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## BREAKING THE STEREOTYPES: A FEMINIST READING OF THE MOVIE *DANGAL*

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### ABSTRACT

For many decades, women have been presented in traditional roles as submissive and timid characters in Hindi cinema, a popular medium. The recent movie, *Dangal* rebels against the patriarchal system by providing the women an equal status to men. The movie presents itself to be served as a feminist text because it champions the cause of women against the oppressive patriarchal system. Our society has demarcated some preconceived notions for the male and the female in some way or the other. It is almost impossible for a woman to cross those stereotypical boundaries. The movie is one such a move to make the people think beyond their biased state of minds. It has showcased how a woman can make her presence felt in a domain previously captured by men. It comes out as a victory of the women against all the odds of the society which do not allow them to exercise their agency. The paper will analyze how the movie has challenged the various gender stereotypes rooted in the society through many layers. It will also study how the film has presented the two girls named Geeta and Babita setting up a new benchmark for the entire female community by asserting their identity in a male dominated society.

Keywords: feminism, identity, stereotypes, patriarchal society, gender, bollywood, cinema

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Cinema as a popular cultural artifact reflects the collective consciousness of the society. With its narrative and visual function, it acts as a medium through which the societal changes can be represented on the screen. Indian society is very much obsessed with cinema whose effect is far reaching and most appealing to the masses. The history of Hindi cinema presents a woeful picture of discrimination and marginalization of women. Traditionally women have been reduced to a mere spectacle in the movies, pretty faces objectified for their beauty. The Hindi movies have essentially been male-centric, leaving little space for the women to evolve as an independent character. They have been

portrayed either as damsels in distress or demented feminists or simple belly-shaking glam dolls whose sole ambition in life is to attract the attention of the male gender. But in recent years, the Indian Cinema has been a witness to a sea-change in the presentation of the female protagonists. The picture of woman presented by the bollywood is changing in more than one sense. They have been provided the centre stage which has been denied to them so far. They have been made a part of the mainstream instead merely being the objects of sexual desire. The recent movie *Dangal* is one such attempt in the Hindi cinema, which moves beyond the set patterns of the society and forms new parameters.

*Dangal* is undoubtedly the strongest feminist movie to have come out of Bollywood in a year that has seen a parade of strong women—from *Pink* to *Dear Zindagi*. What *Dangal* is about is a rare glimpse of Indian cinema trying to break stereotypes (especially gender stereotype), trying to break limitations, and also trying to break a string of jarring masala movies. In a context that devalues the feminine to the extent of oppression, *Dangal* represents the voice of talent that is beyond gender, the film succeeds to convince that women can retain their femininity and yet be successful and even without adopting the 'masculine' they can make their mark. The movie has championed many causes. Firstly, it portrays a father who wanted his daughters to pursue something (wrestling) which was un-imaginable in that social context. Secondly, it reveals what it took for the first generation of women wrestlers to break those masculine stereotypes and depicts the overall impression of wrestling in the realm of sports culture in India.

The movie encapsulates the emotional relationship between the father-daughter and despite all the hardships that he has to face from the society; he manages to train his daughters to compete for the national and international level wrestling competitions. It is a realistic portrayal of a common man in Haryana in late 80s-90s who fights against all odds just to make sure that he can enter his daughters in what was essentially known as a man's sport. In one moving scene, the sisters witness a friend's child marriage and realize the grim reality of their society they live in. The movie is inspired by a real life story of Mahavir Singh Phogat (Amir Khan) who could not compete for Olympics because he succumbed to the societal pressure of settling down with a job that was a source of stable income and got married to have a normal family life. However, he always regrets doing so and hence wanted a male child in order to fulfill that dream of winning a gold medal for the country. This is where a feminist lens is crucial to examine the prescribed gender roles and association of wrestling with 'masculinity.' His desire of a male child is the result of the regressive patriarchal mentality which does allow him to even consider woman as some entity. This dominated society considers woman as an

object whose sole purpose is to cater to the whims of the men.

