, women faced lots of hurdle and issues since its origin. From ancient to the modern age many women players from different sports made their contributions to improve the condition of female players and also voice out for equal rights for women sports. The fight for equality began in the early ages and is still going on and with time new steps have also been taken. Popular culture has become a good source for people who wants to convey

their thoughts and feelings directly to the society and that too in a light entertaining way. In his book *Sport and Film* (2013), Seán Crosson asserts –“In some ways there are obvious attractions to sports that would seem at face value to make it the ideal subject for film. Sport attracts huge attention and is one of the most popular cultural practices internationally providing a crucial source of personal, communal, national and occasionally international identification.” (p. 2).

In Bollywood, some films are recognized as feminist. Still, many fail to truly embody feminist principles and instead continue to uphold patriarchal norms and such films can be known as the “Patriarchal” feminist films or in other words simply fall under the category of “Patriarchal” Feminism.

To understand “Patriarchal” feminism first it is important to understand patriarchy and feminism individually. Patriarchy according to the Cambridge dictionary is – “a society in which the oldest male is the leader of the family or a society controlled by men in which they use their power to their own advantage.” Britannica, also defines patriarchy as a – “hypothetical social system in which the father or a male elder has absolute authority over the family.” On the other hand, feminism, according to the Cambridge Dictionary is –“The belief that women should be allowed the same rights, power, and opportunities as men and be treated in the same way, or the set of activities intended to achieve this state”.

So, here “Patriarchal” feminism means when patriarchy is disguised as feminism. In other words, when a piece of work is presented as feminist but deep down at its core is full of patriarchy. “Patriarchal” feminism is dangerous as it is difficult to see the patriarchy that lies deep down because for many people it is almost impossible to look anything beyond the surface.

In the last decade Indian film industry made a good number of women sports drama films especially in Bollywood. Most of these

films received critical appreciation as well as good box office collection. The use of female actors in films as objects is common, as subjugating women is seen as a common affair by audience as well. Many women sports drama films also fall under women subjugation common affair category. Films like *Dangal* (2016), *Chak De! India* (2007), and *Saala Khadoos* (2016) portrays subjugation of women and no intentional empowerment.

Dangal directed by Nitish Tiwari is the story of real-life events of Indian amateur wrestler Mahavir Singh Phogat and his elder daughters, Geeta and Babita. The main character of the film, Mahavir Singh Phogat looks inspired by Mike Ditka's assertion that "You are never a loser until you quit trying." At the film's outset, Mahavir fervently desires a male heir to fulfil his own dreams. Despite repeated efforts resulting in the birth of four female children, he abandons his pursuit after the birth of the fourth girl, influenced by the societal notion that girls are incapable of excelling in sports, particularly wrestling. However, a transformative incident involving Mahavir's elder daughters, Geeta and Babita, triumphing over two boys forces Mahavir to recognize their capabilities. The film breaks the stereotype of the prevalent societal acceptance of the notion that women are inherently weaker than men.

Dangal unfolds with Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former state-level wrestler who, under paternal pressure, abandons wrestling to pursue a government job. Despite relinquishing his wrestling career, Mahavir clings to his dream of securing an international gold medal for India. Strikingly, he replicates the same parental imposition he experienced, denying his child the freedom to choose his own career. This mirrors a prevalent issue in India, where thousands of children annually endure forced career choices dictated by their parents, a concern emphasized by leading newspapers such as Hindustan Times in a 2015 article titled *Give freedom to children to choose their career: Experts*. In this article, some experts shared their views and one

such view was given by BP Mishra, clinical psychiatrist from Dayanand and Medical College and Hospital (DMCH) he said "Sometimes, parents who failed to fulfill their dreams, try to get them fulfilled through their children." Another article published in The Telegraph online in 2021 titled *Parents should not decide their children's career*. Likewise, in 2015 Times of India published an article titled *Parents should let children choose career*.

Mahavir is a father who fought with society for his daughter's career. He is a father who did everything to make his daughters achieve their goals or in other words, his own goal of winning a gold medal for the nation. In this so-called "feminist film," the story revolves around the dedication, struggle, hard work, patience, and domination of a father. The forced career choice of Geeta and Babita in this film is shown as an appreciable act by a father.

