

October 2025

Film Review: A Feminist Critique of the Representation of Women in 21st-Century Bollywood Sports Biopics

Amitabh Roy
Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya, India

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Roy, Amitabh (2025) "Film Review: A Feminist Critique of the Representation of Women in 21st-Century Bollywood Sports Biopics," *Journal of International Women's Studies*: Vol. 27: Iss. 4, Article 35.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol27/iss4/35>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

Film Review: A Feminist Critique of the Representation of Women in 21st-Century Bollywood Sports Biopics

By Amitabh Roy¹

Film Information

Title: *Mary Kom*
Director: Omung Kumar
Producer: Sanjay Leela Bhansali
Release Year: 2014
Length: 122 Minutes
Genre: Sports Biopic
Original Language: Hindi
Distributor: Viacom18 Studios

Title: *Saina*
Director: Amol Gupte
Producers: Bhushan Kumar, Krishan Kumar, Sujay Jairaj, and Rashesh Shah
Release Year: 2021
Length: 135 Minutes
Genre: Sports Biopic
Original Language: Hindi
Distributor: Cinestaan AA Distributors

Title: *Shabaash Mithu*
Director: Srijit Mukherji
Producer: Ajit Andhare
Release Year: 2022
Length: 156 Minutes
Genre: Sports Biopic
Original Language: Hindi
Distributor: Viacom18 Studios

Abstract

This review critically analyses the portrayal of women in Bollywood sports biopics using a feminist perspective, with reference to three influential 21st-century films: *Mary Kom* (2014), *Saina* (2021), and *Shabaash Mithu* (2022). While these movies ostensibly celebrate women's sporting achievements, a close reading discloses the durability of patriarchal currents in the narrative, visual composition, and character construction. Using feminist theories like Laura Mulvey's "male gaze," Judith Butler's "gender performativity," and bell hooks's intersectionality, this work contends that these films simultaneously empower and limit their heroines. Exploring how femininity, family, and national pride are performed in these films, this review examines the intersection of agency and conformity in movie representations of women athletes.

Keywords: Sports biopics, Feminism, Nationalism, Bollywood cinema

¹ Dr. Amitabh Roy, presently Principal at Alipurduar Mahila Mahavidyalaya, completed his Ph.D from the Department of English, University of North Bengal, India. His areas of specialisation include postcolonial studies, feminism, gender studies, Indian English literature, and Baudelaire. He can be reached at amitabhroy.ar@gmail.com.

Introduction

The 21st century has seen a significant increase in Bollywood biopics centering around women athletes. These stories, long dominated by men in lead roles, are now featuring women as sporting heroes and the pride of the nation. A feminist critique raises the question as to whether these on-screen depictions really subvert deep-seated gender conventions or simply offer a glossed-over version of women's empowerment. This essay examines the ways *Mary Kom*, *Saina*, and *Shabaash Mithu* represent sports heroines in the context of femininity, agency, and nationalism. These movies work within a socio-cultural context that both celebrates women's achievement and constrains its possibility through conventional notions of womanhood.

Indian sports is a gendered arena in which men in sports receive much more media attention, institutional patronage, and cinematic representation. Women in sports are usually overlooked or relegated to second-stage characters in storylines dominated by men. Bollywood has contributed to the reinforcement of these trends, but the trend has started to change with the coming of biopics featuring women athletes.

Even with this advancement, these films tend to use conservative narrative approaches that center the family and the nation. The women athletes are praised not only for their sporting excellence, but for being submissive daughters, respectful wives, and caring mothers. As women gain global recognition in the real world, their film counterparts tend to be attached to patriarchal values. The dominant narrative that valorises men as natural sporting heroes and sidelines women's agency in sports and cinema persists, as successful women athletes are portrayed by these films as exceptions rather than the norm.

Mary Kom (2014): Battling within Gendered Frames

Omung Kumar's *Mary Kom* tells the story of Mary Kom's journey from a small-town girl in Manipur to a world boxing champion. In the lead role as Mary Kom, Priyanka Chopra brings out her gritty determination, discipline, and emotional turmoil. *Mary Kom* is a landmark film because it does not sexualise its heroine but visually presents her physicality with respect and admiration.

Mary Kom's choice to pursue boxing—a domain coded as masculine—acts as a performative disruption. Through training, strength, and ambition, she performs masculinity, revealing gender as a cultural script rather than an inherent set of characteristics. Her repeated insistence on participating in boxing illustrates her resistance through repetition. This resonates with Judith Butler's idea that repetition can also be a site of subversion. As they explain, "The possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style" (Butler 145).

