



# The Carer/ Career Dichotomy: Gender in/as Sports Biopics

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**Abstract** – Cinematic biographies have been a mode of narrating history, and they have become increasingly popular in India after 2010. Sports biopics on women athletes have been hailed as 'empowering' and 'inspiring', though, as this paper argues, these films inevitably reinscribe women into the patriarchal sex role gender ideology, making the female sportsperson conform to the hegemonic feminine ideal. The paper explores the ways in which sports, gender and the pressures of cinematic storytelling intersect in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the lives of famous sportswomen, and analyses the ways in which gender structures the portrayal of sportsmanship, personal struggle, familial ties and the narratives of victory and failure. It analyses six sports biopics – *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), *Soorma* (2018), *Chandu Champion* (2024), *Mary Kom* (2014) and *Saina* (2021) and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022) — studying the contrasts and parallels in the construction of female and male sportspersons who achieved comparable success in sports to determine the cinematic textual apparatus that reiterate gender stereotypes and reify society's gender norms. It also argues that those films that coopt the sports woman into the familial space while valourising male sporting achievement achieve greater commercial success, while those that fail to construct 'feminine' values and foreground purely sporting achievements registered poor audience reception.

**Keywords**— *biopic, gender, ideology, sport, representation*



## I. INTRODUCTION

Biographies have become the dominant narrative mode in the post-modern age, and in India, cinematic biographies have become increasingly marketable after 2010. There have been a plethora of films on sports since *Lagaan* (2001) and *Chak De India* (2007), but since 2010, films based on real-life sports persons have gained enormous traction and appropriation. Movies such as *Paan Singh Tomar* (2012), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Dangal* (2016), *M. S. Dhoni* (2016), *Gold* (2018), have reconstructed the lives of famous sports stars, reformulating and reassembling the many facets of their lives and personality and examining and/ or validating the historical, cultural, and personal forces that contribute to moulding their success and importance. The cinematic biopics of sportswomen in India, in particular, have been hailed as 'empowering' and 'inspiring' since visual biographies are more popular and accessible than their

written counterparts and have a vaster reach and hold on the minds of the audience. However, the plethora of biographies, most of which are not entirely factual but only 'based on a real life', demonstrates that the same life can be read in many ways depending on the politico-ideological stance of the biographer. The argument this paper makes is that, in the process of deconstructing and reconstructing the lives of a famous persons, biopics also enunciate the hegemonic gender ideology – male sports heroes are coded into the Protector-Provider-Procreator narrative, while sportswomen are reinscribed into the patriarchal cultural norms. In spite of the fact that there have been studies on the history of women's sports and representation in media in the West, there have been fewer research investigations into the methods and motifs of presentation of sportsmen and women on screen in India. This paper analyses six sports biopics – *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013), *Soorma* (2018), *Chandu Champion* (2024), *Mary Kom* (2014), *Saina* (2021) and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022) – three female

sportspersons and three male who achieved comparable success in sports – to determine the cinematic syntagms and textual apparatus that reiterate gender stereotypes, locate the tensions between women and ambition and success, and identify how the deviations from the actual events in the lives of the protagonists reflect and reify society's gender norms. It addresses the research gap in the specifically Indian societal expectations of masculinity and femininity, character development and agency, and narrative resolution that reflect and perpetuate gender stereotypes in sports and society.

The commercial success of sports biopics such as *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (2013) and *Mary Kom* (2014), lead to a slew of cinematic recreations of the lives of sportspersons. Most of these sports films, such as *Dhoni*, *Dangal*, *Soorma*, *Chandu Champion* etc., discursively framed the lives of small-town Indians whose trajectory from obscurity to success furnish the model of nationalist pride and personal ambition. Rachel Dwyer argues that “the contemporary Hindi biopic needs to be understood as a reflection of the desires and aspirations of the new middle classes, whose tastes the biopics about entrepreneurs, and performers cater to” (Vidal, 2014: 24). In the late 2000s, with the economic recession across the world in 2008, the right-wing article of “India First” found enunciation in the biographical narratives of Bollywood. The biopic boom was fuelled by a sense of nationalist pride, the ideology of personal ambition and foregrounded the ability refashion oneself irrespective of class or gender position, and sports is an area which has seen ordinary people from rural communities refashion their identities and attain unparalleled and inspirational success.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