At the beginning of Geeta and Babita's training, it can be clearly seen that both the girls were not liking their father's forced decision, and when one day both the girls (scared of their father) grab some amount of courage they indirectly said it to Mahavir that they aren't liking wrestling to which Mahavir asked why and the poor girls innocently replied that because wrestling is damaging their hair. In response to this excuse, Mahavir explicitly showed his domination and male egoism as he called a barber and prepared a setting for their hair cutting in the house courtyard. In this scene, the tears in the eyes of Geeta speak more than her words as she repeatedly begs her father not to cut her hair but Mahavir does not listen to any of her words. Moreover, he said whatever will take the girls away from wrestling he will take away that thing. Patriarchal domination in this scene can be justified by Geeta's mother's expressions as well, as when Geeta asked her mother to intervene in the matter but she did not. The helplessness of a mother or a woman due to patriarchal domination is beautifully portrayed in this scene as the mother wants to save her child but could not do anything as she

herself seems a helpless poor being. In addition, in a previous scene where Geeta and Babita visit their mother to seek help so that they get rid of wrestling, they told their mother that they will do anything that she says but the only thing they asked for is separation from wrestling. Geeta's mother immediately replied to this: "forget for one year that you have a mother". As Mahavir in the hair-cutting scene said whatever will take the girls away from wrestling he will take that thing away from them, this he had already done by separating the mother from her daughters. During the initial stage of training Mahavir already asked his wife to give him a whole year to train the girls without any interruption from her side, so that the girls can develop and become strong, and by becoming strong means having a masculine personality. Carol Gilligan in her book *In a Different Voice* (1993) wrote:

relationships, and particularly issues of dependency, are experienced differently by women and men. For boys and men, separation and individuation are critically tied to gender identity since separation from the mother is essential for the development of masculinity. For girls and women, issues of femininity or feminine identity do not depend on the achievement of separation from mother or on the progress of individuation. Since masculinity is defined through separation while femininity is defined through attachment, male gender identity is threatened by intimacy while female gender is threatened by separation. (Gilligan, 1993, p. 8)

Also, the popular song "*Bapu Shehat Ke Liye Tu Toh Haanikarak Hai...*" is portrayed in the film as a funny one using humorous music, but the scenes and lyrics of the song very well tells the agony, frustration, and state of mind of the girls.

Mahavir's male ego was hurt the day Geeta told him that after winning a gold medal at the national level and becoming a national

champion her further training would be done at the National Sports Academy (NSA) in Patiala. In addition, the coach at NSA was presented as a villain to glorify Mahavir's character. Also, when Geeta started living at NSA her real personality came out when she was free from her father's constant orders and guidance. But in the film this freedom is portrayed as negative, affecting Geeta's performance in the later matches when she loses all the fights one by one, only to show the result of not following Mahavir's training and guidance or in other words to show Mahavir's power.

In a scene when Geeta comes back from NSA to home, she looks like a rebel and she proves it by questioning Mahavir's wrestling techniques. Mahavir's arrogance and frustration were clear because he was losing control over Geeta. Also, the coach at NSA is presented as extremely rude and headstrong because he is a foil to Mahavir's character in the film. The techniques of the national wrestling coach were not good enough even in front of Mahavir. It seems as if nobody in the film holds good knowledge regarding wrestling except Mahavir because both, Geeta and Babita presented incapable of winning any match without Mahavir's guidance.

Additionally, for the Commonwealth Games when Geeta's coach suggests Geeta to fight in 51 kg, she denies but the coach does not pay any heed to her denial and starts her diet and training according to the 51 kg category. When Mahavir got to know about this, he ordered Geeta to fight in her previous 55 kg category. Here, it can be seen that in a male-dominated society, women are just seen as mere puppets. Both, the coach and Mahavir at a moment commence a battle to take control over Geeta.

So, it can be said that the actual "Dangal" was to win over women and make them realize that they will always depend on men to survive and achieve something in life. Geeta won the Commonwealth Games gold medal in wrestling

only after she realized that her thought process and freedom which she was enjoying during her initial NSA days were wrong. After all this, Dangal is seen by many as a "feminist" film.

