

Mary Kom, a Brand of National Integration: “Kommitment” to Self and Nation

Kavitha L

Research Scholar, Department of English, University of Mysore, Mysore -570005

Email: [sukavithe\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:sukavithe[at]gmail.com)

Abstract: *The sports biographical films trace the social mobility of a real successful athlete. The rationale behind the judicious choice of a professional sport, impactful sportsman or sportswoman as the subject, infusing popular melodrama, employing effective mise - en - scene to bewitch the audience, and the didactic communication of the film raises apprehensions towards its intent. Mary Kom, a sports biopic of Mary Kom projects the exemplary self - made athlete subject to propagate self - reliance as a panacea to unemployment. Individual achievement is magnified in the name of patriotism by relegating the state's responsibility to further the citizen's aspirations. The ideology of self - subsistence and inclusive nationalism gets permeated the film.*

Keywords: biographical films, Mary Kom, self - subsistence, Brand of National Integration and Kommitment

1. Introduction

Sports biopics capitalize on actual sportspersons and contests. The success of *Lagaan*, a seminal sports film has galvanized the filmmakers of Bollywood and the result is an array of sports biopics made on various national sports heroes. Audiences have euphoria to witnessing the successful formula of sports celebrities. The sports biographical films trace the social mobility of a real successful athlete. The rationale behind the judicious choice of a professional sport, impactful sportsman or sportswoman as the subject, infusing popular melodrama, employing effective mise - en - scene to bewitch the audience, and the didactic communication of the film raises apprehensions towards its intent. *Mary Kom*, a sports biopic based on the life of Mary Kom, a woman Indian boxer who won a bronze medal in 2012 at the London Olympics. The biopic represents Mary, a tribal woman who bravely fought against all odds and achieves a national hero status through sheer hard work, perseverance, and self - reliance. This article discusses how such aggrandized narratives like *Mary Kom* project the exemplary self - made athlete subject to propagate self - reliance as a panacea to unemployment. Individual achievement is magnified in the name of patriotism by relegating the state's responsibility to further the citizen's aspirations. The paper further closely analyses the content of the film that owns a Northeasterner who is otherwise racially discriminated by the mainstream to comprehend the undercurrent of this grand saga of Mary. The ideology of self - subsistence and inclusive nationalism gets permeated the film.

A sport provides ample scope for individual performance and achievements. Exceptional achievement of professional sportsperson results in upward social mobility. “Magnificent Mary” is a boxing legend and six - times women’s World Boxing champion. The bronze medal that she won at the 2012 Summer Olympics in London conspicuously brought her a high - profile status. The nation was proud of her inspiring success on the international stage. Mary Kom, who hails from a humble family in the Northeast region of India, belongs to a distinct ethnic tribe and race, diligent go - getter pugilist, plays men’s game but is a dutiful

daughter, wife, and mother off the ring. The nation owns and idolizes Mary for her accomplishments. She is appointed as the Superintendent of Police (sports), runs the Mary Kom Regional Boxing Foundation, signs contracts of millions of worth, and is a brand ambassador for various leading global companies. She is a nominated incumbent Member of Rajyasabha and to top it all she is conferred with the Padma Vibhushan award, the second - highest civilian award, for her exceptional service to the nation. The state and the corporate agencies patronize success stories to connect emotionally with the populace. Mary in return sloganeers that she is “proud to be an Indian at heart. (“Mary Kom Rubbishes Media Report, Says She Belongs to Manipur | Boxing News” n. d.) Jay Hind,” She proclaims, “Being the proud brand ambassador of the North Eastern region, it is my duty to live up to the role which the country has entrusted me.” (“I Am Proud to Be an Indian at Heart, Not Shifting from Manipur: MC Mary Kom” n. d.)

Nation constructs national heroes to impact public memory and utilizes ideological apparatuses to disseminate the dominant values. The film is one of the powerful mediums to establish, celebrate and circulate national myths. Sports are a saleable commodity and sportsperson is a marketable subject. Mary Kom is anointed as a national hero not just for her performance in the ring but for a variety of political reasons. Duncan McDuie - Ra notes, “for the Indian government, Manipur and the rest of the Northeast is treated as a ‘troubled’, but highly strategic region; whereas past policies were aimed at strengthening local autonomy, the last decade has seen a shift towards more intense economic, political and cultural integration of the Northeast into mainstream India. Mary Kom’s success provides one such path to integration: sport.” (McDuie - Ra 2015)

Sports have wide reach and appeal. Sports and illustrious sportsperson subject is hence appropriated by filmmakers. The national sporting hero Mary Kom is chosen as the subject of the sports biopic *Mary Kom* because of her life of “individualist mythology” that is worth consumption and imitation. (Schultz 2014)

