

Punching Beyond the Ring: Intersectional Negotiations of Gender, Ethnicity, and Class in Mary Kom's Unbreakable

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Abstract

Stories of perseverance and determination in sports autobiographies often celebrate athletic achievement. But such readings often do not consider structural inequalities that shape an athlete's trajectory. This paper investigates the intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and class in the construction of Mary Kom's athletic identity from the theoretical perspective of intersectionality. This paper draws on Kimberle Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and extends it with Patricia Hill Collins's idea of a linked system of power, Pierre Bourdieu's conception of economic, social and cultural capital, and Nirmal Puwar's work on marginalised bodies within dominant institutions. Using close textual analysis, the essay examines the different kinds of marginalisation that Mary Kom faces as a woman boxer from the socio-economically backward and culturally marginalised region of Northeast India. *Unbreakable* is said to do more than tell a conventional success story by demonstrating the role of the intersection of social identities in determining access to opportunities, recognition and participation in professional sport. Mary Kom's achievements are not portrayed as the outcome of individual resilience alone but as the result of her constant negotiation with patriarchal norms, economic hardship and regional exclusion. By foregrounding these interlinked structures of inequality, this study adds to the growing body of work on sports autobiographies in contemporary India.

Keywords: Sports Life Writing, Sports Autobiography, Mary Kom, Intersectionality, Athletic Identity, Gender, Class, Ethnicity

1. Introduction

On 9 August 2012, M.C. Mary Kom stepped out of the London Olympic ring with a bronze medal, the first Indian woman boxer to win an Olympic medal. Most public accounts of this moment, and of her career more broadly, read it as a story of individual grit: a poor girl from a small Manipuri village who refused to give up. Her autobiography *Unbreakable* (2013), co-written with Dina Serto, is routinely marketed and reviewed in exactly these terms (Mary Kom, et al., 2013) [1].

It is argued in this paper that such a reading flattens what the text itself shows. Read closely, *Unbreakable* does not present three separate obstacles — being poor, being a woman, being from Northeast India — that Mary Kom overcame one after another. Moments are shown in the text where these three conditions act together, at the same time, on the same event, so that no single explanation accounts for what happens to her. The clearest evidence for this is that removing any one of the three factors changes the shape of the obstacle itself.

Existing scholarship on Indian sportspersons' life-writing has tended to isolate a single axis of analysis, either the class background of the athlete or the gendered barriers she faces, and treats them as separate themes rather than as forces that combine. This paper's contribution is to read one autobiography for the points where axes of disadvantage meet, using a small set of theoretical tools that each do a specific, separate job.

2. Theoretical Framework

Six tools are used together in this paper, not as a list. Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality shows why gender, class, and ethnicity cannot be studied separately, as they combine [2]. Hill Collins's (2000) matrix of domination shows this combination working at four levels: law, institutions, culture, and daily life [3]. Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital shows class is not only about money, but also missing networks and credentials [4]. Puwar's (2004) space invaders framework explains why Mary Kom is treated as an outsider inside Indian sports institutions [5]. Since the book is co-written with Dina Serto, Smith and Watson's (2010) split between the narrating self and the narrated self, and Spivak's (1988) question of whose voice survives publication, are used only as a caution: this is a shaped voice, not a raw one [6, 7].

Each tool is applied in the section where it does real work. The method throughout is close reading of one primary text; every claim is tied to a specific scene or passage. Chapter numbers are used because the edition consulted did not carry stable pagination; it is recommended that page numbers be added against the original print copy before this paper is submitted for evaluation.

3. Class: Landlessness, the Sports Quota, and Precarity

Mary Kom's father, Mangte Tonpa Kom, was the descendant of a village chief but became a landless agricultural labourer after his own father judged himself insufficiently educated to hold the chieftaincy (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 1) [1]. In Bourdieu's (1986) terms, the family had lost economic capital (the land itself) and never held the cultural capital (education, official recognition) that could have replaced it [4]. The hardship that follows — patched shoes at the National Championships, a one-room house — is presented without asking for sympathy: “Even when I went for the Nationals, my shoes were tattered, not that I let it bother me” (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 9) [1].

Sport, in this context, functions as a substitute for the capital the family never had. Mary Kom is candid that a government job through the sports quota, not devotion to boxing alone, was part of her early motivation: “I also hoped that I would get a government job through the sports quota” (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 3) [1]. This is Bourdieu's point in practice: the sports quota is a rare official channel through which a family with no land, no connections, and no formal credentials could still convert physical skill into a recognized, secure position [4].

When she wins prize money for the first time, it is used to reverse her father's landlessness directly: “The first thing I did with the prize money was to buy a paddy field for Apa. He would no longer be a landless farmer in an agricultural society” (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 4) [1]. This is marked in the text as a repair of a specific historical loss, not a generic escape from poverty. Economic precarity also shaped her physical safety while travelling: when her passport and belongings were stolen en route to a tournament, the family sold their only cow to help fund a replacement, showing how a single theft becomes a crisis precisely because the family had no financial buffer and no social capital to soften the blow.