Using domination to control someone's life is a crime committed by Mahavir Singh Phogat in this film but he is not a criminal but rather the celebrated hero of the film. The makers cast "superstars" for such a role so that it becomes easy for the viewers to see them as heroes no matter what they do or how they do.

Likewise, in *Chak De! India* the story revolves around the protagonist of the film Kabir Khan played by Shah Rukh Khan. The film starts and ends with Kabir Khan which evidently manifests that the film's story is Kabir Khan's life. The so-called women empowerment shown in this film is a way to fulfill the protagonist's purpose. All the hard work and dedication that Kabir put in while coaching the Indian Women's Hockey team was done because there lies a personal benefit for him. India v/s Pakistan finale craze and the Hindu-Muslim rift is an important theme of the film but so far, its release, it is known for being a women-centric sports drama film.

Chak De! India begins by depicting Kabir Khan, the captain of the Indian Men's Hockey team, who is accused of deliberately losing an international match during a critical penalty shot against Pakistan; he missed, leading to India's defeat. This action brands him a traitor, subjected to relentless media scrutiny that forces him out of his home and community. After the allegation of intentionally losing the match, his reputation shattered and after seven years he got the position of coach for the Indian Women's Hockey team. This happened with Kabir because of his religion and throughout the film, he is seen working so hard to prove to the nation that he was not a traitor. A notable song from the film "*Maula Mere Lele Meri Jaan...*" is played in the background every time Kabir thinks of his past, the allegation, and other things, including the moment when he was indirectly forced to

leave his home. In the middle of the film, Kabir is seen remembering his old days while watching the silver medal that he won in the final match of the Men's Hockey World Cup. Every time he looks at his silver medal, he thinks of turning it into gold. This shows his personal motive behind his training and other things that he was doing for the Women's Hockey team.

When Kabir is offered to coach the Women's Hockey team that is the very first scene where we see patriarchy and gender discrimination. As most of the board members were male, they did not even take the women's team seriously which is why they chose Kabir Khan knowing very well, the allegation of cheating on him. Though the allegation was false, very few people knew this, but what if it was true? The head of the organization even explicitly dismisses the women's team, asserting it exists solely due to state subsidies, devoid of any intrinsic value. Furthermore, he espouses outdated views, believing a woman's place is solely in the household, focusing solely on domestic chores, while sports should be the domain of men.

In addition, a qualifying match was organized by the association on Kabir's request between the Indian Men's Hockey team and Indian Women's Hockey team to send the women's team to participate in the Women's Hockey World Cup. The main purpose of this match was to show the strength and capability of women players to the members of the association. During the match when the women's team was losing, Kabir's taunting of the players is portrayed by the filmmakers as a "motivational" tactic.

While training the women's hockey team, there are numerous scenes depicting Kabir dominating and intimidating the players. One of the film's notable dialogues, loved by the audience is delivered by the protagonist Kabir Khan: "har team me ek hi gunda hota hai aur iss team ka gunda main hoon." (every team has one don, and in this team, I am that don.) This

dialogue, however, is not something to be celebrated, as it clearly shows Kabir threatening the women players and asserting his dominance over them.

As the coach of the national team, Kabir should not be making such statements. In the film, this dialogue is used to generate excitement and applause in theaters, but if a real-life national team coach gave such statement, it would definitely provoke societal backlash, if covered by the media.

Similarly, Sudha Kongara made *Irudhi Suttru* (Final round, 2016). The film is made in both Tamil and Hindi language. The title of the Hindi version of this film is *Saala Khadoos* which is a more appropriate title than its Tamil version, because it simply justifies the character of the main protagonist, Adi Tomar, an arrogant, frustrated mid age Women's Boxing coach.

Saala Khadoos is no different from *Dangal* and *Chak De! India*, as most of the story seems similar. Like Mahavir from *Dangal* and Kabir from *Chak De! India*, Adi from *Saala Khadoos* too fulfilled his goal by becoming a coach of Women's Boxing. Some common characteristics can be seen in all three protagonists of the respective films, like anger, frustration, and above all male domination.

