

# Kom and Mirza: On the Transformative Ability of Autobiographies

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## **Abstract**

It has long been established that a reader/student of autobiography is invested in the process of the discovery-creation of the 'self'. The created self becomes as much the reader's as the author's. This connection between the author-figure and the reader gives rise to a 'transformative ability' in autobiographies, while maintaining a relationship of relatedness and influence. This ability is reflected in their helping shift perspectives and challenge existing narratives and stereotypes that exist around womanhood. This article focuses on issues highlighted in the life-narratives of Indian women in sports that reflect the larger society they are a part of. It provides insight into their existence as social beings. I evaluate the autobiographies of two Indian female athletes, Mary Kom and Sania Mirza, and analyses their 'transformative ability' in the context of gender. The texts are Kom's *Unbreakable* (2013) and Mirza's *Ace Against Odds* (2016).

**Keywords:** female athlete, sports, gender, autobiography, transformative ability

## **Introduction**

This article highlights the struggles faced by female athletes in India. It evaluates their experiences through an analysis of two autobiographies by two prominent female athletes, Mary Kom (*Unbreakable*) and Sania Mirza (*Ace Against Odds*). The argument uses a gender-centred approach in its analyses of these texts and focuses on social issues that are unique to women in sports. It raises questions about a woman's position in society in the twenty-first century and questions to primary concerns in the life-narrative of a woman in sports. The social history of sports in the country is fraught with marginalisation, discrimination, and commercial exploitation of athletes.<sup>1</sup> While much has been written about men's sports across the globe, it is argued that little has been documented in women's sports. It is not common knowledge that women also participated in games of their own in ancient Greece. These games were dedicated to Hera, the wife of Zeus. The second century Greek traveller and geographer, Pausanias,<sup>2</sup> writes about unmarried girls competing in races. His account seems superficial as it deals mainly with things like the attire that girls wore for the competition. Further, it is widely known that women were barred, on the penalty of death, from watching the legendary Olympic Games, where men and boys competed,<sup>3</sup> but it is unknown if they were allowed to watch the women's games. Thus, there exists an empty space in the historical writings of sports,<sup>4</sup> which warrants further study.

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<sup>1</sup> Supriya Chaudhuri, "In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 29, no. 12 (2012), p. 1760.

<sup>2</sup> W. H. S Jones and H. A. Ormerod (eds), *Pausanias: Description of Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918).

<sup>3</sup> "The Women: Were the Ancient Olympics just for Men?," *Penn Museum* (2023). At: [www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicsexism.shtml](http://www.penn.museum/sites/olympics/olympicsexism.shtml).

<sup>4</sup> Rachel Hewitt, *In Her Nature: How Women Break Boundaries in the Great Outdoors* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2023).

Academic work on sports is limited in India. Historical compendiums on sporting competitions and figures occupy a space (albeit minimally), but a socio-cultural approach is largely lacking. Supriya Chaudhuri, from Jadavpur University, is one of the only known figures in sports studies in India. Outside of her work, the genre finds little interest among scholars. This lack of interest among scholars reflects the general mood of the larger society. As a result, women athletes are confounded in the problematic situation of breaking gender stereotypes, but at the same time being “forced to inhabit the margins of their discipline, with little recourse to proper training, funds, or diet.”<sup>5</sup> This was the case in 2012 when Mary Kon won an Olympic bronze medal in boxing. The circumstances behind her feat are described as growing up in “poverty” and “struggle.”<sup>6</sup> She had institutional help for her advancements, and her success helped change the scenario of boxing in India: her Olympic medal secured future investments and interest from the government and from the public. A decade later, one is compelled to ascertain the current situation of women’s sports in India. Bernard Dunne, former Irish professional boxer and now named the High-Performance Director (HPD) for Indian Boxing, calls out the lack of medals in India despite the country’s large population and two working organisations, namely Sports Authority of India (SAI) and Boxing Federation of India (BFI). The year 2023 witnessed four female boxers procuring medals at the World Championship.

