

## Teaching Gender Through Films on Sportswomen: Contrary Messages

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### Abstract

It is increasingly essential that teachers focus on media-based ways of teaching and learning. Hence, educators include films to provoke discussions and analyses of concepts. Scholars investigating women in films have shown the dominance of gendered constructions and representations. However, there have been few studies evaluating films on Indian sportswomen, although there have been numerous films on this, from *Chak De India* to *Mary Kom*, *Dangal* and, more recently, *Panga*. Specifically presented within the context of a developing country like India, these films have been heralded as life-affirming narratives for women, which will supposedly help in improving the life conditions of girls and women in society – the stark reality of our country being reflected in adverse gender ratios, female foeticide and infanticide, among other ills. However, in fact, many of these films actually reaffirm conventional notions of patriarchy and masculinity. This article assesses the utility of teaching gender and empowerment through two prominent films on sportswomen – *Chak De! India* and *Bend it like Beckham*, which continue to be seen as iconic films. By engaging in critical content analysis and a systematic reading of the narratives, the article highlights that these films, ironically, predominantly identify sports with masculine achievements, wherein women's successes are reduced to supporting narratives. Hence, the gender order is upheld with the identification of the "masculine" with the aggression and vigour associated with sports, while the "feminine" is identified and marked as secondary and inferior, with "her" worth being determined by, and reflecting, "his" success on the sports platform.

**Keywords:** cinematic representations, Indian sportswomen, patriarchy, teaching

## Introduction

One of the most important tools of teaching in the 21st century is the film or visual medium. Due to the ubiquity of images, videos and visual flow that students, and indeed, society is exposed to, it is essential that teachers, educators and courses focus on innovative and media-based ways of teaching and learning. An integral way to do so is of course, to include films or television shows or even video snippets that can provoke thought, reflection, discussions and analyses of different concepts and issues addressed in the course. Indeed, cinema has been highlighted as one of the most important cultural expressions of the increasingly globalized information society that we inhabit (Moura, Cachadinha, & Almeida, 2017). Consequently, utilizing films for analyses relating to important concepts like gender, sexuality, power and discrimination, is indeed a fascinating enterprise.

There has been a growing tendency of investigating the representations of women in films as it helps to shed light on and to question the dominant gender stereotypes that prevail in popular culture. Scholars have focussed on the underrepresentation of women as compared to men in television and films (Signorielli, 2001), the desirability and sexual attraction of women being linked to their younger age (Bacue, 1999), women being rendered and represented as sexualized, objectified and shown as helpless as well as incompetent (Witt, 2000) along with other related themes. There have also been analyses of the role of heroines and female characters in Disney films which have revealed the specific gender constructions and representations they have focussed on – for instance, a depiction of the female characters as being emotional, sexually and socially passive, dependent and romantic as compared to their male counterparts (Wiersma, 2000). Analyses of such films have also revealed how, despite the overt messages of women as powerful and liberated, there are often insidious subtexts of domestic violence, sexism, racism, ageism and a culture of complicity with sexual violence, that is being encouraged (Towbin et al., 2008).

However, there have been far fewer studies on the issue of women in sports as well as their representation in cinema (Muller, 2013). Nonetheless, most of these studies have showcased the very limited number of films being made on this issue of sportswomen, as well as the disproportionate focus on the sexuality and sexualisation of the women (Cahn, 1994; Caudwell, 2009; Pappas, 2012) in which many of these films have engaged. Interestingly, however, very few such studies of evaluating films being made on sportswomen have been done in the Indian context (De, 2013; Mukherjee, 2018). This article is an attempt to analyse the utility of teaching gender and related concepts through the use of two of the most prominent films made on sportswomen in recent times, the first structured within the Indian context, and the second focussed in and around the Indian Diaspora – *Chak De! India* and *Bend it like Beckham*.

