

# **Confetti Of Literary Thoughts**

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# Mary Kom and Williams Sisters: The Undying Sportswomen Spirit

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Women's participation in sports has a long history. It has not followed a linear path towards greater participation. Sports has been considered a highly gendered social sphere as women were denied their participation. "It serves as a site for celebrating skills and values clearly marked as 'masculine'" (Bryson,1983). Gender has become an important factor in the sociology of sport since 1970s. Women have been excluded from the field as they lack physical dominance, aggression and competitiveness. The sport has been predominantly a male preserve and often considered as a site for hegemonic masculinity. The society has created demarcations between men and women in the field of sports. Sports has played a historical role in the maintenance of hierarchical gender relations and women's participation and performance in sports has always been negotiated with this set of hierarchical gender relations.

Women have been fighting for equal opportunities in every fields all throughout history. In sports, specifically, they were considered physically weak to involve in the games. The conventions of the society shattered their long-held dreams. They were expected to be equally fit as men and to have certain gender perceptions such as assertiveness, aggressiveness and power which are contradictory to the general notions about women. There are many women who have broken the stereotypes of the society and transcended the dominated sphere of sports. Many biopics have played a significant role in portraying the life of such women.

The movie 'Mary Kom' directed by Omung Kumar revolves around the life of an eponymous boxer, MC Mary Kom, the only woman to win the World Amateur

Boxing Championship six times. The daughter of a poor farmer in Manipur fights all the obstacles and pursue her ultimate dream by balancing the needs of personal and professional lives. Like every other sportswomen, Mary Kom has also faced lack of opportunities and facilities. She is one of the finest examples that show the world that if one has the willpower, no one can stop them from achieving their passion. Women are often considered physically weak and creates a notion in everyone's mind that they are incompetent in the dominated sphere of sports. In contrary to this, Mary Kom has become successful by exposing her excellence in a physically demanding sport.

Mary Kom nicknamed as 'Magnificent Mary' is portrayed as an inspiration for thousands of women, especially in India. As the well-known proverb says "If you educate a girl, you educate a nation", one female player will inspire the whole world to achieve the same. Though there are constraints put towards the sporting mothers, many female athletes have demonstrated that motherhood can bring athletic identity. In many instances, the society questions their identity, as it contradicts the traditional "good mother" ideals. Kom breaks this traditional ideals by returning with a huge comeback after her delivery. The power of motherhood is revealed when her coach says "A woman becomes even stronger after becoming a mother. And now your strength has increased two-fold. So we will work twice hard" (1:32:05). Mary Kom reinforces her identity after being subjected to criticisms and facing failures. Mary Kom's father is a typical conservative father who stands against his daughter's dream. The scene in which he points out to the boxing glove and says "This is no girl's toy" (00:04:46) and "Who will marry you once your nose and face are broken?" (00:06:45) reveals his conformity to the conventional rules of the society. In a state like Manipur, where there is an impediment to

women's progress in sports, Mary Kom has outshined men through her perseverance. She broke the gender barriers by participating in a masculine sport which is indicated in her father's words "From the first time you picked them up, you've started acting like a boy" (00:06:52). The female masculinity of Mary Kom is clearly presented in her fight with a boy in the village and she gets mocked by his words "We've got the female Mohammad Ali over here!" (00:07:51). Mary Kom is faced with many challenges as the discourses of femininity and masculinity control the domain of sports. Though she dislikes calling her a 'boy', the society limits her image to a 'masculine' female through her profession.

Women are often subjected to social deprivation and their capabilities are undermined. There are differences in facilities and opportunities provided to men and women. When the interviewer asks "Why is it that in spite of having a huge population, we have managed to produce such few champions. Is it because of lack of talent?" (00:45:43) Kom replies that "It's not because of lack of talent, but the lack of facilities to promote the talent" (00:45:52). The federation refuses to provide more facilities to Kom than the everyday tea and banana diet. The participation of women arouses many problems and the availability of infrastructure only to a particular section of the society and also the social and economic inequalities affect the progress of women's sports in the country. There is huge discrepancy between male and female incomes as women are paid less or half of what is provided to their male counterparts. Myriam Lamare, a French boxer stated that "A woman who can box is a woman who can fight- at once capable of giving life and of defending it, in the true sense of the word. I am strong and feminine, vulnerable and active" (Lamare,2006). Mary Kom is so stubborn that she gives her time, joy and identity to boxing and is faced with a dilemma when she is asked to choose between her father and boxing. There has been an impediment to women's

progress in sports particularly in Northeast India. “You are biased against me just because I’m from Manipur” (1:24:21). This suggests the ignorance faced by Mary Kom from the federation and she tries to overcome her limitations by performing to the best of her ability.

The ways through which Mary Kom has surmounted the predicaments of her life invigorates many young women who are portrayed as powerless in the minds of people. The traditional notions of the society is subverted by Mary Kom with her aggressiveness, power and assertiveness. The childhood struggles she had experienced have finally delivered the results for what she has been longing for. Mary Kom is also successful in breaking the gender ideologies that prevailed in the society. She builds an independent and dignified masculine identity by altering the attitude of the people. She takes boxing as an opportunity to change the perception about women. Mary Kom hopes that her participation in boxing would inspire every women whose dream is being shattered. Apart from Mary Kom, there are many other women who have highly contributed to the field of sports.

The movie ‘King Richard’ directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green follows the life of two Afro-American sisters, Venus Williams and Serena Williams, the greatest tennis players in the history of sports in the world. The William sisters have build an identity through their father’s relentless support. He provides them with “everything the girls need to go from prodigy to pro” (00:01:35). The 78-page plan written by their father before they were even born helped them transform into eminent personalities of the world. The lack of financial resources cause a decrease in opportunities and it results a hindrance in their ability to progress. The inequality of social class is a major issue in sports through which the talent of the lower class is neglected. Venus and Serena face the issue of being repudiated by the coaches as they

hail from Ghetto, a slum area. “They work as hard as they need to stay off these streets. I’m in the champion-raising business” (00:04:23) says Richard, their father, as he wanted his daughters to have a distinguished career.

The lack of recognition of Black women athletes was a matter of controversy in America for a long time. The white-dominated society were in opposition to the participation of the Black women in tennis, a white sport. Venus and Serena have experienced adversities in the name of race, through which they lacked basic facilities. Richard encourages Venus by saying “Now I haven’t been no great daddy...but I’ve never done anything but try to protect you. This next step you about to take, it would...it would be hard for anybody. But for you, you not gonna just be representing you, you gonna be representing every little Black girl on Earth” (1:42:33). Venus and Serena come from rich history of people like Sojourner Truth, American women’s rights activist who fought for justice and rights of Black people.

Women have been fighting for their equality in the field of sports for ages. They have faced gendered and racialized stigmatization all throughout their life and tried to surpass all obstacles to transcend the dominated sphere of sports. It is important to give women equal opportunity in sports as it helps them in many ways. The lack of media attention is a major issue women face in this field. In order for women to have true equality in sport, the media will need to begin to recognize women for their athletic ability and the society will need to move away from the social conditioning of women into gender stereotyped roles.

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