Ajay Singh, the president of BFI, speaks on the ascent of India from the 44th position to the 3rd (in the IBA world ranking) as indicative of “India’s rapid growth as a boxing nation ... [and] also shows its strong position in the world.”<sup>7</sup> Haryana can be labelled as a centre of excellence for boxing (both amateur and professional),<sup>8</sup> on a par with the centres in Havana and Harlem. This ‘leap’ signifies a change, somewhere in the institutional and social aspect of the system and the society. Female participation in sport in India has been traditionally low, owing to the conservative socio-cultural attitude of the country. Efforts made by corporations that attempt to improve the condition of sports in India keep women’s sports marginalised and expose the gaping gender disparity that exists in the institutions. Chaudhuri correctly asserts that “of all social activities, sports are the most sharply segregated and regulated by gender.”<sup>9</sup> It should be added, that the few percentages of women who are ‘allowed’ participation must find themselves troubled when media headlines of sexual assault of athletes and articles prying into their personal lives are constant. This calls the safety of women in sports into question. Such controversies have ubiquitously stayed their time in the media in India, and practically in every country that engages in women’s sports. The issue remains a global one: the captivating headlines of Spain winning the Women’s World Cup for the first time in 2023 had adjacent headlines of the official Luis Rubiales being charged for sexually assaulting a player.<sup>10</sup> The record-breaking feat of the event (with respect to its audience strength) remains perpetually conjoined with the controversy.

It is interesting to note that with women’s sports, there has been a pattern of women having to first *prove* their capabilities, against the dominant and conservative ‘ideology’ of the

<sup>5</sup> Chaudhuri, “In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body,” p. 1767.

<sup>6</sup> Chaudhuri, “In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body,” p. 1766.

<sup>7</sup> Ani, “India rise to No. 3 in IBA’s world boxing rankings,” *The Hindu*, 4 February (2013). At: [thehindu.com/sport/india-rise-to-no-3-in-ibas-world-boxing-rankings/article66468714.ece](http://thehindu.com/sport/india-rise-to-no-3-in-ibas-world-boxing-rankings/article66468714.ece).

<sup>8</sup> Nikhilesh Bhattacharya, “Bhiwani Junction: The Untold Story of Boxing in India,” *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2013), p. 183.

<sup>9</sup> Chaudhuri, “In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body,” p. 1761.

<sup>10</sup> Paul MacInnes, “Rubiales accused of ‘forcefully’ kissing Bronze after Women’s World Cup final,” *The Guardian*, 7 December (2023). At: <https://www.theguardian.com/football/2023/dec/06/luis-rubiales-forcefully-kissed-lucy-bronze-after-world-cup-final-claims-fa-chair>.

time, and it is only after the ‘proving’ and the ‘doing’, that there has been ground for facilitation. For example, women had always been barred from participating in long distance running, because it was the prevalent idea that women *could not* run 26-mile races. In 1967, a Syracuse University student, Kathrine Switzer, entered the Boston Marathon under the pretence of being a man. As the race began, she was chased by officials on the racetrack, but that did not stop her. She ended up finishing the race in 4 hours and 20 minutes, alongside male runners. It was not until five years later in 1972 that women were ‘allowed’ to run long-distance races. Switzer was a trailblazer, directly responsible for the growth of women's sports worldwide.<sup>11</sup> As to the claims that men are biologically stronger than women, it should be noted that the large gap between top male and top female athletic records has been ever on the decline. In the Boston Marathon, the time gap between the fastest female and the fastest male runner is only around ten minutes.

Women like Switzer deserve representation, especially in popular art forms. In India, representation of women in films, music, and books has undergone palpable changes in the twenty-first century: from adhering almost strictly to the madonna-mistress complex, to the complicated (and voiced) female characters of today. Recent decades have also seen a growing number of public debates on issues concerning gender, and the way gender affects individuals and their experiences of different social institutions. Literature offers a keen scrutiny of society, and the category of autobiography is especially relevant. An autobiography provides insight into the experiences of athletes in the first person, with instances of direct address to the reader and the use of verbatim to place the reader close. Further, as it is conceived primarily as a “historically situated practice(s) of self-representation,”<sup>12</sup> it provides gender studies a new terrain of inquiry, at the individual level. It exposes the social realities of women in sports.

