

Writing Life and Righting the Sporting Self: Voice of the Marginalized in Mary Kom's  
*Unbreakable: An Autobiography*

Dr. Pratima Das

Associate Professor & Head, Department of English, CHM College, Ulhasnagar, (MS) India

Micky Barua

Department of Humanities, Vidyalkar Institute of Technology, Mumbai, (MS) India

**Abstract**

Mary Kom's autobiography, *Unbreakable* is a literary testimonial of her tough childhood and her battle against the male dominated boxing world. It also records the self-defining moments of her sporting career. This memoir is also a record of the voice of a marginalised subject who has to steer through the landmines of the politics of sports. This paper analyses how life writing and boxing legitimize the selfhood and experiences of a female subject. As a daughter of poor landless agricultural labourer Kom had begun in financial disadvantage too. The paper focuses, on both gender and class as the agencies of marginalization while boxing and writing as agencies of selfhood.

**Key Words:** Sports writing, selfhood, marginality

"People used to Say that Boxing is for Men and not for women and I thought I will show them some day. I promised myself and proved myself....."

Whether or not I look 'Indian', I am Indian and represent India with pride and all my heart" (Mary Kom, *Unbreakable*)

Marginalization has always been an attractive recipe of English literature as far as representation of life as a social reality is concerned. Whenever issues relating to human rights have been brought under the focal lens of criticality, literary depictions of the experiences of marginalized groups on some common grounds of discrimination like gender, geographical location, religion, class, language, age, ethnicity, etc. have acquired great significance. From time immemorial, this subaltern theme involving the agonies, pain and suffering of the marginalized

groups have always found prominence in literary portraits. Expression of these experiences in various instances like treatment of a person, group or concept as insignificant or peripheral in different forums, have often been buried in silence, and relegated to the margins as non-literary in case of a common man.

Marginality is a position where an individual is deprived of self-identity and voice. It also relegates a living subject to an object position. It is quintessentially an old phenomenon and is present in the existing system of society and the world at large. Gender, race and religious, ethnic groups are some spheres where the social exclusion is predominantly seen. Marginal people are also misrepresented or rather underrepresented in cultural texts as can be seen in case of consideration of women, children, homosexuals, lesbians, coloured people and Dalits. The history of marginalization has witnessed its growth

on different terms. For instance, the neo classicist understands it in relation to individual flaws while the Marxist theorists relate it structurally to capitalism.

Writing is an agential act of putting into words, the experiences of life. It is also a tool in the hands of a marginalized subject to establish an identity and a voice that are otherwise occluded or silenced. Recent work by American sociologist Charles Tilly highlights the importance of economic structures and social networks to social exclusion. From the Indian context, even though we may boast of living in a multicultural and multi lingual country where ethics and morals are its core amidst its basic tenet of *unity in diversity*, the pluralistic credentials of the Indian society are often found wanting of this very facet.

This paper attempts to study the voice of one such marginalized case in the autobiography of one of India's famous female boxer, Mary Kom's *Unbreakable* by exploring the link between sport and writing. Here, an effort shall be made to have a better understanding of this concept of marginality by an analysis of the gender-driven, socio-cultural, political or economic conditions of the society through the experiences of Mary Kom in her path to fame. The prime reason for selection of this life writing is that amongst other functions, it legitimizes the life about which it writes.

The writing in this autobiography is also an assertion of the rights of the writing subject – the right to live, speak and be treated well, because of which it may appear to be immensely political. The idea of self in recent years have been redefined and with reference to the specific domain in which the self develops and flourishes. Here we have ideas such as writing self, travelling self, reading self and sporting

self. While exploring the symbiotic interface between sports and writing, this paper also attempts to show how self is constructed positively in all of these associated activities.

Mary Kom's autobiography *Unbreakable* is a literary document that intervenes in the self-fashioning potentials of both sport and writing by elevating the writing on the female subject from the position of an object to an active subject. The dominant patriarchal system is still deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people of our country. It is because of these roots that woman is relegated to a subservient or secondary position, thereby depriving her of the privileges which a male child gets. The resulting hostility and alienation faced by a woman is the one of the numerous challenges accepted by Mary Kom who defies the dominant norms of society and emerges as a successful and invincible woman. She stands as an icon for the reconstitution of a new female image upholding the dignity of a woman no longer battered by society, race or society.