However, in the process of configuring the identity of the protagonists, these biopics also avoid transgressing gender norms of society and reformulate ideals of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ by identifying the body of the actor with specific societal concepts and values. In a Pew Research conducted in March 2022, most Indians were found to favour traditional gender roles in family with 87% holding that wives should obey husbands and 80% agreeing that when there were fewer jobs, men should have greater preference to the available posts. In the Southern states, conventionally held as more progressive, adults surveyed were more likely to assert that women should be primarily responsible for childcare. Nair and Eapen in “Women and Sport in India” illustrate the discrimination faced by sportswomen both on the field and in media coverage. Women make up only 2% to 8% of the sport association governing bodies, and the media “tend to represent sportswomen as women first and athletes second” (64). For

instance, in a study on the coverage given to women sportspersons, when Sania Mirza won the mixed doubles in tennis, neither of the major English newspapers surveyed showed her action in court, though one carried a photograph of her with the trophy and another showed her attending a fashion show (64). These attitudes are seen in their life narratives of the sportspersons, with biopics sportsmen disseminating a linear equation between effort and success and naturalising their ambitions and triumphs, while the biopics of women configure female achievement within the framework of family as if to assevrate that for a woman public success is secondary to private duty.

The role of Western women in sports has been studied with research spanning areas such as gender disparity in representation, participation, opportunity, agency and access to resources. Though participation in sports enhances confidence, leadership skills and social prestige (Eime et al., 2013), there remain multiple barriers to women's participation in sports – whether as competitor, coach or administrator (Pfister, 2010; LaVoi & Dutove, 2012). Studies by Fink (2015) and Cooky et al. (2021) found that women receive less media coverage than male athletes, and when covered, they are often depicted in ways that emphasize their appearance and sexuality over their athletic achievements. Studies on media focus showed that the media even chose different angles and shots for female players, exploiting their bodies and thereby shaping attitudes, expectations and values towards women's sports (Bissel & Duke, 2007; Greer et al., 2009). As Naomi Woolf (1991) points out in *The Beauty Myth*, acceptable looks is more about behaviour than appearance – the image of the sportswoman (small, slender, sexualized) as embodied in the media represents not simply an athletic ideal but also certain feminine traits. This is foregrounding of a woman's sex appeal and gender role and deemphasis of her athleticism and physical power is seen both in real and reel life.

## III. PRIMARY TEXTS CHOSEN FOR ANALYSIS

The movies chosen highlight these aspects of male and female athletes in Indian cinema. *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* is based on *The Race of my Life*, the autobiography of the athlete, Milkha Singh. The film follows his trajectory as runner till his victory over his Pakistani counterpart in the Goodwill games. *Soorma* (Warrior) is based on the life of the hockey player, Sandeep ‘Flicker’ Singh, and his triumphant return after an accidental shooting that leaves him paralysed. The final scenes are of the 2009 Commonwealth Championship, where he scores the winning goal against Pakistan and the closing shots archive footage of the real life Sandeep Singh receiving the 2010