However, a close reading of the film uncovers disturbing trends. Mary's success is presented as acceptable because it does not challenge her status as a wife and mother. Her husband's facilitative role is highlighted, contextualising her journey within the realm of acceptable femininity. Butler's theory of gender performativity dismantles the idea of gender as a natural or inherent truth, arguing instead that gender is constituted through repeated acts, gestures, and performances regulated by social norms. According to Butler, "Gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (30). This perspective reveals that what is taken as feminine or masculine identity is not an inner essence but a cultural construction that gains stability only through its continual reiteration. The analytical strength of this theory lies in its paradox: while repetition reinforces normative gender roles, the very process of repetition also allows for disruption, parody, or subversion.

Thus, gender performativity both sustains and destabilises patriarchal power, exposing identity as fluid and contingent. Butler's argument becomes especially useful when addressing how Mary's identity as a strong woman is still framed within the expectations of motherhood and marital harmony.

Even her return to boxing after maternity leave is presented as a selfless act of sacrifice for her children and country. Instead of focusing on individual ambition, the narrative portrays her decisions as patriotic and maternal duties, thus upholding patriarchal gender roles. This oscillation illustrates Butler's notion that gender identity is not fixed but negotiated: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (34).

***Saina* (2021): Compliant Excellence**

Amole Gupte's *Saina* dramatises the career of badminton legend Saina Nehwal, starring Parineeti Chopra in the titular role. The biopic follows a linear, motivational trajectory of grit, triumph, and family ties. Saina's journey is presented as a personal journey of perseverance. While class mobility and dedication are central, the film avoids strong commentary on regional, gendered, or institutional politics, unlike *Mary Kom* and *Shabaash Mithu*.²

Butler refers to the "highly rigid regulatory frame" under which gender is performed (30). Reflecting Butler's theory of how gender is performed under social surveillance, Saina's career unfolds under intense public scrutiny by the media, her fans, and her family, which forces her to negotiate multiple, sometimes conflicting, gender expectations. Her athleticism is a gendered performance that blurs boundaries between what is traditionally perceived as masculine and feminine behaviour. During the film's training sequence, Saina is shown sweating, grunting, and enduring strenuous physical drills, a portrayal usually reserved for men athletes in Bollywood sports biopics. This kind of athletic aggression and strength is culturally coded as masculine. Athletes like Mary Kom and Saina Nehwal do not simply express a predetermined form of femininity; rather, their public performances in sports actively negotiate, resist, and sometimes reconstitute cultural norms of femininity and masculinity.

An important thread of the narrative is that Saina is influenced by the aspirations and sacrifices of her mother. While the mother-daughter relationship resonates emotionally, it also perpetuates the stereotype that women can only make achievements as a group, framing success as a sacrificial endeavour rather than the product of the individual. The movie eschews any meaningful examination of systemic sexism or institutional barriers, opting instead for personal struggle and obedience. However, Saina's mother performs a hybrid role as both masculine and feminine, which subtly contributes to the disruption of conventional gender roles; she is portrayed as a masculine disciplinarian or coach-like figure and motivator, but she is also a feminine caregiver, an emotional anchor, and a symbol of sacrifice.

Laura Mulvey's theory of the male gaze can be used to examine Saina's disciplining by male control as her body and behaviour are disciplined to fit into patriarchal norms. Saina's body, which is athletic, is never sexually objectified, but she is nonetheless depicted as feminine, soft, and emotionally vulnerable. In her training, the film portrays her body as a site of discipline and control, associating her with feminine stereotypes of sacrifice, humility, submission, and obedience. Her character is humble, hardworking, and dutiful—never questioning or rebellious. There is no representation of any independence in her relationship with her coach, thus rendering her as a soft, compliant, and emotionally dependent woman.

² In addition to its focus on gender, *Mary Kom* also highlights the main character's Northeastern identity by depicting how athletes from Manipur face neglect and lack of recognition compared to their mainland counterparts. It hints at the marginalisation of Northeastern citizens in India, offering a political stance on regional identity.

***Shabaash Mithu* (2022): Challenging the System**

Shabaash Mithu, directed by Srijit Mukherji and starring Taapsee Pannu, is the most progressive of the three films reviewed. It tells the story of cricketer Mithali Raj, covering not only her sporting prowess but also the sexism entrenched in Indian cricket. From inadequate funding to media invisibility for women's sports, the film puts systemic obstacles at the forefront of the story.