### **Films on Sportswomen of Indian Origin: The Case for Analysing *Chak De! India* and *Bend it like Beckham***

It is undoubtedly the increasing global success of Indian sportswoman that has resulted in a higher number of films being made on this issue. Typically, as sports is largely understood as a patriarchal and male-dominated sphere where women have rarely, and only recently, been given increased access, most of the films on Indian sportswomen have focussed on the challenges confronted by these pioneers. If we merely try to list out the total number of films focussing on sportswomen in India, we find that almost all of these films have been released in the last two decades or so. If we take the case of the largest film industry in India, the Hindi language film industry, we find that Bollywood – as it is popularly known – has released

important films like *Chak De! India*, *Mary Kom*, *Dangal*, *Sultan* and the Tamil-Hindi film *Irudhi Suttru* (Hindi film released as *Saala Khadoos*). Apart from these, there was *Kousalya Krishnamurthy*, a Telegu language remake of the Tamil film *Kanaa*, which have both been released in the recent past. It is a logical argument that these films have only been possible due to the success enjoyed by the actual Indian sportswomen at the global sporting arena – for instance, the successes of the Indian sportswomen at the Olympics. Taking a cue from the real life glories of the Indian sportswomen, cinema in India has tended to reflect the rising role women are playing in the traditionally men's world of sport, and professional sport at that.

The films are especially dedicated to highlighting the role played by sport in freeing women from the fetters of a patriarchal society that has always strived to restrain women from accessing and succeeding in the masculine world of sports. Indeed, several scholars have pointed out how sports has traditionally had a huge role to play in celebrating and shaping masculinity and its expressions (Connell, 1995; Rajendran, 2017). The new message or lesson however, is that women have now managed to wrangle their way into the high stakes arena of professional sports. This is also in keeping with the increasing social awareness of feminist issues and the construction of a conscious demographic that will consume films or other aesthetic products that assert such messages.

While almost all of these films have been released after the 2012 and the 2016 Olympic Games where Indian sportswomen won medals and captured the popular imagination like never before, one of the most prominent films on Indian women's sports was of course, *Chak De! India*, which was released in the year 2007. It focuses on the meanings of national identity while being premised on a failing national women's hockey team, and highlights the evolving definitions of Indian womanhood as well as how they play out in the wider space of cultural politics (De, 2013).

In a similar vein, scholars analyse the British-Asian comedy-drama film *Bend it like Beckham*, and attempt to locate the possibilities of sports as an avenue for inclusion, in the context of the construction of a multicultural society like Britain (Abdel-Shehid & Kalman-Lamb, 2015). The film was released in 2002, when in Tony Blair's Britain, multiculturalism was more than just the flavour of changing times. Indeed, in this British film about people of Indian origin or the Indian Diaspora, the trope of multiculturalism as a socio-political strategy of the new Labour government becomes ironically an aspirational idea, while in actuality, doing little to challenge the pressure towards conformity to the white English norm. They also note that the film's apparent feminist commitment, with the context of sport ostensibly offering a scope for the women to overcome their gendered life and opportunities, however, fails to mount a sustained and realistic challenge to the hetero-normative values of patriarchy premised around conventional constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The basic purpose of this paper then is to engage in critical content analysis of these two culturally influential films in order to understand the varied readings and constructions of gender, sexuality and feminisms that these films can be considered to represent. The films have been understood to represent women's empowerment through their successes in sports, however, a more analytical reading of the films suggests that there are in fact, messages contrary to the empowerment narrative that are obvious in the themes. In fact, despite the fact that after the release of these two films, there have been a number of such films that have been centred on sportswomen, some of the more problematic gendered themes that we identify in these two initial films continue to remain relevant in the latter films as well. Consequently, these two films can be considered to have had a lasting impact on the genre, which is what

makes them particularly suitable to use as tools to aid in teaching about gender and its related constructs.

As the following arguments in this paper note, most of the themes in these films are consistent with the constructs of conventional notions of patriarchy and masculinity. Despite the distinctly women-centric premise of both films, the prioritization of the masculine values of authority, pride and aggression as stemming from and being synonymous with the male characters in the film helps to buttress the traditional constructions of men as the decision-makers and change agents within these films.