### **Gender Studies, Sports, and Autobiography**

The budding feminist movement in the 1960s did not extend into the realm of sports. Billie Jean King (b. 1943), who changed the face of women’s tennis, in her autobiography *All In*, expresses the wish that she had been more involved in the feminist cause.<sup>13</sup> Now, however, gender studies attempt to establish a stable ground within sports studies, especially with the emerging category of ‘sport feminism’. Gender studies and sports studies entwine as both involve the discourse of the body. A gender-centred approach to sports debunks myths (from medical and cultural perspectives) that were designed to keep women from participating in sports, extending to both the physicality of the female body and to women’s psychological fitness.<sup>14</sup> Scholars analyse the constructed nature of the gender role expectations that pervade sports, and initiate discussion on representation, stereotypes, ‘rules’ of proper behaviour (for women), and so on. These conditions extend to the present day and make research on women in sports an urgent matter.

James Olney states that autobiography has become a “focalizing literature”<sup>15</sup> when it comes to ‘studies’ like American Studies, Black Studies, Women's Studies, and so on. It offers

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<sup>11</sup> Kathrine Switzer, *Marathon Woman: Running the Race to Revolutionize Women's Sports* (London: Hachette UK, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 14.

<sup>13</sup> Billie Jean King, *All In: An Autobiography* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2021), p. 209.

<sup>14</sup> Tim Delaney and Tim Madigan, *The Sociology of Sports: An Introduction* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2009), p. 256.

<sup>15</sup> James Olney, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

a “privileged access to an experience”<sup>16</sup> (the black experience, the female experience) that other varieties of writing cannot offer. While building on the ‘direct’ and ‘faithful’ quality of autobiographical writing, he maintains that autobiographical writing veritably informs all forms of literature. He further traces a shift, in the focus of autobiographical studies, from ‘bios’ to ‘autos,’<sup>17</sup> noting that prior to this shift, there was no concern for the “agonising question of identity, self-definition,”<sup>18</sup> and adding ‘auto’ to ‘biography’ changed nothing. Today, however, the ‘self’ has become the prime focus of autobiographical criticism.

It has long been established that the creative act of writing (an autobiography) is implicit in the discovery and the creation of the ‘self’ (of the author-figure) in the text. A reader/ student of autobiography is invested in the process of this discovery-creation, and the created self becomes, in Olney’s words, “as much the reader’s as the author’s.”<sup>19</sup> This connection, between the author-figure and the reader, results in one of relatedness and influence, giving rise to a ‘transformative ability’ in autobiographies. It is reflected in their ability to shift perspective and challenge existing narratives as well as stereotypes that exist around womanhood. As a cultural artefact, autobiography celebrates “individual consciousness and experience”. The reader is interested in understanding how events, people and perspectives, among other things, contribute to the identity of the ‘self’ found at the end of the text. The spectrum of social prejudice against women who wish to engage in a male-dominated field like sports is visible here.

Autobiography is especially important among groups from which individuals step newly onto the stage of public history.<sup>20</sup> Here, Kom and Sania Mirza are trailblazers in their respective sports. Kom (the first female Indian boxer to win an Olympic medal) and Mirza (Grand Slam winner and first Indian woman to win a singles WTA tour title) offer their stories to clarify the beginning of women's sports in India. They had been at the top of the world sporting stages, and had been the first Indian women to do so. Their narratives address the social realities that they struggled with, and constantly engage in challenging stereotypes about what it means to be a woman in India. The narratives are laden with personal intonation, and we listen to the voice of the athlete. It should be reiterated that despite the successes and ‘proving’ of these athletes, India is still far from achieving gender equality regarding opportunities, resources, and facilities. It becomes important especially to encourage young girls to take up sports. Athletes and trailblazers like Mary Kom and Sania Mirza become compelling forces for aspirants, with stars like PV Sindhu calling them their role model and source of inspiration.