Volume 12 Issue 11, November 2023

www.ijsr.net

Licensed Under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY

Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the co - producer of the biopic, speaking on the rationale behind choosing Mary's story said: "Mary Kom is someone who every single person in India is very proud of. She has come a long way. It is such a wonderful story of her life. " Further added that "She is a true hero. ("It Is a Rare Experiment, Says Bhansali on Mary Kom Film" n. d.) I am not surprised by her victory. I expected her to bring the gold home from the Asian Games. Mary has the tenacity and the passion. These are qualities that prompted us to make a film on her life in the first place. " Mary is aspirational and through the way of biopic appeals to the audience to aspire to the status. Mary is shown to fight hard and succeed against poverty, lack of opportunities and facilities, racism, gender bias, corrupt sports institutions and officials, political upheavals at home state, age, and other personal challenges. ("Story of Mary Kom Inspired Me Personally: Omung Kumar" n. d.) In the biopic, she overcomes these challenges with sheer hard work, strong will, and the support of her family. The director of this self - help narrative Omung Kumar said in a statement that Mary's story inspired him and hence he wanted the nation to draw inspiration from the such inspiring rags - to - riches saga that the biopic charts. According to him "Her story has been an inspiration for everyone. Being a mother and a sportswoman, she equally managed her family with sports. " The Millions who watch the biopic get inspiration, take pride in, and discover a fabricated quick - fix to achieve economic and social advancement. ("As Mary Kom Completes Four Years, Omung Kumar Says It Was an Aspiring Film That Involved a Lot of Risk | Bollywood - Hindustan Times" n. d.)

Country needs symbols and attributes to consolidate as a nation Sports performs an integrative function. Benedict Anderson opines that "the consciousness of nationality makes a nation. " *Mary Kom* attempts to appropriate consciousness of "Indianness". Omung admits that "We took a bit of creative liberty to generate a patriotic feel, to intercut her personal pain with the national duty. " ("Omung Kumar to Turn Producer with Sports - Based Film | Bollywood - Hindustan Times" n. d.) Mary endorses national integration. Talking about *The Jackie Robinson Story*, Aaron Baker observes that the film insists "on showing racism as a problem best understood and responded to in individual terms. "A successful northeastern sportswoman is deployed to challenge the existence of racism in India. Mary conceals the crisis around her, condemns racial attacks calls them "unfortunate". Her apolitical stance has guaranteed her state patronage. Mary is invoked to posit no racism. (Schultz 2014)

The biopic castigates and also contributes to racism. The politics of racism is blatant from the very casting of *Mary Kom*. Priyanka Chopra plays Kom's role in the biopic. Many North - easterners have been critical of the way Mary's racial identity is erased by the casting of Priyanka Chopra, former Miss World, and a mainstream actress. In an interview with Vanity Fair, Chopra said, "When I played Mary Kom, I was very skeptical taking it on in the beginning because she was a living, breathing icon and she made a place for so many female athletes. (Das 2013) Plus, I look nothing like her. She comes from the northeast of India and I am from northern India and we physically didn't look alike. In

hindsight, the part should have probably gone to someone from the northeast. " The insistence that crowd puller Indian face is enough for the role of Kom further reinforces racism. ("Priyanka Chopra: The Role Of 'Mary Kom' Should Have Gone To Someone From The Northeast" n. d.) Bimol Akoijam adds that "the oriental face is not acceptable to the general public of this multicultural India...they will not accept somebody who does not have the typical "Indian" look to play her role". ("Race and Prejudice on Celluloid - The Hindu" n. d.) The director unapologetically confesses that he "wanted someone popular and saleable, so that it reaches out to more audience. " ("Movie Review: Mary Kom Is Made for Whistles and Some Quick Money - Hindustan Times" n. d.) The north - east feature is not "popular", "saleable" and "does not reach out to more audience" but Mary's success story does. He is confident enough to declare that "Once the film unraveled, people forgot about the cheek bone, the eye brow and the accent. " ("The Punch Has Paid off for 'Mary Kom' Director - The Hindu" n. d.) Talking about the politics of casting Priyanka for playing Kom, Lin Laishram, an actress from Manipur reiterates that "I always felt that casting is an important step in film. I believe in authenticity and inclusivity, so a girl from Manipur or the North East could have been surely cast to represent us. "Appealing for inclusivity she further probes the Bollywood industry: "When it comes to playing an achiever from the Northeast a non - North Eastern person is chosen as seen in *Mary Kom*. ("Race and Prejudice on Celluloid - The Hindu" n. d.) On the other hand, why not cast people from the Northeast also as normal Indians in all walks of life which we are. "Only Mary had no objections to such a racist outlook. ("Lin Laishram: Writers Should Offer More Representation to Northeast Actors" n. d.)