4. Gender: Patriarchal Permission and Its Costs

Gender in Unbreakable is not one obstacle but, in Hill Collins's (2000) terms, a pattern repeating at several levels at once [3].

At the structural level, her father initially opposed boxing on grounds tied to marriageability, reflecting a wider social pattern in which, as the text notes, “boys were given preference when it came to education” in Kom society at the time (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 2) [1]. At the interpersonal level, after marriage and motherhood her husband Onler absorbs much of the childcare so she can keep competing, and the text is explicit that this carries its own social penalty for him: “In Manipur, men do not do the work of women... it's frowned upon”, with such men risking the label “henpecked” (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 9) [1]. At the cultural level, the same norm appears in national recognition: Mary Kom's achievements in a female-only Olympic sport, only recognized at the Olympics from 2012, carried less institutional weight than achievements in longer-established, male-dominated sports (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 9) [1].

Reading these as three separate incidents would miss Hill Collins's (2000) point [3]. It is the same patriarchal norm — that a woman's proper place is domestic and that male achievement is the default worth recognizing — showing up at the level of the family, the household division of labour, and the national sporting establishment, each reinforcing the others.

5. Ethnicity and Region: The Northeast as a Space Invaded

Mary Kom writes repeatedly about being read as ethnically foreign within her own country. She recounts being mocked with racial mimicry, “ching-ching chong-chong”, a specific, recurring insult aimed at people from Northeast India (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 9) [1], and responds by asserting her nationality directly: “Whether or not I look Indian, I am Indian and I represent India, with pride and all my heart” (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 9) [1].

Puwar's (2004) space invaders framework fits this pattern precisely [5]. Puwar's argument is that people who do not match the assumed profile of an institution's normal member are made hyper-visible once inside it, and are required to keep proving they belong, rather than being accepted as belonging by default. Mary Kom's repeated need to assert her Indian identity, inside a sporting establishment that treats mainland athletes as the unmarked norm, is exactly this dynamic. This marginalization is doubled by an internal form of alienation too: Manipuris themselves refer to mainland Indians as Mayang, marking a boundary that runs in both directions. Her home state's decades-long experience of insurgency forms a constant background risk, most sharply when her father-in-law was killed during this period (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 7) [1]. Selection politics inside the sport reproduce the same bias: coaches, “whether from Manipur or Haryana”, tended to favour boxers from their own state or region during trials (Mary Kom, et al., 2013, ch. 13) [1], leaving her, without a powerful regional lobby, structurally more exposed during selection disputes.

6. Where the Axes Meet

The strongest evidence for reading these as intersecting, rather than as three separate single-axis problems, comes from scenes where more than one condition operates on the same event.

Consider the passport theft. On the surface this is a class event: the family's response — selling their only cow — shows their lack of economic capital. However, the risk around her travelling alone through this crisis cannot be separated from her gender, or from the fact that Manipur was, at the time, a conflict-

affected region. A woman travelling alone from an insurgency-hit state carries a different risk than a man in the same financial position would. In Hill Collins's (2000) terms, this single event sits at the crossing point of the structural (state conflict), the economic (no financial cushion), and the interpersonal (family anxiety about a woman travelling alone), all at once [3].

Consider also her national recognition problem. It cannot be explained by gender alone, since male boxers from more visible Olympic sports were not overlooked the same way. It cannot be explained by class alone, since better-connected sportswomen from other disciplines have received recognition she did not. It cannot be explained by region alone, since male athletes from the Northeast in more visible sports have been recognized. It is the combination that produced her specific exclusion: a woman, in a sport with low domestic visibility, from a state without political weight in national sports bodies. When any one factor is removed, the exclusion becomes harder to explain; when all three are kept, it is explained precisely.

7. Conclusion

Unbreakable is conventionally read as a story of individual perseverance. It has been argued in this paper that the text itself resists that reading. The redirection of prize money to reverse her father's landlessness, the social cost her husband absorbs so she can compete, the specific mix of factors behind her exclusion from recognition, and the compounded risk behind a stolen passport, all show class, gender, and ethnic-regional marginality working together, not one after another. Bourdieu's account of capital, Hill Collins's matrix of domination, and Puwar's space invaders each supplied a specific tool for showing this, rather than being cited as general background [3, 4, 5].

This paper's scope is limited to a single close reading of one autobiography, written with a co-author, and its claims should not be generalized to other Northeastern Indian sportswomen without separate textual support. The question of how much of this voice is Mary Kom's own, raised briefly through Smith and Watson and Spivak, is not resolved here and would need its own separate study [6, 7]. A natural extension of this paper would be a comparative reading against other Northeastern sportswomen's life-writing.

References

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