Arjuna Award from the then-President, Pratibha Patil. *Chandu Champion* (2024) narrates the story of Murlikant Petkar, India's first Paralympics gold medallist, with the final shots recreating the question that spurred him to achievement: *Ae, hasta kaiko hai?* (Why are you laughing?). *Mary Kom*, among the highest grossing Indian films with a female lead, charts the boxer's journey from her early struggles to her victory at the 2008 World Boxing Championship at Ningbo. Before the match, she is informed that her child requires a heart surgery, and the film crosscuts between the bouts in the ring and the surgery. The final shots show the actual photos of the sportswoman with her family. *Saina* commences with Saina Nehwal addressing a press conference after winning the 2018 Commonwealth games. The film closes with Saina returning home to deliver the medals she won to "those they truly belong to" – her family and friends. The closing shot is the family posing for a candid photo and an intertitle of the date of her wedding. *Shabash Mithu* (2022), based on the life of former Test and ODI captain of the women's cricket team of India, details her struggles as a cricketer and the final acknowledgment of the legitimacy of women in sports and leadership with the closing shots showing little girls asking for her autograph, a male assistant serving tea in a cricketing academy coached by a woman player and Mithu's brother placing her team photo in the place where the photograph World Cup winning cricket team of 1983 was hung.

The films, except for *Chandu Champion* and *Shabash Mithu* were commercial successes and critically well acclaimed. The biopics of women athletes stay close to the critical biographical facts of the lives of their subject, and do not circumvent the personal ambition that motivated the female protagonists. However, 'Great Man' biopics and female biopics have their own 'patterns of development', ideologies and conventions and distinct paradigms of biography (Bingham, 2010: 37). Significantly, the biopics that exhibit fractures in questions of female agency, reproduce cultural constructions of gender binaries and stereotypes, and reinscribe women into the familial space were commercial hits while those that challenge the hegemonic order did not. This paper studies the tropes that illustrate the conflict between the dominant and emergent gender ideology in the contrasts and parallels in character development and agency, obstacles and challenges, coaching and mentorship, representation of competition, and the emotional arcs in resolution and outcome. It also proposes that two films, *Chandu Champion* and *Shabash Mithu*, were experienced limited financial success on account of their the failure to assimilate their protagonists into the normative gender order.

#### IV. BODY AND SUFFERING AS SPECTACLE

Both in the western world and in the Indian subcontinent, sports has been seen as a way to train the bodies and minds of young men. The statement "the battle of Waterloo was won on the playing fields of Eton" was a reference to the belief that muscular Christianity and its emphasis on virile masculinity and athleticism was instrumental in building the Empire. Indian freedom fighters, likewise, mimicked Imperial masculinity since colonialists disparaged the native male as effeminate, unathletic and cowardly. The traits of feminine gentleness and childhood innocence were "projected onto the 'low cultures' of Europe and onto the new cultures European civilization encountered" (Nandy, *Intimate Enemy* 37). The child, the native, and the woman were the binary opposites of the adult man and needed to be dominated by him. The nationalistic discourse responded to the colonial aspersions by reasserting the gendered characteristics of muscular Christianity and recapturing their lost manliness through sports, physical training and building hard bodies, seen particularly in the exhortations of Vivekananda and the writings of Aurobindo Ghosh. The plethora of sports films in the 2010s retain this conservative gender power dynamics reaffirming male physicality and pre-eminence in sports.

This is seen notably in the spectacle of suffering of the masculine. The male body is pushed/punished to excess in the training process and results in a baptism by blood into manhood. *Soorma* commences with the harsh corporal punishment received by the child Sandeep. The male characters show scant regard for their well-being – Sandeep pleads with his coach to let him play when he is injured; Milkha runs bleeding and barefooted to compete for the Indian team, and their heroism lies in the neglect of pain and injury; the biopic on Petkar commences with the war motif and the resilience against odds. "Physical displays which result in injury provide evidence of masculine performance ... sports injuries are seen as battle scars" (Wellard, 2009: 15). In women's biopics, however, the regimen of bodily performance which present aggressiveness and toughness – the necessary signifiers of competitive sport – are minimised or absent. If the female is a cause of castration anxiety and has to be demystified through gaze, the sports woman will require sexualisation to strip her of the aggressive/ active role historically ascribed to the male hero. The different regimes of exercise for women glamourize speed and sweat, and in the running, jump rope, gymnastics sessions, the skills associated with the feminine are evoked – agility, grace, and balance. When Saina engages in hard physical training, it is for weight reduction and body toning, and Mithal's training provides the slender muscularity, the new feminine body ideal (Roth and Basow,