Coming to the Indian forefront from the often unheard rural areas of North Eastern India, the selected literature is also an eye-opener to the current trends in the literature of the marginalized, gender based marginalization in the sports as depicted in films and media. This aspect of the autobiography can also be considered as a mode of discursive articulation to give voice to the marginalized. Another point that should not be ignored is that although women have made invaluable contributions to the world of sports, their accomplishments have been drastically marginalized by the sports media industry.

Legendary five-time female world boxing Champion, Mangte Chungneijang Mary

Kom, was born on 1st March, 1983 in Kangthei, Manipur to Mangte Tonpa Kom and Mangte Akham Kom, both of whom were landless agricultural labourers. She grew up amidst a marginalized tribal community in the conflict torn state of Manipur. As the eldest of four siblings in the family, Mary Kom's childhood years was in a humble background helping her parents with farm related activities. Hailing from an impoverished background, she could neither afford proper shoes nor dream of having sports gear to pursue her passion. She had to toil hard in the fields, cut wood and help her family earn a livelihood. These hardships and the various instances of marginalization faced on account of her tribal community and geographical location since her childhood days laid the foundation of her strength as acknowledged by her:

“I am tough because of my background. They made me who I am today. They gave me the strength to keep fighting. Indeed, they made me want to fight in the first place.”  
(*Unbreakable* 03).

Her father began his life in Kangthei where he stayed for more than ten years fending for himself. The condition in the village made Mary Kom steer through the difficult times as the children of her time could manage to go to school only when they were self-sustainable. This was the first obstacle she faced which she overcame by her indomitable will, hard work and training from her father. Mary Kom's self-motivation and personality related to her inherent growth tendencies and innate psychological needs is a classic example of the Self-Determination Theory concerned with the motivation behind choices people make without external

influence and interference. As Kom confesses her tough childhood by saying:

“But Father had trained us to work from a young age. There were many jobs I could do that even the boys struggled with. All three of us siblings were given our chores, and as the eldest, I took my responsibilities very seriously. I helped in the fields, even with ploughing the fields – a task that required immense strength, because the bullocks were not easy to control.” (*Unbreakable* 13)

The laborious activities like “ploughing, works in the field required handling heavy farming tools, carrying bundles of rice saplings for planting and later, sacks of rice” (*Unbreakable* 14) prepared her body for boxing where she has to exude her strength and stamina in fighting big opponents.

The next hurdle presented by marginalization to Mary Kom was her first duel with the male dominated boxing world at the inception of her boxing career. Even today, Boxing is thought to be a male dominated sport where toughness is a male virtue. Hence when Mary Kom first approached L. Ibomcha Singh, the chief coach of Sports Authority of India, Imphal for admission, she not only received a cold shoulder but was also taunted:

“Why do you want to join boxing? You are a small frail girl. With your gold earring, you don't even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys.” (*Unbreakable* 31)

In due course of time though, Mary Kom's display of male virtues at the boxing ring proved to be a victory not only over her fellow opponents, but more importantly over male superiority, chauvinism and

negation of the marginality of women in sports like boxing. It is this very degree of self-motivation and self-determination in real life related to the self-determination theory that has been explained in details by noted psychologists Edward L. Deci and Richard Ryan. The vein of marginalization was spread in the marginalized community of the 'Kom' tribe also. After winning the silver medal at the World Women's Boxing Championships in Pennsylvania, USA in November-December 2001, the community of Kom was proud to have an international level boxer when for so many ages were relegated to anonymity by the society. This suppression of the voice of the Kom tribe was asserted in the international arena by Mary Kom and her sporting achievements. As she says:

It was the first sporting achievement of its kind by anyone in our small tribe. To be honest, one of the greatest motivating forces for me has been my desire to assert the identity of my tribe 'Kom' within my own country and the world over. We are just a few thousand people. I hoped that by coming up in sports and getting known worldwide, I'd be able to popularize my culture and ethos of my tiny tribe. (*Unbreakable* 53)

In spite of tasting global success after overcoming the hurdles mentioned earlier, Mary Kom still highlights the marginalization of the sport of boxing in India on account of politics and infighting within the sports federation. Citing her own example as a case of marginalization in media, Mary Kom often ended up lamenting on the very thought of how she was being ignored by the press in her very own state of Manipur. Even during the selection process, her heart could be seen paining on the plight of the deserving

boxers in our country who do not get selected for representing at various levels because of the selectors harbouring regional bias which incidentally is another working of marginalization. As confessed in the work:

