

Dangal: Patriotism, Patriarchy, and Gender Politics

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Abstract

Aamir Khan starrer and produced film *Dangal* (2016, Nitesh Tiwari) hit the cinema screen on Christmas last year and it has crossed the figure of 300 crore. *Dangal* is the story of a father-coach Mahavir, who imposed his dream on his daughters to get Olympic gold in wrestling for the nation. *Dangal* has been promoted as a feminist film for supporting women's wrestling in sports. Though this film is remarkable in touching the cords with common audiences, it seems very problematic in terms of gender politics. At the one side, this film is propagating for women's empowerment in very feudal state Haryana where, female foeticide and sex ratio are very critical. On the other hand, it also emphasises that gender equality or feminism will only arrive by the supports of male. This paper argues that this year's released much hyped film *Pink* (2016, Shoojit Sircar) and *Dangal* portray a subservient version of feminism where these films subconsciously portray the concept of 'male savior' in the Hindi film industry.

Keywords

Feminist Film, Melodrama, Patriotism, Patriarchy, Gender Politics

Biopic Sports Genre

Dangal is a biographical sports drama film based on amateur wrestler Mahavir Singh Phogat, who trained wrestling to his daughters Geeta Phogat (Fatima Sana Shaikh), and Babita Kumari (Sanya Malhotra). Mahavir Phogat's character is played by star Aamir Khan, who forced his daughters in men's wrestling world for the sake of his failed desired to win a gold medal for the nation. Mahavir's daughters, his wife (Sakshi Tanwar) and society have resisted against his decision. Later they get interest in sports and elder daughter Geeta Phogat won the gold medal in 2010's historic Commonwealth Games.

After globalization and liberalization, biopic genre especially sports drama has become very popular. It might be because of the rise of middle classes and its aspirations. *M. S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (2016, Neeraj Pandey), *Marry Kom* (2014, Omung Kumar),

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Bhaag Milkha Bhaag (2013, Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra) and *Sultan* (2016, Ali Abbas Zafar) were highly successful at box office. These sports biopic films can be associated with this new emerging middle classes, who aspire to be successful and they want new role model for it. They need inspiration, motivation and icon from their own class. *Dangal* celebrates the success of new emerging middle class.

This change has been possible because of the rise of multiplex where upper middle class used to watch. Adrian Athique and Douglas Hill argued that Indian multiplex is much more than an architectural form and it represents the 'unbound India' that celebrates the glory of India.¹ The rise of Indian multiplex has become phenomenal that denied the space for single screen theatre after the liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s. This process has created new middle class audiences, who watch cinema in the multiplex and this middle class is the prime audience for these biopic that depicts new heroes in the society. In that sense, it can be argued that these sports biopic is a category of 'multiplex cinema' that acknowledges the socio-economic needs of aspiring new middle class audiences. Sports biopic represents a history and culture of aspiring middle class that reflects in cinema. We are living in a transitional phase in terms of gender justice², where society is struggling between values, morality and ambition.

Feminist Film and Male Ego

Dangal film is promoted and seen as feminist film but this film is all about Mahavir Phogat stardom. The film gives very little space to the success of Phogat sister. In the film climax scene, Geeta is fighting for Commonwealth Game 2010 (CWG). In this game, Geeta is constantly looking at her father's face and her coach for winning strategy. It seems that Geeta is unable to develop her own method or strategy in spite of having practiced wrestling for more than seven to eight years. This film subconsciously establishes the notion of patriarchy by giving importance to her both male coaches. She is constantly relied on the feedback of her father, who gives winning strategy to her daughter. It is important to mention here that how this film emphasises the importance of Mahavir Phogat by the narration of his wrestling technique at the time of fighting sequence of CWG in the mind of Geeta's subconscious level. Whenever, Geeta listens to her inner voice, which is the narration of Mahavir wrestling technique, she defeat opponent each time. One can sense that how women are dependent on the men for the success. In the last scene, when Geeta won the gold medal, film narrative turns attention to her father. *Dangal* revolves around the aspiration, dream and challenges of Mahavir Phogat from beginning to the end of the film. This film shows that Geeta would not be able to win the gold without the help of her father Mahavir Phogat. Actually, Mahavir Phogat/ Aamir Khan is the real hero of this film not his daughter Geeta, who won prestigious gold medal. But at the same time, Mahavir should be appreciated that he imagined his daughter as wrestler in feudal society where sex ratio and female foeticide is very high. He was basically a patriarchal thinker but he was forced by circumstances to become a feminist. It is to be highlighted that the film is all about one man who driven by his male ego and its film narrative has given too much emphasis to Mahavir/Aamir Khan. Geeta's victory is overshadowed by her father and all sympathy goes to her father. It looks like that Mahavir has won the main battle not Geeta. She was just a catalyst to add stardom to her father. This film is also a typical formulae Hindi film of Bollywood, where hero and villain exist but it is packaged differently.

¹ Athique, Adrian and Douglas Hill. (2010). *The Multiplex in India: A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*. London and New York: Routledge,

² Gender is believed to be a social construct that outlines the roles, behaviors, activities that are appropriate for men and women whereas sex is a biological reality.