260). While both men and women are obliged to treat their bodies as instruments in the pursuit of physical endurance, male bodies are treated as weapons, ultimately resulting in what Messer declared as “violence against one’s own body” (qtd. in Connell, 2005: 58). However, in the case of women, the body is sexualized into the gendered stereotype of the desirable, statuesque feminine, and the protagonists are played by actresses who embody the cultural standards of good looks. Kom, a boxer, shows no bruises or scars from training, and she is denied the muscular body which is symbolic of power. Her most rigorous exercise is the flag pole hold, an exercise that requires a great deal of upper body strength, but the heroine who plays her epitomises the popular ideal of heterosexual attractiveness. In cinema, the disciplinary practices of training in sports produces gendered bodies.

## V. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT AND AGENCY

An inherent paradox of the female biopic is the tension that exists between female ambition and female agency. In women’s biopics, the protagonist is depicted as dependent on another person – mentors, coaches, or family – to be the causal agent. In *Saina*, the female biopic trope of the controlling mother is transmogrified into that of a collaborator and counsellor who determines the major decisions in her life. Bingham observes how the mother figure of the female biopic keeps “the heroine sympathetic ... by rendering her ‘innocent’ of a drive to exceed the ordinary expectations of a woman” (222). During the training and strategizing sessions before the Commonwealth Games, Saina silently listens while her mother discusses the game plan with her coach. Her mentor character, Kashyap, prods her to request her coach to include her in the Indian team for the Philippines Open, whereas, in actuality, Saina was the first player to be selected. Similarly, Kom’s husband, Onler, provides the impetus for her to resume boxing. Lieberman theorises how the female-centred sports film maintains the active male gaze by “continuing to place these cinematic female athletes as objects” by ordaining a male figure (lover, coach, or father) who guides her, saves her and grants permission to enter sports “thereby re-establishing male ownership of the gaze” (10, italics mine). In *Shabash Mithu*, however, the restoration of femininity is incomplete because the impetus to play comes from another female and the woman athlete is celebrated for her athleticism – notably greater than that of her resentful brother. Though there is no heterosexual relationship to restore the patriarchal order, the narrative necessitates a cohort of women to validate her ambition and drive.

## VI. COACHING AND MENTORSHIP

Notably, no female athlete is completely autonomous, while male success is independent of external support. Milkha trains under a series of coaches, but is dependent for success on none of them. While he fills a coffee cup with sweat from his jersey under the supervision of his coach, he fills a fire bucket with his sweat when training on his own. Similarly, Sandeep Singh’s brother mentors him until his first break in hockey, but appears only briefly after his initiation into the Indian team. Both before and after Sandeep’s accident, he is more of a loving caregiver and indulgent sibling, more sidekick than superior. Murlikant Petkar, too, receives his first impetus from his older sibling, but when abandoned by his family after his injury and he watches his weeping mother driven away, he undergoes what Ralph Donald describes as the initiation rites where he is separated from his family, “more specifically from the world of women” where he will “undergo a period of instruction in the behaviours and responsibilities of adult males ... passively and submissively obey all orders given ... by male elders” (173). Male stereotypes of the athlete include possessing innate drive and ambition and the capacity for individual initiative or what Aaron Baker described as the “heroic individual” who “overcomes obstacles and achieves success through determination, self-reliance and hard work” (49).

