

Gendering Sports: A Study of Selected Text *Unbreakable*, an Autobiography by M.C. Mary Kom

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Abstract

The topics including race, gender, history and sexual orientation play major roles in women's participation in sport. Women's participation in sport can create a substantial contribution to social life and tradition development. Throughout the history of sport, it has been known that the arena of sport is mainly male dominated. Since time immemorial, the society has constructed the order that it seems natural where man belongs to marketplace, woman belongs to household chores, woman the mistress of domesticity, man the master of all else, man the rational thinker, woman the guardian of morals, man dominant, and woman subordinate. Although it is believed that the status of women in North East India is comparatively better than that of mainstream India and since ancient times women have been playing a vital role in contributing to the peace and progress of the region. Many inspirational women from the region have been pioneers and leaders, breaking gender barriers and making considerable progress in diverse fields. The path towards success is no bed of roses for womenfolk especially when it comes to sports. Besides, one's racial or ethnic background greatly shapes the experience they may have in sport. One of such inspirational woman who has carved a niche is Mary Kom, hails from Manipur whose contribution is immense in the field of sports. This paper will specifically focus on the struggles that she has faced during her sports career which is reflected in her autobiography entitled *Unbreakable*.

Keywords: sports, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender barrier

INTRODUCTION

Mary Kom penned down her relentless struggle that she encountered while she was about to pursue boxing as a career which demands extreme hard work, dedication and determination. This book portrayed her zeal to excel amidst all odds and determination to overcome every hurdle in her way is worth emulating by every woman across the globe. It is a simple tale told of a woman's road to emancipation and empowerment. In a short and crisp narration, her tough childhood, her rebellions, how long she waited for Onler to propose marriage, how she was willing to run away with him and of course how she held her own in the male world of boxing that the ring becomes the Mary's dominion. For a majority of Indian women, life is a struggle – a struggle to follow their dreams, a struggle to assert their rights, a struggle to make ends meet. What sets her apart is the sheer grit with which she faces every hurdle, and her determination to not let go her struggle in vain.

CONTENT

Mary Kom in her book writes with utmost candidness and composure about her struggles as an entrant. After establishing herself as a world class pugilist, again and again she suffered difficulties as a woman first and second she belongs to a region, which is looked down upon by the mainstream Indians. Albeit, Mary Kom has an unbeatable demeanour, none of the obstacles could stop her from clinching the medals. Apart from this, a colourful and vibrant portrayal of Manipuri culture and life in Manipur in general has taken a place in her autobiography. She continued playing after her marriage and even having children breaking the clichés of so-called Indian docile wife. Proliferation of awards and accolades never diminished and eventually being an Olympic medallist bringing honour to the country. As a tribal woman from a minority community competing in a quintessentially male-dominated sport, MC Mary Kom carved a niche in the arena of boxing.

Family matters a lot in the life of a sports personality because in the path of their career they would have to sacrifice a lot more things. While some will support and others will criticize for choosing the unusual life. For a girl it is a herculean task to convince her family to have admitted in sports. In case of Mary Kom, they were very poor and when she was born her mother was very disappointed. “A daughter she believed would be more of a burden than a help. Would she be able to toil in the fields alongside her father as a son would?” (Kom6). As daughters are expected to be dainty and docile she is meant for only household chores this disappoints her mother a lot.

She unveils that in the Kom society from where she hails, boys were given preference when it came to education..since a girl would get married and go away to her husband’s home... But my Father has trained us to work from a young age....I helped in the fields, even with ploughing the field...I went up the hills with Apa to collect firewood and to the lake to fish. Cooking, washing clothes, gardening, cleaning the house, and various other odd jobs....but looking back, it was that sustained toil that prepared my body for boxing. My strength and stamina continue to be my strong points even when I fight bigger opponents in the ring. (Kom 12-14)

Mary Kom has written in her autobiography how she suffered during the initial stage of her career because of her geographical area—North East, that too from corner most state Manipur devoid of development from the main stream India. For Mary Kom, it is entirely different experience while she comes out of home for the first time, she was taunted for her petite body, secondly she is a woman and third a woman of periphery. She overcomes all the hurdles and established herself as an international pugilist and the first woman to bring home the Olympian bronze. Often they are not equipped with proper sports kits and as she is of lower economic background she is not able to buy these kits herself. But her potentiality and determination is unbeatable which takes her so long in her career. Northeast is periphery under periphery, people are abused, used derogatory terms, takes advantage of their innocence and what not.

Through socialization, individuals learn to behave in accordance with the expectations of others in the society. For instance, the colour pink, Barbie dolls, profession of teaching and nursing is attached with a girl whereas toys like cars, guns, and doctor, engineer and a sportsperson as profession is attached with a boy. Since time immemorial, sports arena is

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male dominated therefore there is always a big mountain to climb for being a female athlete especially in a country like India. A water tight compartment has been created where women even if they participated but made sure to exempt them from giving equal pay from their male counterpart. The very idea that women can equal to man is abomination to many because a perpetual domination is expected on women folk. Besides, many other obstacles are laid in the path for women, they are judged for their dressing sense, objectified as an entity camouflaging their talent and success. The sexist mind is inescapable, no matter from whichever part of the world one belongs. Despite such daunting challenges and unkempt mind, women are making history with their determination and indefatigable energy which is laudable. Sports are a challenging and a demanding arena where both men and women are subjected to oppression and prey to some external force like media. The word “sport” most of the times is associated with male figures in the Indian household. Though not surprising, it is women who contribute the most to household finances in Manipur. They work both inside and outside the home. Women have to face struggles and criticism as well because women must keep them busy in Virginia Woolf’s captures best in the phrase “mending the stockings and minding the stews.” (Woolf 56)

Being the daughter of landless farmer, Mary Kom touched the height of zenith. Women’s boxing was a new department back then, with practically no facilities to support it. It remains a pretty contentious matter, the question of who began and propelled women’s boxing in Manipur. The Manipur Boxing Association under the guidance of Khoibi Salam took the lead in introducing the sport before any other state in the country.