### **Mary Kom and her *Unbreakable* Legacy**

The figure of Mary Kom is almost invariably invoked in India around the discussion of women, empowerment, and gender equality. In her autobiography, she recalls how she was burdened with the weight of ‘lack’ even before she was born. While speaking about her mother wanting a son, she reflects how a daughter is considered more of a “burden” than a “help” and adds, “Would she be able to toil in the fields alongside her father as a son would?”<sup>21</sup> She goes on to subvert this idea of a woman as a frail domestic being that needs to be protected and kept indoors,

<sup>16</sup> Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 13.

<sup>17</sup> Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> Olney, *Autobiography*, p. 24.

<sup>20</sup> Albert E. Stone, “Autobiography in American Culture: Looking Back at the Seventies,” *American Studies International*, vol. 19, no. 3-4 (1981), p. 7.

<sup>21</sup> Mary Kom and Dina Serto, *Unbreakable* (New Delhi: Harper Sport, 2013), p. 6.

by working effectively in the fields when she was not even fifteen years old. She speaks about how she could complete tasks that boys found difficult. She remembers, “the menfolk would stand and gape, seeing me drive the animals.”<sup>22</sup> She further recalls travelling on her own to meet a coach who had no knowledge of her coming in. He tells her that “boxing is for young boys”<sup>23</sup> and calls her a “small, frail girl.”<sup>24</sup> Her father, after he had learned of her choice to enter the sport of boxing, says, “You are a girl. One day, you will get married. Should anything happen, should you get injured, it will be a big problem.”<sup>25</sup> The purpose of her identity as a woman for marriage is the point at issue. Years later she finds herself marvelling at the fact that, despite such opposition and lack of resources and support, she continues to fight to engage in her sport. She shows how she was subjected to societal prejudice and was denied equal opportunities simply because she was a woman.

The text illuminates instances that reveal bigger issues specific to the female experience: the model of ‘femininity’ that is promulgated in society resonates as she recalls her mother buying her gold earrings when all she wanted was new shoes for boxing; also, she had dreamed of riding a motorcycle all her childhood; but when she could afford to buy one, her mother dissuaded her from buying a Pulsar, and she had to “settle” for a “feminine Activa.”<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite crossing the traditional women’s ‘sphere’ over to more ‘masculine’ ventures like boxing, she can still be seen as bound by the social and cultural shackles that exist for the female sex.

In 2003, she received the Arjuna Award, and with this she says, “my ratings in the marriage market shot up too.”<sup>27</sup> She calls safety (for a young girl like her) as one core reason she agreed to marrying her friend Onler so young. She goes on to call her marriage an “unusual”<sup>28</sup> one, simply because she is absent from the house for much of the year. She admits the importance of the duties of a wife and says, “The kitchen is her domain; she is the one who shops for vegetables and groceries.”<sup>29</sup> Here, one can identify a perpetuation of the ‘usual’ regressive role that a woman is expected to play in the household. She adds that if not for the help of her relatives her “boxing gloves would be hanging somewhere, gathering dust.”<sup>30</sup> Her marriage was unusual, with Mary spending months out of the house and Onler staying home with the children. While she praises him for his support and progressive mind, it raises the question: is the presence of a supportive husband/ man necessary for a female athlete to succeed? Is it possible for a sportswoman to pursue her dream and not be subject to public scrutiny about her household affairs?

Further, her narrative discusses the critical role that women play in a traditional household, and how it can hold them back from pursuing their passion. She juxtaposes the image of a training camp, describing it as a “physically demanding space,”<sup>31</sup> and the image of her feeding her children. The image illustrates the hardships she faced as a mother and an athlete, but at the same time, runs the risk of glorifying her struggles. The image, thus projected, looks to illuminate the transforming agency of women in modern society. She takes on her duty as a

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<sup>22</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 13.

<sup>23</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 31.

<sup>25</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 41.

<sup>26</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 54.

<sup>27</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 57.

<sup>28</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 69.

<sup>29</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 69.