The powerful male mentor who controls the female athlete is part of the female biopic, and in the sports biography, the coach is a constant presence. All the sportswomen reiterate their inability to win without their coaches. Kom pleads with her coach: “I thought I could make a comeback without your help. But I was wrong. I can box without you but I cannot win.” In the World Women’s Philippines Open, Saina alters her tactics remembering “Rajan sir’s” instructions; her eventual victory is attributed to his tutelage. In her final cliff-hanger match, the commentator comments on the coach, “the midgame interval is when *their* contributions come in,” as the visuals show Saina being motivated by Jeevan Kumar. As Leiberman posits, “at a decisive moment in her career ... her skill is backgrounded and instead all credit is given to the strategic wisdom of a male hero” (71). Even in *Shabash Mithu*, a movie is largely female driven without a male prop to empower ambition, the words and images of the coach are foregrounded in the debut match of Mithali Raj. Writing on the female biopic Griselda Pollock describes how these films confirm, “the pathology of the feminine ... made to hinge about a powerful sexual male figure” (qtd in Codell 2014: 165).

In female biopics, women *occupy* the sporting arena, but it is *run* by men.

Partnerships are, thus, productive for women, but men renounce relationships once they have found their purpose. The predominant archetype in these male sports biopic seems to be that of the *brahmachari* – a masculine figure in the Indian cultural paradigm – who struggles against earthly temptation towards the realization of the self and fulfilment of human purpose. In Indian spirituality, the concept of *brahmacharya* signifies “stature and vitality... energy, ardour, intellect, competence, capacity for work, wisdom, success ...” (Sivananda, 1984: 10-11). When Milkha, whose early life was lived in penury, is picturized as consuming two tins of ghee in one sitting flouting authorities, it not only valorises his masculine insouciance, but also evokes the diet of the wrestler, whose tutelary deity is Hanuman, the celibate God. In the two male sports biopics, women are emplotted successively as muses inspiring them to their game, distracting femme fatales, and eventually as obstacles to be overcome. In *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, the first is Biro; the second, Stella, the Australian girl he has a one-night stand with; and the last Perizaad, the fellow athlete whom he rejects. In *Soorma*, all three roles coalesce into Harpreet. Coaches, too, have only an initial cursory presence in male sports biopics – as the necessary authority to authorize the protagonist’s worth after which they play a marginal role. Milkha Singh defies constraints and flouts the remonstrance of his coach and participates in the selection match. Sandeep Singh demonstrates his cocky irreverence when he asks to play against India’s official goal keeper when trying for the national team. In contrast, the biopic on Petkar, however, is an all-male world with no attempt to reassert patriarchy, and as in the case of women’s biopics, highlights the benevolent constructive effects of a male patron. Murlikant Petkar is driven and sustained by his coach post-injury – the absence of the feminine and masculine value systems in the film may be read as contributing to their limited mainstream acceptance, since the narrative depth of sportsperson biopics illustrate how a sportsman’s challenges hinge around skill and performance, whereas it is determined by personal relationships for a woman – a norm *Champion Chandu* destabilises.

## VII. PERSONAL STRUGGLE AND COMPETITION

The capacity for initiative is downplayed in women’s biopics, particularly when negotiating career setbacks. Bingham analyses the three act structure of the female biopic – rise, fall and rehabilitation: the woman escapes a bad man only so long as there is a “good man” to catch her, and this is illustrated by the Hindi sports biopic (2010: 219). In the biopics analysed, sportswomen suffer diminished self-image and require emotional sanctuary from husbands, families and coaches. When Kom pleads

with her coach to train her, he ties her shawl around her in the North Eastern style with her children on her back, saying “A woman becomes strong after motherhood, and your strength (*taakat*) is now doubled” – providing not only reassurance, but also deploying motherhood as an aid to achievement. Saina suffers a losing streak after her fall out with Rajan and despairs about not knowing “what to do”. The voice over narration relives her of agency – “Ma took control of the situation”. When she resumes training, she credits the succor she receives from her “pillar of strength – my Kashyap”. The genre of women’s biography gravitates towards women who lose control over their “private demons” and displaces public ambition to male partners, managers, and/or husbands (Bingham 2010: 214). However, male biopics valorise the hegemonic notion of “rugged individual self-reliance,” that also marginalises and erases the woman. After his defeat in Australia, Milkha distances himself from Stella, and sets himself a goal to work towards – breaking the world record for the 400 m race. Sandeep Singh writes his father’s resignation letter, appeals for rehabilitation grant, and goes to Denmark for his treatment on his own. The audience is not privy to any motivation from anyone save himself. At the end of his treatment, he displays what Tom Brown defines as ‘the historical gaze’, the “moment in which his [the actor’s] head tilts back, his eyes seem to gaze into an imaginary distance” (Vidal 12). Again, the two biopics that do not display the male transcending impediments by individual effort and assertiveness, while the woman is dependent within the domestic confines of relationships are those on Murlikant Petkar and Mithali Raj. Raj returns to family when she renounces her cricketing career midway but is drawn back into the World Cup competition, it is the collective efforts of her player colleagues, the team Captain (who recollects the admonition on team spirit by the WCB Chief, Shanta), and her Muse, Noorie.