When his wife is pregnant with their first child, he paces up and down and yearns for the news to be in affirmation of a boy child. Moving on to the movie, Sakshi Tanwar (Mahavir's wife) becomes pregnant two more times in the hope of bearing a son but it so happens that each and every time they become parents to a girl child. In between her pregnancies is a montage of ridiculous and superstitious formulae and a string of unsolicited advice from neighbours and well-wishers of how to get a son. These offerings to fate involve feeding holy cows and bizarre nightly chores which reminds one of the crippled mentalities on the part of the society. The little detail of not distributing the sweets among the people shows how there is no notion of 'celebration' when a girl child is born. This incident shows the narrow mindedness of the male dominated society who is sceptical of the birth of a girl child and even wants to control her birth by hook or by crook. Thus a woman's identity remains in constant danger even before her birth. And even if she manages to come into this world by some chance, her birth is being labeled as misfortune. It is quite apparent that in our daily lives—the birth of a boy is celebrated and there are certain aims and ambitions that are assumed to be pre-given by the society and the family for them. However, the girls have to constantly prove their worth in order to be treated with same respect and dignity time and again. It is quite visible in the movie also.

After four daughters, Mahavir gives up trying and hoping, locking up his medal and dreams in a trunk. However, Mahavir Phogat does not sound like a misogynist because he tells his wife, "Bura mat maan na, lekin mujhe jo sapna poora karna hai, woh beta hi kar paawe hai." These words reflect the protagonist's dilemma that on level, he is not upset with his wife for giving birth to a girl child but on the other level; he is also controlled by the same patriarchal society which does not allow the free agency to women. Obviously, such a notion stems from the existing gender norms in our society where physical strength and hence taking up sports as a career is naturally associated to masculinity. The incident of the beating of the two young boys by

Geeta and Babita acts like an epiphany for Mahavir Singh who realizes the real identity of his two young girls that even the girls can compete with men. He realizes that his daughters are capable of wrestling because they have displayed a very 'masculine' trait: reacting to an unfavourable situation with violence. In it lies the first flicker of feminism as Mahavir's face lights up watching his daughters demonstrate fighting, almost chiding himself for being so utterly stupid longing for a son. This is the first moment when the girls are seen as no less than men through the eyes of a patriarch who sees in them a hope for the future. His famed dialogue "mhaari chori chhoron se kam hai ke" (Are our daughters less than boys) can be seen as an invocation for the female conscious.

However, initially the girls see their father as a dominant patriarch who is forcing his dream upon them. Even the song 'Haanikarak Babu' aptly expresses the feeling of a typical child who is undergoing the hegemonic parental pressure of becoming someone without her own willingness. The girls resort to escapism and avoid the hard training that is required for them to become wrestlers. This becomes more visible in the scene where Geeta and Babita attend their friend's mehendi ceremony and tell her that they are misleading a 'normal' girl's life. It is then that their friend makes them realize "how fortunate they are to have a father like Mahavir who is paying attention to his children; otherwise usually in our society, parents got their young girls married off as soon as they hit puberty." Her famed dialogue "*Kam se kam unhone tumhein aulaad ka darja to diya hai* (atleast he acknowledges you) acts as a realization and inspiration for the two sisters who further show their keen interest in a sports which is not the female's domain. Barring their initial hesitation, Geeta and Babita are clearly in their element in every match.

Dangal is not a movie, but a movement against the regressive mentality which claims that women are less than men and belong only inside homes. Women are not expected to express their feelings or to develop their personalities rather get accustomed to their individual subjugation and succumb to the same. Simone de Beauvoir, a

famous feminist writer states that: "One is not born a woman rather she becomes one," in that under the aegis of femininity she is in fact following the dictates of an ideal, largely created by men, to ensure that man keeps his place as top dog in a patriarchal society. As such, men become the standard by which women are measured against (and invariably don't match up to), and woman is reduced to a passive object, whose beauty regimes and supposed feminine attributes confine her to a life devoid of action and thought. She asserts:

"Society, being codified by man, decrees that woman is inferior; she can do away with this inferiority only by destroying the male's superiority."