Mithali is presented as politically conscious and vocal about gender discrimination, stating "*Aesa khel ke dikhayengay ke koi humaari pehchan kabhi koi bhool na paye*" ["We will play in such a way that no one will ever forget our identity"]. She protests against the invisibility of women in sports, gender inequality, and stereotyping and raises concerns against a system in which individuals are judged by gender and not by merit. Her struggles are portrayed as institutional rather than solely personal. She battles not only to win games but to be noticed and recognised. The film addresses the slogan "we bleed blue too," referring to the blue jersey worn by women cricketers representing India. When Mithali voices this phrase, it reflects her feminist political consciousness and her nationalistic passion as she calls for women athletes to receive recognition and respect in a space dominated by men.

bell hooks's perspective on intersectionality and marginalisation is a useful lens to use in examining *Shabaash Mithu*. On marginalisation, hooks writes of Black women, "Our survival depended on an ongoing public awareness of the separation between margin and center and an ongoing private acknowledgement that we were a necessary, vital part of that whole" (xvi). hooks emphasises that women who have been marginalised must see themselves not as outsiders but as integral to the whole, fostering power, solidarity, and the will to sustain resistance. She also calls attention to the ways that Black women are doubly marginalised by intersecting identities of race and gender. Regarding intersectionality, the film condemns the intersecting systems of gender, class, and institutional disregard that marginalise women athletes. Being a woman first and an athlete second, according to the Indian social construct, puts the protagonist in a position of second-class status within cricket. It is not merely a tale of victory but one of resistance, calling out to viewers to see the structural disparities present in women's sports. Though hooks is more vocal about racial discrimination, her perspective can also be applied to understanding women's struggles, particularly in the context of sports.

This film strongly emphasises the systematic neglect of women's cricket in India, especially compared to men's cricket. The lack of facilities, funding, and visibility for women's cricket highlights the gendered politics of Indian sports administration. By showing Mithali Raj's fight for recognition, the film critiques patriarchal hierarchies in both sport and society, questioning why women cricketers are invisible despite equal effort. *Shabaash Mithu* presents women's cricket as a site of feminist resistance, in which women athletes push for respect within the patriarchal space of Indian cricket.

Thematic Synthesis

Throughout all three films, several thematic patterns emerge: visibility of women's bodies, nationalistic framing, and conditional empowerment.

These movies represent a move away from invisibility towards visibility for women, but their visibility is still circumscribed. The woman athlete's body is valorised but only when framed in the context of emotional vulnerability or domesticity. Their power is aestheticised; their struggles are sentimentalised. The athletic strength and determination of women athletes are often shown in highly stylised, beautiful, or feminised ways rather than through a style of raw, gritty realism. The intense training sequences or victories are filmed with melodramatic music, slow motion, or glamorous cinematography that makes the women's athleticism appear graceful and artistic, rather than simply powerful.

Women's success in sports is commonly presented as a service to the nation. The heroines are permitted ambition only because it is for the collective ideal. They are never given victories as personal expressions of liberty; rather, they are presented as sacrifices upon the altar of nation-building. In *Saina*, the tricolour flag is repeatedly shown in the backdrop of Saina's win during the international tournaments. Lines such as "*Bharat ka naam roshan karna hai*" ["To bring glory to India"] emphasise the burden of representing the nation, not just the individual. In *Shabaash Mithu*, Mithali Raj's speeches to her teammates invoke collective duty towards the country; they are playing not just for themselves but to "write India's name in golden letters" in cricket history.

Mary Kom and *Saina* portray their heroines as exceptions to the norm of passive femininity; they are exceptional women who fight against the odds through personal effort. This threatens to depoliticise their stories, as the structural problems faced by women in sports are minimised or ignored. By contrast, in *Shabaash Mithu*, the protagonist is depicted as an assertion of true athleticism, a progressive step forward that can be followed by other films in portraying their heroines. Meaningful empowerment can only come about by questioning systemic gender inequality, not merely by cheering on the heroine.

Conclusion

Though the increase in women-centric sports biopics in Bollywood represents an improvement in women athletes' visibility and narrative emphasis, some of these films fall short of articulating a truly feminist perspective. *Mary Kom* and *Saina* represent sporting success while upholding standards of conventional femininity. *Shabaash Mithu*, however, ventures to subvert the system and plead for change at a collective level. A properly feminist film like *Shabaash Mithu* does not simply highlight remarkable women but also questions the systems that render their narratives remarkable in the first place. Yet many of these films—while valuable—continue to be imprisoned in the very ideologies they mean to move beyond. Among the three films discussed, *Shabaash Mithu* stands out by presenting a more pronounced feminist blueprint, which can be followed by future directors making films on women athletes.

Acknowledgment

The AI tool Grammarly was used to correct inadvertent mistakes.

Works Cited

- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. Routledge, 1990.
 hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. South End Press, 1984.
 Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3, 1975, pp. 6–18.