## VIII. EXAGGERATED GENDER TRAITS

While the male biopics employ signifiers of growth and maturity, the commentary, dialogues and graphics of female biopics (re)produce normative images of dependence. At the press conference, Saina stresses the importance of *parivaar* – “*Aap ki mummy, aap ke papa, dost*” in her win, and adds that she must leave to “hand over these [medals] to their true owners”. The infantile terminology for parents as well as her commentary that her victory is not wholly hers is a non-threatening gender representation. The final scene of the film constructs her in connection with other people – parents, fiancé, and friends. Her identity as ‘child’ is underscored by her expression and accompanying music when, at the Czech Open, she looks,

not with triumph, but longing at her defeated opponent being comforted by her mother. The background score is the lullaby her own mother sung to her as a child. *Mary Kom* underscores the inherent tensions between women's success and her role as woman. Her proficiency in cooking is foregrounded during the interview after being awarded the Arjuna Award. When she declares that women would conquer all fields if given opportunities, her subversive statement is counterbalanced by her subsequent gendered performance – the journalist comments on the excellence of her cooking. Commentators have observed that the movie makes no mention of Kom's signature left hook, though it highlights how she loved to paint her nails – "Painting nails is every woman's right," she declares. Creedon quotes Del Ray's suggestion that women athletes are constrained to emphasise their femininity to reduce the cognitive dissonance they experience as a social anomaly (1994: 280). The essentialising reductiveness of Kom's character is foregrounded when she responds to Onler's query on whether she did not want her child – "Of course, like every girl, I also want to be a mother" ("Har ladki ki tarah mere ko bhi maa banna tha"). When her child is ill, she refuses to train for her championship game, demanding of her husband, "How can you think of a match when child is sick? Do you think boxing matters to me now?". While ambition is to be celebrated in a male subject, a woman is first a mother and a home maker. As Lieberman observes,

cinematic female athletes must negotiate more than just a sports victory to have a happy ending; they have to embody a social definition of female ... grounded in the constructions of family, specifically their ability to be a daughter, wife or mother" (17).

By contrast, Mithali is portrayed as painting nails, cooking and engaging in feminine activities only when she comes home defeated after leaving the team. Further, during the 'bride-viewing' ceremony, she demands of her prospective groom if he would give the same precedence to family as was expected of her. However, in the preparation for the World Cup match the background score echoes the maxim of Bharatnatyam dancers: *Yatho hastha thado drishti*, subtly reinforcing a conventional framing of her femininity.

As a result, women's biopics iterate the mediation of femininity and the contingent questions of woman as woman. The opening scene of *Kom* is of her husband remonstrating with her for trying to bear her labour pain. "This is delivery pain. No woman can control this pain," she retorts – she might be a world boxing champion, but when it comes down to essentials – she is still a woman. Saina is given the confidence to play by being told that she is an inspiration for "women and girls" across the country. For

Custen, "the difference between male and female careers ... is striking, men are defined by their gift, women by their gender, or their gendered use of their gift" (1992: 106). The success of the female athlete is, therefore, always a broader statement about empowerment and breaking barriers, and not a personal victory as for her male counterpart. As illustrated in the words of Mithali's muse, Noorie the sportswoman has to be interpellated into the role of a gender pioneer embodying collective struggle, vicarious success, and aspiration of generations of women, "When you are on the pitch, you don't play for yourself – you play for every Noorie who couldn't make it to that ground".