According to her, women should not allow themselves to be limited by other people's ideas of what they are or how they should behave or what they should look like. "The most potent weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." The oppressive patriarchal norms hegemonize a woman right from her birth to maturity. Thus her womanhood is a social construct not a biological one. It is being filtered in her psyche that she is weak and inferior to men. She has been denied all the rights and is being forced to live as the Other. The protagonists Geeta and Babita's challenging of the male superiority on various moments justifies this statement. They move beyond the established notions and perform as active subjects. For instance, when young Geeta takes part in one of the first wrestling match of her life; she was looked down upon, taunted, made fun of with her father. She is scoffed at:

"Most men leech at her, snigger obscenely; wonder if she would fight in a tee shirt, hoping it to rip off. And as soon as Geeta makes her male opponent bite the dust, jaws drop, hands applaud and the same lecherous men start rooting for her."

During the match, where she tells his opponent male wrestler, *chori samajhke mat ladiyo*, (Don't fight by considering me a girl) is an evocative one. This statement on the part of Geeta is a direct challenge to the patriarchal regime. It portrays her as a woman who is asserting her voice against the dominant ideology. She is a representative of her

class who is not willing to accept her oppressors and is ready to break the male superiority. This goes against the ways in which girls have been typecast in a male-dominated society.

*Dangal* is caught in stereotypes, its tone is lewd, a few characters perverted. The film lists out each of these vices and busts them hard in their face giving viewers a sense of joy and relief. The film also celebrates the role reversal. Geeta and Babita's cousin Omkar becomes their Man Friday. He trains with them, cooks for them, travels with them and even gets slapped for them multiple times, yet his sense of bravado or machismo is never questioned. Wrestling has traditionally been considered a 'man's sport' in India, add to this the fact that the girls belong to a village in Haryana- the state that has a skewed sex ratio and is notorious for violations of rights of women and girls. Geeta and Babita's achievements are not just achievements for themselves and the nation but a major milestone in the fight for gender equality. It is not only about two women who made it great, it also speaks of how gender based bias is rooted in our minds and also how this bias can be overcome, the way Mahavir and the two girls do. Their story is indicative of how change of mindset of an individual is capable of breaking taboos and doing away with misogyny.

The two girls prove that gender is not a restraint for them in their path to victory. Gender, according to Judith Butler, is by no means tied to material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construction, a fiction, one that, therefore, is open to change and contestation:

"Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" That genesis is not corporeal but performative, so that the body becomes its gender only "through a series of acts which are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time" (Butler 273).

By excelling in a sports that is not meant for them, the girls showcase the fact that their determination can break through the masculine bastion of wrestling to prove that they can do anything men can. The two young girls in the movie liberates themselves from the notion of gender and manifests their capability to overcome every constraint. Geeta and Babita's journey peppered with a lot of challenges (internal and external) and their father's vision and undying support to their cause. We also watch Geeta and her father wrestle in ways that are not manifested physically.

In the rigorous training that turned two young women into obedient daughters, Mahavir's feminism flowers even more as he refuses to treat them differently. Every action of his that eliminates femininity in the girls pushes them towards strength but not masculinity. One has to take into account that Mahavir did not want to turn the girls into boys but instill in them enough strength to fight as whoever they were. In feminist discussions, one often talks about the starting line for men and women and the barriers that come in both the paths. Mahavir, as a father and coach removed those barriers and in it lies not only *Dangal's* but Mahavir's feminism. He does take on the ridicule of the same patriarchal setup that he's part of and even gives up his job to enable his daughters to do something that bends, even if not breaks, gender norms. His deeds don't match his own patriarchal consciousness. So it will be unfair to count Mahavir's actions as solely that of a patriarchal figure.