I don't like talking about the Indian women's boxing scenario in terms of state teams, but that is the reality of how things operate on the ground. Even during training, I was often neglected and not given enough attention by the coaches. When coaches and other boxing officials favoured their own state players, the only way I could fight back was in the ring, and by aiming higher and higher. (*Unbreakable* 105)

Mary Kom's journey to fame was definitely no cake-walk. It involved steering through the landmines of the politics of sports, where she often ended up as another victim to this ploy. She often spoke about the prejudice faced by the sports persons from the North Eastern part of our country only out of her concern that this kind of marginalization on account of geographical locations could result in the untimely death of a promising sportspersons' soul. This is not a one-off case of social exclusion. As could be understood from the perspectives of the normative theory of social exclusion, reducing social exclusion as the aims of the policy of a country is definitely worth applauding only when there is clarity in the definition and normative justification of the policies. This is also being referred to by Mary Kom when she says:

There was also the fact that I was not always recognized as Indian in my own country. Because of our oriental looks, people from the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India.

We're called Nepalis, or Chinkies, and people call us names like ching – ching - chong-chong. In a country where people speak all kinds of languages and have varied kinds of looks, why is such treatment meted out to us. (*Unbreakable* 91)

Mary Kom's autobiography also reflects the characteristics of indigenous sports women's life writing in a trouble torn state of Manipur and that at the national level with a fair indication of the motives for legitimizing the selfhood and experiences of a female subject. Some parallels of this genre that can be foregrounded from the selected literature is the commonality of marginalization on the basis of gender that is on offer both at the state level in Manipur and at the country level at India. The life writing referred to herein is the genre of personal narratives of Mary Kom, especially the confessional and trauma narratives from the selfhood perspective and the testimonies from the soul of a female boxer.

Mary Kom's achievement of name, fame, multiple awards and recognition from scratch, when she had nothing - neither money nor support, is only a living example to the fact that it is oneself who can decide one's own limit, and nobody else. Complaining about marginalization like lack of support, lack of resources and funds do not appear to be any hurdle after reading the autobiography as Mary Kom too did not have basic money to travel at the start of her career. She neither had a good trainer, nor got the desired amount of support which only goes on to prove that it is not about having resources, but having excuses for not getting success in one's life.

Boxing as a sport, has off late adorned the role of an agency to assert lost dignity and

selfhood of an individual. It is akin to the role of the autobiography as the framework to define Mary Kom's individualism and her success as a woman. Notwithstanding the common means of marginalization in the global scenario on the basis of gender, class and politics of sports, there was also the insurgency in the state which killed Kom's father in law that remained neglected till it was brought to attention by the writings of Kom. This incident was a turning point in Kom's life, as there was no answer to this sudden murder. Even though the ominous presence of insurgency is visible, it is yet to be resolved and after restoration of the burial from the silence in the state of Manipur. This marginalization of the state torn with strife shows that the needs of the state are not met and is excluded as a minority.

It is because of these cases of marginalization that noted French Writer Simone de Beauvoir's declaration, 'He is the Subject, he is the Absolute—she is the Other,' in her book "The Second Sex", questions the self and the Other who is the non-subject. It is quite explicit that the women's selfhood has been subordinated in various situations. Even in case of Mary Kom, the whole paradigm shift happens when womanhood breaks the infringement of the male dominated boxing world. She builds her own female identity and reclaims her own self over the biases inflicted on her. By resisting the divisive politics of sports, the state and the prejudices of gender, the selfhood of the female subject of Kom is asserted as she transformed the stereotype of boxing. The traditional depiction of women as abject victims of the patriarchal family has been challenged in Mary Kom's life. Her trials and tribulations to steer forth her boxing

stint revalue the self as a dynamic subject and not a marginalised 'Other'.

Boxing and writing can also be considered as two ways of reclaiming the selfhood of Mary Kom for whom nothing was impossible with her free will power and decision making. Her battle with the oppressive world was a battle with her own feminine self which refused to be dominated by the male boxing world. She achieved her selfhood with her self-direction and her own self-definition as an autonomous individual. She stands for the feminity which is strong and most importantly, free from fear and dejection.

Her boxing Academy was another step towards the upliftment of sports like boxing from the side-lines of society. As she expresses her inner anguish towards the prevailing gender marginalization in India by saying:

“Violent crimes against women are on the rise in India—a phenomenon that I have been observing with alarm. I have been considering adapting my training in boxing to self-defence courses. Perhaps I can provide such courses for women, and not just in Manipur, in the future”. (*Unbreakable* 132)

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