## IX. RESOLUTION AND OUTCOMES

A comparative study of the final contests illustrates the contradistinction between masculine competitiveness and the female dependence. If the hero overcomes a challenge, changes and develops over time, in female biopics the focus is on the return to family. The male biopic, on the other hand, reiterates independence and maturity, and both movies illustrate Kennedy's "interpretation of sports as an internal battle and the existence of a personal flaw that needed to be overcome" (2007: 28). In *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag*, the child Milkha is picturized as running besides his older avatar – symbolic of Milkha having made peace with his past. In *Soorma*, the voice over narration declares that Sandeep is no longer a boy who plays to impress 'some girl', but a sportsman who plays for his nation. Both films refer visually or verbally to an earlier infirmity or flaws of the protagonist and his eventual triumph over it and his personal transformation. Murlikant, likewise, returns triumphantly after receiving the Padma Shri – symbolically uniting societal recognition, and personal and national pride.

However, in female biopics, the locus of attention is on the fundamental indispensability of allies and family. When Saina is exhausted after an hour of play, she envisions her coaches, her friends and family, her adherents and patrons, and garners the will and tenacity to play. The voice over describes individual success as "the game of the human pyramid", where the one who reaches the prize does so because s/he stands on the shoulders of others – minimizing her achievement. The closing shot is a long take of the celebration at home with her parents, fiancé and friends, the accompanying music being the lullaby sung to her as a child. The final title credits announce her marriage to Kashyap as the shot freezes on a commemorative family photo. The trajectory of *Kom*'s final match follows the progress of her child's surgery, and the film intercuts between shots of the match and those of the surgery. When her child's heart stops, she is depicted as collapsing after a

strong punch, and remains prone while hallucinating about her family. It is only when the child is resuscitated, that Kom surges up and wins the match. In an interview the real-life Mary Kom declares how she had never fallen in the ring after a punch and she was not fighting the final of a world championship as her son was being operated on. Kom closes with a long shot of her on the victory podium – where she is unmindful of the peans poured on her, focussed only on the coach speaking to her husband on the phone. As the Indian flag rises to the rendition of the anthem, her coach signals that her child's surgery is successful and tears flow down her cheek in response. The women's role is primarily that of a homemakers, and ambition and achievement are relegated to a backdrop in final summing up of their life narrative. Lieberman humorously observes about female athletes: "You can have this moment, but then it needs to pass and you need to return to your rightful place as wife and mother" (18). *Shabaash Mithu* is overtly gender equitable with the closing titles showing advertising banners for pressure cookers aimed at women dismantled and replaced a poster for women's cricket coaching centre and Mithali's colleague coaching males in a cricketing camp when her husband brings in tea. However, even in this 'empowering' spectacle, a female athlete's story is more about breaking barriers than celebration of athletic success. In male biopics, the attention is uninterruptedly on the competition, the suspense of its uncertainties and reversals until the final win, not on the vindication or validation of a choice of sporting career.

## X. CONCLUSION

Despite its subversive potential, performing gender in sports films conveys a specific ideology – that woman can and should fit into feminine coded values and be non-threatening despite her success in an unfeminine activity. Foregrounding the family-oriented, domesticated, talented woman who is essentially nurturing and feminine and who must fight institutional prejudice with a 'good' man to back her serves to glorify the values associated with femininity. In sports biopics, sports becomes a back drop for a specific ideological reconstruction of a register of gender – men play, women are supported to play. The widespread cultural traction of films that affirm this value system, contrasted with the limited acceptance of those films that sought to challenge it, underscores a larger societal attitude – the emergence of a new patriarchy that, despite a performative embrace of the New Woman, resists the substantive integration of women into male-dominated structures.

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