The film does show Geeta returning to his father's ways after a period of rebellion when she grows her hair, paints her nails and eats golgappa, but reading this as blind obedience to an autocratic father is to deny the female character her agency. Even as children, Geeta and Babita resist Mahavir as much as they could, until the time they make the decision to take wrestling seriously. Even the incident of Mahavir's defeat in the hands of his daughter in a wrestling bout, is a challenge to his masculinity. A patriarch is being forced to taste the mud in his own den. Masculinity is not always challenged by big events, with a grand opening. Patriarch(ies) are and have been challenged in bits and pieces, in small steps, quietly. While Mahavir's

thought wasn't feminist, driven as it was by his own selfish need for glory, can we completely discount his actions? He pushes his daughters into flouting rules of the society, protects them from the backlash, and indeed, stands guard for their attempts at breaking free. In this context, however miseducated, his actions are, most definitely, feminist.

Like *Pink*, *Dangal's* feminism may be complicated in parts but it is not problematic. *Dangal* strongly challenges patriarchy that controls the rights of women. *Dangal's* un-ironic presentation of the nuskhas that villagers advised Mahavir to apply to have a boy, Mahavir's friend's smug smile as he offers him a box of laddoos for his new born son, the taunts of the same people as Geeta and Babita begin their training in the village are real scenarios that people not just in Haryana but in most of the country, face. The young women achievers has forced a society to renegotiate their views of womanhood, especially when these women achieve their accolades in an area which is, exclusively, a male domain. Not just any sport but wrestling, which not just requires technique and brute strength but is also a contact sport. Mahavir Phogat's decision to push his daughters into wrestling may not have been an ideal act in feminist studies. But Mahavir Phogat is a product of his time and space. And in his context he realizes that girls can achieve what boys can. This is a massive break from the gendered roles that millions of women in that state are thrust into. With their carefree gait (a trait not often seen on women in Hindi cinema, where they usually stand with their heads tilted, breasts out, stomachs in, and butts out) and their direct gaze (again, Hindi cinema women are urged to cast their eyes down in order to look bashful), the girls run through the opposition with a smile and a laugh. "*Dangal jeetne se pehle, darr se jeetna padta hai*", says Mahavir Singh. It works as a motto for life as much as for sport.

We need films like this (and other ones like *Mary Kom* and even *Pink*) to remind us that the female body isn't an object to be ogled but can be a dynamic subject. One can believe that *Pink* and *Dangal* are good for feminism in India. Popular cultural offerings slip into our imagination so much

more easily than ideological prescriptions. The woman takes centre stage and snatches her impossible victory that belongs solely to her and we are left with a new hero. The final scene of the movie encapsulates the woman's attaining of the centre stage when Geeta in absence of her father (patriarch) not only achieves victory but also manifests the recognition of her 'self.' In that moment, the long journey of beating societal expectations, the nay-saying men, and even her own demons, we see Geeta win by herself. This achievement is more important for Geeta (or any other woman wrestler) because it enables her to overcome the constant fear and shame. It challenges the blindness which denies to see woman as equal human being in the existing social domain.

There is no doubt that *Dangal* emerges as one of the strongest cinematic statements on women's empowerment in recent times. The subtle sledge hammering of what needs to be done in a society choked with prejudices, widespread misogyny and outright injustice is evocative enough in the film and the impact remains solid because of the climax which ultimately collects the bits and pieces of hints from throughout the film and gives it a defining edge, ultimately creating an unbiased space. Not only because it deals with a lot of important issues, but also somewhere breaks conventions and reinforcements of mainstream cinema in a lot of ways. It succeeds in making us cheer for young women who break gender stereotypes. Thus, cinema plays an essential role in shaping views about gender roles and gender identities within the Indian context where women are viewed as playing subordinate roles to men. The main implication of this paper is that representation of women in such films encourages social change in the treatment of women in Indian society, which is very male-dominated and patriarchal. Going beyond the stereotypes and the existing social norms will act as a milestone in changing the mindset of the people. Such portrayals on the part of cinema would do justice to women and their role in the society.

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