<sup>30</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 86.

mother, even at the gym, and furthers our probing into the dilemma of a woman equally bound by duty and by desire. She remembers her father telling her that “being a woman, you should be able to do everything.”<sup>32</sup> This finds conflict later in the text when she has to give birth by caesarean section. She expresses her mental turmoil in the following lines:

I wanted to continue boxing after my children were born and an operation might put an end to my chances. Even at that moment, my thoughts were on boxing. I found myself unable to decide one way or the other... What if a caesarean meant that I couldn't play again? My Olympic dream was still unfulfilled. But our aunts and elders who had gathered there were unequivocal in their decision: life was more important than sport. With Onler's approval, I was prepared for surgery.<sup>33</sup>

The ‘I’ eventually evolves into what her aunts, elders, and Onler wanted. It is not to say that she was against the surgery to enable birth, but that the anecdote works to illuminate the problematic situation of the athlete, who cannot find a way around her duty but must go through with it. It shows a portrait where she is unable to voice her ‘desire’ without first explaining that she truly loves her children. The text, then, becomes a platform where she attempts to convince via a display of equal devotion to her family and to her dream. After giving birth, she is asked to quit boxing, for the welfare of her body, and because now she is supposed to attend to her babies. She is also snubbed by other athletes and is not taken seriously. It takes immense mental strength and faith in herself to stand up against her family, friends, and her colleagues. It should be understood that this took place before she won her Olympic medal; that is, before she made her mark on the scene. She begins to question her decision to stay in the boxing ring and not return home, and even occasionally considers her actions selfish. This throws light on the inherent contradiction that is ever-present for women who wish to pursue their dream, as they tend to perceive their own actions as selfish and self-serving. Thus, her story invokes a reading where we are able to find nuanced difficulties faced by women in sports, including body issues.

The notion that sports “de-feminises”<sup>34</sup> women has currency in the twenty-first century. The concept of a “macho female athlete”<sup>35</sup> is perjoeatively used to refer to women who are muscular and do not conform to the traditional or ‘normal’ image of a woman. In an interview, Serena Williams, one of the greatest tennis players of all time, talks about body shaming from those who have labelled her too ‘manly’ throughout her career. She says, “People would say I was born a guy... because I’m strong.”<sup>36</sup> Similarly, Mary Kom addresses the body image issues she struggled with. She talks about how she would feel insecure about her ‘boyish appearance’ and would think, “feminine clothes didn’t look good on me.”<sup>37</sup> This illustrates the general dilemma that girls, who find their bodies not conforming to mainstream or accepted body-types, encounter. This is worsened when it is repeatedly articulated by people around her and gets internalised into a form of ‘dislike’ of her own body. After she has achieved her dream of getting an Olympic gold, she walks a ramp at a fashion show. She talks about this experience and recalls feeling pretty in her gorgeous dress. The text, therefore, presents a change of attitude before and

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<sup>32</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 26.

<sup>33</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> Delaney and Madigan, *The Sociology of Sports*, p. 234.

<sup>35</sup> Delaney and Madigan, *The Sociology of Sports*, p. 243.

<sup>36</sup> Andrea Park, “Serena Williams Has the Perfect Response for People Who Call Her ‘Manly’,” *Glamour*, 31 May (2018). At: [www.glamour.com/story/serena-williams-on-dealing-with-body-shaming](http://www.glamour.com/story/serena-williams-on-dealing-with-body-shaming).

<sup>37</sup> Kom and Serto, *Unbreakable*, p. 26.

after Mary achieves her dream (the Olympic medal). She goes from feeling insecure in 'feminine' clothes to feeling comfortable in them. Her 'deviance' from the norm of traditional body-type is rewarded in her sporting endeavours where talent trumps beauty, and finally she is 'safe'. She is projected as finally being comfortable across the spectrum of male and female body characteristics (and socially imposed characteristics). It should be noted that it is the safety net of her 'happy' ending that generates and validates such a narrative: what about the female aspirants who are unsuccessful in their careers? Mary Kom broke through the coded feminine ideals that were imposed on her, and her story becomes a parable for the readers as an "accepted sports narrative"<sup>38</sup> where struggle finds validation. Thus, the text offers more than just a tale of Olympic victory and personal growth. It is also a critique of the idea that athletes and their life-narratives validate the very system that they have struggled against.