The plot seems to contest the negative stereotypes of Northeastern women by aggrandizing Mary's exceptional life spirit to strive against the odds. She is projected as an adamant girlchild who doesn't care for her father and chose boxing. She overlooks the suggestion of the male coach who suggests her against marriage. She fights corrupt sports authorities. She marries Onler who supports her in all her endeavors. The myth of female ascendancy in the northeast is re - iterated. Mary is elevated as a self - made sports icon who represents India. India owns her to disseminate the allegory of national integration. Purba Das postulates that "as an ideological venture, the national integration campaigns promote "unity" as the primary category for citizens to identify with, and in the post - liberalization era campaigns, additional characteristics such as young, mobile, and forward - looking are assigned to this unified Indian national identity. " Mary has become the face/site ? of inclusive, young, and one India. ("Manipur: Olympian Mary Kom and Actress Lin Laishram Appeal for Peace | Oneindia News - Video Dailymotion" 2023)

2. Conclusion

The biopic except for the opening scene does not speak of the political scenario of the region. It turns blind eye to the forces that form the reality of the Northeast. The filmmakers subterfuge the landscape by projecting Imphal as Manipur. Reality is compromised by dramatizing sports and a sportsperson's life to secure the desired effect on the

audience. The biopic deifies Mary and her efforts to excel in sports despite disadvantages like her race, class, gender, and corruption. As the filmmakers claim that the story is chiefly meant to entertain and inspire, the audience takes home the idea that Mary individually fought the odds and if she can they can as well. Mary furthers the myth that success is bound if an individual works hard. There seems to be a contrived effort to induce that the social, economic, and ethnic issues can be positively negotiated through individual effort. The hard work is recognized, lauded, and disseminated through various agencies to the public. The biopic of Mary Kom is one such medium through the way in which national integration gets permeated and complications involved get choked by emotionalizing sports.

References

- [1] "As Mary Kom Completes Four Years, Omung Kumar Says It Was an Aspiring Film That Involved a Lot of Risk | Bollywood - Hindustan Times." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/as-mary-kom-completes-four-years-omung-kumar-says-it-was-an-aspiring-film-that-involved-a-lot-of-risk/story-gQ6pgFEu5VdkOQeZlxXocM.html>.
- [2] Das, Purba.2013. "Casteless, Raceless India: Constitutive Discourses of National Integration." *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 6 (August): 221–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2013.799711>.
- [3] "I Am Proud to Be an Indian at Heart, Not Shifting from Manipur: MC Mary Kom." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/150613/sports-other-sports/article/mary-kom-rubbishes-reports-contemplating-leave-manipur-0>.
- [4] "It Is a Rare Experiment, Says Bhansali on Mary Kom Film." n. d. India Today. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/bollywood/story/it-is-a-rare-experiment-says-bhansali-on-mary-kom-film-114883-2012-08-30>.
- [5] "Lin Laishram: Writers Should Offer More Representation to Northeast Actors." n. d. <https://www.awazthevoice.in/women-news/lin-laishram-writers-should-offer-more-representation-to-northeast-actors-3787.html>.
- [6] "Manipur: Olympian Mary Kom and Actress Lin Laishram Appeal for Peace | Oneindia News - Video Dailymotion." 2023. Dailymotion. May 5, 2023. <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x8kolij>.
- [7] "Mary Kom Rubbishes Media Report, Says She Belongs to Manipur | Boxing News." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://sports.ndtv.com/boxing/mary-kom-rubbishes-media-report-says-she-belongs-to-manipur-1498929>.
- [8] McDuie - Ra, Duncan.2015. "Is India Racist?: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom." *South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies* 38 (2): 304–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00856401.2014.992508>.
- [9] "Movie Review: Mary Kom Is Made for Whistles and Some Quick Money - Hindustan Times." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/movie-reviews/movie-review-mary-kom-is-made-for-whistles-and-some-quick-money/story-operpwNQFk3klSew5LWIBO.html>.
- [10] "Omung Kumar to Turn Producer with Sports - Based Film | Bollywood - Hindustan Times." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/bollywood/omung-kumar-to-turn-producer-with-sports-based-film/story-C0vIjLc2PPmvVjoS6gfRL.html>.
- [11] "Priyanka Chopra: The Role Of 'Mary Kom' Should Have Gone To Someone From The Northeast." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/priyanka-chopra-the-role-of-mary-kom-should-have-gone-to-someone-from-the-northeast/409747>.
- [12] "Race and Prejudice on Celluloid - The Hindu." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/comment-article-race-and-prejudice-on-celuloid/article6391835.ece>.
- [13] Schultz, Jaime.2014. "The Truth about Historical Sport Films." *Journal of Sport History* 41 (April): 29–45. <https://doi.org/10.5406/jsporhistory.41.1.29>.
- [14] "Story of Mary Kom Inspired Me Personally: Omung Kumar." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/story-of-mary-kom-inspired-me-personally-omung-kumar-118090400505_1.html.
- [15] "The Punch Has Paid off for 'Mary Kom' Director - The Hindu." n. d. Accessed November 15, 2023. <https://www.thehindu.com/features/metroplus/interview-with-mary-kom-director-omung-kumar/article7177369.ece>.