I do not like talking about the Indian women’s boxing scenario in terms of state teams, but that is the reality of how things operate on the ground. Even during training, I was often neglected and not given enough attention by the coaches. When coaches and other boxing officials favoured their own state players, the only way I could fight back was in the ring, and by aiming higher and higher. (Kom105)

Kom has mentioned that she is hardly recognised as Indian in her own country. Because of her oriental looks, people from the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India. She has been teased as Nepalis, and often used derogatory names like Chinkies, ching-ching chong chong. In a country where people speak all kinds of languages and have varied kinds of looks, yet people are indifferent to the people of North East India. When she used to say that she is from Manipur, many people didn’t even know where it is. She also made a confession that Manipuri people too refer to the people from mainland India as ‘Mayangs’, or non- Manipuri, and that too makes her sad.

Life wasn’t the same after her pregnancy. Mary and Onler forgot what it meant to sleep through the night. She had decided from the very beginning that she would nurse the babies, even if it meant delaying her return to boxing. By that time, she was fortunate enough that she had a sponsor, and through them a specialist doctor was assigned to her. She advised her to increase her calcium intake, since she had given birth. Earlier, she ate her usual food. In the village no one spoke about health and dietary matters, so she had no idea that she was supposed to eat a certain sort of food and take supplements, to recover from the effects of childbirth. She managed to get back on the right track quickly because of the attention she got in terms of nutrition, physical health and better training. Such are the difficulty levels that

a woman athlete goes through, but Mary was so determined that giving up on the game is out of her mind, in fact she didn't take much leave and rejoined the training camp soon.

One gets a glimpse of the disparity between the two sexes in the arena of sports. A woman is no less than a man if given a chance, but narrow minded society always fettered her movement within the four walls of the room. Since time memorial, they are discriminated on the ground of second sex and fragile, hence inferior to man. As time passes by, woman breaks the stereotype and entered the threshold of sports, although they faced scathing criticism initially. But she grows stronger and strives forward to pursue her dream and excelled in sports. On the other hand, there are also some parents who support their daughters in pursuing her dream. Mary Kom gives an another story of struggle whose poverty stricken childhood compels her to take up a life of hard labour and thus attributing her with all the masculine bodily traits. She chooses boxing as her sport which she thought she could excel in. She has faced umpteen of negative comments out of which her father was one of them. She proved all of them wrong and established herself as the Olympic medallist and International pugilist as well. What is worth mentioning is her husband's extreme support in her sports career and she gives all of the credit to him because after marriage a very few can manage their profession of sport and she is one of them. Her husband quits his job to look after the household and their babies so that she can focus on her career.

In the arena of sports, a woman always faces scathing criticism, receives unequal pay and inferior treatment. With the respect and relentless support of the family and the partners, it is possible to touch the height of success which is illustrated through the life of Mary Kom with her partner Onler. In *Unbreakable*, we find Mary Kom writes about her successful sporting career post-marriage only because of her husband Onler. Mary gives credit to her husband, behind her success, there is Onler. He is the reason of her medal hauls continued after the marriage, putting an end to doomsday predictions about the end of her career.

Judith Butler's essay *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* has best captured the gender role defined as the socially constructed and culturally specific behaviour and appearance expectations imposed on both women and men. Butler is of the view that gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. This is what happened with the female athletes as sports are assigned to their male counterparts. When they ventured the arena of sports, they faced scathing criticism and discrimination as well.

CONCLUSION

Women players face discrimination on the grounds of sex, as second-class citizen, as feeble, for religion, for ethnicity and make headlines for all the wrong reasons in the media. The media did not pay heed to their achievements, laurels and accolades rather takes extra pain in having interest in their personal lives and dress malfunction of anyone. Mary Kom is doubly marginalized for being a woman and a woman from Northeast, when she goes out to play outside her state Manipur.

Milkha Singh of the selection committee struck it off, saying he didn't know which sport I competed in. I felt so humiliated by that comment that I responded publicly with this

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question: How many more titles do I have to win for the country to believe I deserve the honour. (Kom 90)

When she was awarded the prestigious Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna award in 2009 the highest sporting honour in India, her application was rejected the first time. She becomes the five-time World Amateur Boxing champion, and the only woman boxer to have won a medal in each one of the six world championships. She set a new standard in amateur boxing without ever competing in professional boxing. Nicknamed "Magnificent Mary", she is the only Indian woman boxer to have qualified for the 2012 Olympics. She became the first Indian woman boxer to get a Gold Medal in the Asian Games in 2014 in Incheon, South Korea. In 2015, Kom became the first amateur to surpass several professional athletes in India in earnings, endorsements and awards. She is the first amateur athlete to win the Padma Bhushan.

Thus, Mary Kom went on adding feathers to her hat honoured the country in a global platform. Unless and until we change our parochial mindset the battle for equality in women player has been perennial problem and will remain forever.

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