Laura Mulvey argues in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”³ that how patriarchal society consciously or subconsciously emphasises patriarchy and shapes our view on the cinema viewing practices. She talks about ‘male gaze’ that occurs several times on the screen and this theory suggests that the ‘male gaze’ denies women as human being and it relegates women to the status of mere objects of desire for male. She argues that women being portrayed as the perspectives of men and in this sense, woman also see women on screen in the same way as male do. In that respective, *Dangal* has double male gaze, one on the screen and other off-screen. When Mahavir Phogat goes with her daughter Geeta in the local village’s palaestra, she has not been permitted to fight in bout in male bastion sports. But, one manager suggests that Geeta should be invited in palaestra so that people will come in large numbers to see how girl fight with boys in arena in men dominated wrestling. Here, woman body is objectified on the screen as well as off the screen. Large numbers of crowds mainly men come to see how girl fights with boy.

Male Stardom

In the opening sequence of this film, Mahavir Phogat defeats a much younger state level wrestler three times in the office premises in front of colleagues. After the defeat, young wrestler says “*tune aaj state level champion ko harayahi, khus ho le*” (you have defeated a state level champion, you should be happy). Mahavir replied back “*dil-chota n kar...tu national champion se hara hai*” (“Don’t upset, you were defeated by national level champion today”). It is to be noted that in the very starting scene, he is portrayed as a central hero and it shows that it’s about the success and story of Mahavir Phogat much more than the Fogat sisters. On social media, feminist critics criticized that Fogat sisters does not have own agency, they are merely bodies of her father’s dreams. Initially, the children were not interested in wrestling and they don’t co-operate with their father. Fogat sisters have two choices either go for wrestling what her father wants or get married at the early age and do unpaid domestic work and become reproductive machines. Both sisters chose wrestling as Geeta said in film “*issase achcha to pahl wani hi hai*” (wrestling is better option than doing domestic work”). It is interesting to note that girls have only two options and they choose wrestling as they don’t have any other better option. It shows the limited opportunities for girls in the patriarchal society. They chose wrestling and they have to sacrifice their childhood and faced the taunts of the society.

This film is always sympathetic towards Mahavir Phogat. In one scene, when Geeta goes for higher training in Patiala, she discovers her femininity and grows her hair, which is against the will of her father. When she is defeated in several matches, audiences sense that it’s good she lose the games, she deserves it because she was not following the father’s steps. The whole film is made on the concept of Indian patriarchal society, which says that father is always right. In the film, *Taare Zameen Par* (2007, Aamir Khan) and *Udaan* (2010, Vikramaditya Motwane), fathers depicted as a villain, who forced their children for certain careers. But in this film Geeta and Babita were also forced for wrestling but they were successful. Mahavir Phogat became the hero otherwise he would be called as a villain. We felt more sympathy for Mahavir than Geeta. It is interesting to note that Mahavir Phogat becomes a national hero because we want to see father as right person, we see father’s feudal mentality and morality as value. We don’t question these things. As a society, if we have questioned these things, this film should be a film of daughters (Gita, Babita) not their father (Mahavir).

³ See for details -<https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1021/Laura%20Mulvey,%20Visual%20Pleasure.pdf>

Melodrama and Nationalism

Dangal is highly melodramatic film as Vasudevan argues that “melodrama as a form addressed the fundamental unsettling of the sacred and socio-political hierarchies (2010: 18) and that of Thomas Elsaesser who focused on popular forms of storytelling and “emphasized the question of personality in melodrama’s tendency to personalize public and political conflicts” (Ibid). *Dangal* adopts a popular form of narrative that highlighted the stardom of Aamir Khan and it was a “generalized mode of cinematic narration” (20) which contests the labeling of melodrama as “women’s films”. Vasudevan further puts forward that while such postulations project melodrama as a highly adaptive form one must retain melodrama’s association with a “gesture towards the moral domain based on its engagement with a situation with victimhood” (23). Bollywood often uses melodramatic types of speech that delivered in localized language. For example, *Dangal* has notable dialogue like Mahavir Singh said “*Hamar choriyachoro se kamhaike*” (our daughters are no less than boys). This dialogue becomes very popular outside of the realm of film industry and it is widely accepted by public that becomes a part of popular culture.

Interestingly, this film called as feminist film but it does not talk about women’s freedom and desire. For example, in one scene, Geeta and her friend goes to shopping complex, she flaunts her grown hair, watches the cinema, she looks at guy and laugh. *Dangal* does not embrace Geeta’s femininity and her natural desire. The film shows that these are distractions from higher goal and that goal is to fulfill the dream of her father by winning a gold medal for the nation. When she grown her hair in Patiala training centre, film shows that she is moving in the wrong direction as she has not followed the instructions of her father.⁴ She would go to lose the match and she in fact loses all international matches because of not following the father’s teaching methods. In one scene, Geeta has apologized to her father for it and promised to follow his instructions. Later, she cut the hair short, followed the father and won the CWG match. Here, the film never embraces their personal desire and her femininity. Instead, it depicts that Geeta’s femininity is obstacle in her success. She has to be masculine and cut her hair short and obey her father. Interestingly, real Geeta has a long hair when she won a gold medal in CWG and her opponent has also a long hair. This means that women’s femininity and her long hair is not an obstacle in women’s sports, especially wrestling.

Hollywood sports drama film *Million Dollar Baby* (2004, Clint Eastwood) talks about the protagonist Hilarey Swank’s personnel achievement and her athlete’s quest to become a professional boxer in men dominating sports, which is above the nationalism. Whereas, *Dangal* never celebrates Geeta’s personal or professional success and her desires of her own. Here, Geeta is portrayed as ‘sacrificial figure’ for the nation where she is merely an object of loyalty to her father and the nation and that thing is celebrated by the large audiences.

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⁴ Mahavir thinks that girl’s hair is distraction in sports. He cuts the hair of his daughters while training for the wrestling. When Geeta goes to other city for higher training, she again grows her hair long.

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