### **Teaching Women's Empowerment through *Chak De! India*: Patriarchy Prevails**

The film *Chak De! India* essentially starts out by showing that the Indian men's Hockey team captain Kabir Khan had apparently intentionally lost an international match, where he seemingly intentionally misses a penalty shot in a match against Pakistan, causing India to lose the match. Consequently, the media hound him and he is branded a traitor and forced to move out of his home and neighbourhood. With his reputation in tatters, he disappears from the public eye for quite some time before resurfacing years later in order to apply for the post of Coach for the faltering Indian women's hockey team. The film clearly highlights the intrinsically gendered and biased attitude of the Hockey Association officials. The Head of the organization expressly says that the women's hockey team exists merely because of the state providing subsidy, and that there is no inherent value at all that it serves. He believes that the woman's place is only in the home and cooking and cleaning are the only two things that the women should focus on, leaving the sporting activities to the men. By starkly showing the audience what the sportswomen are up against, the film reaffirms its commitment to be a watershed film on women's empowerment by highlighting that nothing is, in fact, impossible for women to accomplish, despite the existence of sizeable obstacles.

The storyline of the film follows how the team falls apart even more due to, firstly, the patriarchal attitude of the officials and the management body, as well as the internal divisions and regional divides between the players themselves. It is only with the talismanic Coach, played by Shah Rukh Khan, and his tremendous self-belief and determination, that the players are united as a team and learn to play like, and eventually become, champions. Apart from asserting the unshakeable patriotism of the coach and his redemption at an international sporting event, the film also intends to serve as a celebration of girl power, Indian womanhood and the solidarity of women.

Indeed, it must be recognized that *Chak De! India* played a significant role in the popularizing of the issue of women's sport as well as harbouring a keen sense of nationalistic fervour. However, while attempting to read the film as a visual text in order to interrogate the meanings of women's empowerment that it claims to envision, I would like to point out that despite the film-makers' attempts to reconceptualise sport as an avenue of liberation for women, the end result is much more contradictory and complex.

Since the movie is so predominantly premised on the trope of the "hero" – represented by the mentor cum coach figure of Kabir Khan, and his redemption through success at an international sporting event, the focus on the women becomes secondary, and instead is subverted by the male figure of the coach emerging as patronising and decisive, who needs must direct the women as they have to unite to win the ultimate sporting event. The male as rescuer of a troubled women's team becomes another variation of the trope of the male as saviour of the

damsel(s) in distress (Wiersma, 2000), who are unable to help themselves and rendered voiceless and agency-less, unless and until the central hero of the film comes to their aid. Indeed, the underlying narrative of the film is overwhelmingly masculine and patriarchal – as revealed by the figure of the coach as not only embodying the role of the paternal protector, but also serving as a potential source of threat to the female characters whenever they serve to challenge his masculine authority. For instance, the coach Kabir Khan warns the senior-most player that despite her obvious seniority and experience, she cannot be the “goonda” or undisputed leader, the trouble-making masculine entity (De, 2013), since every team can only have one such character, and in this case, it is he, himself who fills that role. Hence, the implicit violence that has been identified by feminists as part of the structure of control of patriarchy (Krishnan, 2018) has, ironically, been showcased by this film celebrating the power of Indian women as well.

### **Teaching Gender Stereotypes and Women’s Agency through *Bend it like Beckham*: Locating Sport as Avenues for Reclaiming Masculinity**

The second film that I seek to read in order to understand its gender implications is *Bend it like Beckham*. It tells the story of two eighteen-year-old aspiring professional footballers in the United Kingdom: Jesminder “Jess” Bhamra and Jules Paxton. Jess is from a British Asian Sikh background while Jules is from a white ethnic background. Following the Orientalist trope of the European initiating the Asian (Said, 1978), she initiates Jess into the local women’s football team. Both the women have their own battles to bear as Jess is shown to come from a very conservative family where her mother is extremely concerned at her lack of femininity, as well as her overt challenge to traditional gender norms, whereas Jules is plagued by the presence of a hyper feminine mother who believes that sporting activities lead to undesirably masculine traits among women along with the possible spectre of turning her daughter into a lesbian, in keeping with the close cliché association of sportswomen being likely to be lesbian in terms of sexual orientation (Caudwell, 2009).

Further, there is an attempt to address the construct of multiculturalism as integration in the film; however, the structuring is such that Jess’ attempts to embrace typically English practices are seen as an entire contrast to traditional Asian Indian values and hence, her transformation into adopting the English lifestyle and practices are almost constructed as rejections of her devalued Indian identity and cultural values, revealing the relatively overt way in which the colonial narrative of the whites as offering a respite from the barbaric nature of Indian culture seems reemphasized.