Adi as a coach is much worse than Mahavir and Kabir because he just not only used and taunted his players but also verbally and physically abused them. The kind of attitude he possesses and the way he behaves with his players is not acceptable at all. In one scene where his discovery "the natural talent" Madhi, loses a fight due to a hand injury, Adi in anger starts abusing Madhi. He first dragged her from the crowd, then pushed her on the ground and ultimately kicked Madhi "the natural talent" with his feet.

In an online article published on Psych Central titled *The Consequences of Verbally Abusive Athletic Coaches*, it is explicitly written that "physical violence is not usually a

component of a coaching relationship.” Only because Adi is a boxing coach and boxing is seen as an aggressive sport does not allow him to be abusive and aggressive with his students. Like Mahavir and Kabir, Adi too was trying to fulfill his goal by giving a world champion to the nation so that his rival in the film *Dev*, and other members of the committee who did partiality with him understand his worth.

All three characters knew very well that they would not get any other chance to reunite with their loving sport, so when such a situation came in their life all of them grabbed the opportunity instantly without giving a single thought to it, as becoming a coach of a women team is what they were left with.

To highlight the gender inequality issue in sports, many sports drama films are made in world cinema but few get popularity and, sadly most of those selected popular films are patriarchal at their core. The so-called women empowering/ feminist films like *Dangal*, *Chak De! India* and *Saala Khadoos* did not empower women at all rather these films strengthened the patriarchy in society. Also, these “fake” feminist films are more patriarchal than the anti-feminist films. Spectators watch these movies from a feminist point of view. The makers promote these films in the market as feminist films aiming to strengthen the position of women in society but it is weakening the women. Most viewers only watch these films not read such films, which is why they see these films as the makers want them to see.

Table 1: Comparison of Sports Biopics by Gender of Lead Protagonist

| Male Lead Protagonist Films | Budget (INR) | Box Office Collection (INR) | Female Lead Protagonist Films | Budget (INR) | Box Office Collection (INR) |
|-------------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>Dangal</i> | ₹70 Cr | ₹2,024 Cr | <i>Panga</i> | ₹49 Cr | ₹41.71 Cr |
| <i>Sultan</i> | ₹90 Cr | ₹623.33 Cr | <i>Mary Kom</i> | ₹38 Cr | ₹86.19 Cr |
| <i>Gold</i> | ₹61 Cr | ₹158 Cr | <i>Rashmi Rocket</i> | ₹25 Cr | ₹58 Cr |
| <i>Chak De! India</i> | ₹20 Cr | ₹190 Cr | <i>Shabaash Mithu</i> | ₹48 Cr | ₹2.76 Cr |
| <i>M.S. Dhoni: The Untold Story</i> | ₹104 Cr | ₹216 Cr | <i>Saina</i> | ₹26 Cr | ₹1.5 Cr |
| <i>Bhaag Milkha Bhaag</i> | ₹41 Cr | ₹210 Cr | <i>Saand Ki Aankh</i> | ₹20 Cr | ₹30.7 Cr |

Also, it is not that every woman’s sports drama film made in Bollywood/world cinema is patriarchal, some films fall under the feminist films category in true sense, like; *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Queen of Katwe* (2016), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Offside* (2006), etc. Moreover, there is only one major difference between “Patriarchal” feminist sports films and feminist sports films and that is of the protagonist. In “Patriarchal” feminist sports films there is always a male

central protagonist and in feminist sports films a female one.

Conclusion

The popularity of “Patriarchal” feminist films is because of the inequality in the film industry, where male actors are considered superior to female actors. In addition, this inequality in the film industry becomes the main reason why the so-called superstar in the so-called feminist films rules the entire story of the

film. Therefore, the purpose of making these films is to just make a good profit and not to empower women and the box office collection of these films proves it as well. The directors cast “superstars” for the central role in the film so that they can easily attract more audience to the theatres.

Films like *Dangal*, *Chak De! India* and *Saala Khadoos* shows that in a man’s world women will always depend on them to achieve something in life and without their support and guidance they cannot do anything on their own even if they are multitalented.

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