### **Sport as Inherently Masculine: The Failure of the Case for Empowering Women**

Sport can be located as one of the last few legitimate spaces for men to claim, emphasize and reassert their masculinity. As it is an elaborate ritual for men to display their physical strength and aggression in a publicly accepted and approved way, feminist critics have frequently been critical of its inherently gendered and exclusionary character. Sporting activities have been noted as being the foundational basis for the development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, as well as offering men the cultural ideals of the perfect masculinity to aspire to (Connell, 1995). Additionally, the female body in sport has tended to be scrutinized in terms of its levels of sexualisation and desirability. Traditionally, the women, and by extension the female body, have been held up as the rewards or spoils of victory in sporting events, and more recently served in the role of the overtly sexualised objects, important as diversionary spectacles but not as intrinsically competent competitors (Muller, 2013).

In both these films, despite the celebration of the actualization of women as sportspersons being the manifestly obvious focus, the essential significance attached to authoritative, patriarchal figures – what may be referred to as the role of the “benevolent dictator” – is played out by the central figures of coach Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India*, and by Jess’ father Mr Bhamra, as well as by the ethnically white coach Joe, in *Bend it like Beckham*.

Mr Bhamra is consistently portrayed in a largely sympathetic light, as a victim of systemic racism while Joe, a much younger coach who could not go the distance in his own men’s football career due to injury, is similarly treated as the source of masculine authority, direction and guidance for Joe and Jules. And indeed, in the ultimate and predictable victory of the women’s team when both Jules and Jess are selected to go for the much-coveted US-based soccer scholarship, it is as much an affirmation of Joe’s capacity to participate in and find success/fulfilment in the ultimate sporting arena of football.

As for the coach Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India*, his journey towards the retrieval of his erstwhile reputation as a loyal player, which had been “lost” due to the clearly undeserved allegations of betrayal and cheating that he had faced earlier, is addressed through his reclamation of the lost masculine identity and potency with the success of the women’s team. This journey is, of course, complicated by his Muslim identity in a Hindu-majority country like India and the allegation of cheating having been made in a match against Pakistan; the background of war and antagonistic relations between India and Pakistan is of supreme significance in this context.

### **Conclusion: Movies, Masculinity and Messages**

It can be argued that *Bend it like Beckham* falls within the lens of post-feminism as a “sensibility” wherein ideas of women’s empowerment are gradually affirmed through the agency of the individual woman, as against the structural and systemic nature of sexism that must be combated as a matter of course by women across the world. The trope of the sportswoman finding fulfilment and success through sport and becoming empowered is still a shying away from the acknowledgement of the need for a collective correction of structural inequalities. Both *Chak De! India* and *Bend it like Beckham* are, indeed, sports films centred on women engaged in sports as vocation with the emphasis on the liberating potentials of sports. The twin contexts of the developing world and the developed world – as evident through these films – may differ in terms of basic facilities but the approach to women in sports seems to be quite similar. The perspective of the man as coach, and to a lesser extent, as the protectionist *Pater*, largely renders women as agency-less subjects who need to be taught and trained in the ways and skills of masculine sports. Additionally the male coach and/or the *Pater* is one who had inevitably failed in men’s sports in some way – either in terms of breaking into the world of professional men’s sports – as exemplified by Joe and Mr Bhamra in *Bend it like Beckham* – or failed as a model sportsman who epitomizes loyalty and commitment to sport and his nation, as exemplified by Kabir Khan in *Chak De! India*. Hence, the failure of the man is an implied and yet clearly articulated failure of him in terms of his masculine identity. Subsequently, their success in the women’s sporting arena, even as it comes through the sportswomen’s triumphs, becomes a way for the emasculated sportsmen to almost reclaim victory, and therefore, their masculinity.

Consequently, teaching these two foundational visual texts as premised on the meaning and nature of women’s empowerment becomes a complicated and ultimately problematic exercise, since these films celebrate the importance of sports as an avenue for masculine achievements,

wherein women's successes only become supporting narratives in the overwhelmingly male tropes of success and glory in sports. Therefore, teaching gender and the related concepts of femininity and masculinity, as well as the complexities of sexuality, through two seemingly women-centric films becomes an exercise in contradictions, due to the implicit but clearly antithetical messages that they seem to express.

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