Lastly, she symbolises a subversion of prejudices levied on women in general, as she goes on to repudiate the gendered norms and expectations made of her. She would go on to become the only boxer (male or female) to have won eight World Championship Titles. She heralds the reality that women can break gender barriers and act in society, exercising agency. Her autobiography signals the importance of change at the social as well as the domestic level. It depicts her as strong, tough, and capable of strong physicality, which can be crucial in liberating women from the sphere that has been traditionally assigned to them. The choices she makes redefine what it means to be a woman in India. Sania Mirza, the top Indian tennis player, is on similar ground in her autobiography, claiming her position as a woman in sports in India.

### **Sania's *Ace Against Odds***

The introduction by Martina Hingis, former World Number 1 Swiss professional tennis player, to *Ace Against Odds* (2016), calls India a "community that had almost never encouraged girls to take to sport."<sup>39</sup> Sania Mirza began competing in the Grand Slam Tournaments in 2005. She calls producing a world-class women's tennis player from India a "virtually impossible task"<sup>40</sup> and says, "in this highly competitive field, in which no Indian woman had ever succeeded, I would need to be lucky to be successful, even with all my talent and willingness to work hard."<sup>41</sup> The state of women's sports was virtually non-existent in India. We remember Karnam Malleswari winning the first Olympic medal for India in 2000 in weightlifting, and a few other instances of headlines that persisted for a few days in the media. The lack of infrastructure had been so palpable to the athlete that she credits her triumph to the likes of fate, destiny, and luck. One cannot help but assume that it must take the hand of a higher power for a woman to achieve what the likes of Malleswari and Mirza did. There is a constant reminder of the notion of her family's 'sacrifices'. Her family finds the means to fund her passion, with no more than a strong belief in her talents. They move across borders and invest their hard-earned money into their daughter. Similar 'tropes' are found in the autobiographies of Mary Kom and even Saina Nehwal (a more recent star): their parents overworked to the point of exhaustion to support their daughters' dreams, having only faith in their talent and hope for the future. *Ace Against Odds*

<sup>38</sup> Chaudhuri, "In the Ring: Gender, Spectatorship, and the Body," p. 1769.

<sup>39</sup> Sania Mirza, Imran Mirza, and Shivangi Gupta, *Ace Against Odds* (New Delhi: HarperSport, 2016), p. 8.

<sup>40</sup> Mirza, Mirza and Gupta, *Ace Against Odds*, p. 24.

<sup>41</sup> Mirza, Mirza and Gupta, *Ace Against Odds*, p. 39.

dives straight into the (social) obstacles that Sania Mirza faced, and the role they played on her performance on court. She also does not shy away from voicing her opinion against them.

The text discusses, among other issues, one controversy where a male-dominated crowd of journalists had asked the teenage tennis player her thoughts on premarital sex. Her response, or lack thereof, issued headlines that misrepresented her stance. The scandal was resolved, and the clarifications barely made it into their columns. She speaks at length about the role of news articles, headlines, and journalists in her career on and off the court. Also, when addressing the controversy of a photograph where she can be seen putting her feet up on the Indian national flag (considered akin to blasphemy in India), she says, “I was beginning to feel emotionally drained, battle-scarred and bruised. The two recent controversies within a span of one month had taken a big toll on me and left me mentally jaded and fatigued.”<sup>42</sup> The photograph turned out to be fabricated. Mirza’s identity as a Muslim in India contributed to her professional woes.

In sports, there seems to be an inherent contradiction relating to women’s bodies: female athletes who are “strong but thin” and “firm but shapely”<sup>43</sup> get more readily accepted in society and find greater recognition (sponsorship deals, for example) than more muscular female athletes. The historical case of Babe Didrikson Zaharias, an American athlete, ridiculed in the media for her ‘manliness’ is an example. Sania says, “my achievements on the tennis courts that had brought me into the spotlight were of no interest to [the media]. It was far more lucrative to portray me as a glamorous doll whose only objective was to use sport as a stepping stone to films.”<sup>44</sup> Her ‘pretty’ looks seem to have perpetually put her on the spotlight, especially with the rise of electronic journalism in India. She would be questioned regarding her clothes both on and off court, an issue that male athletes hardly ever encounter. Sania quotes Barkha Dutt:

What if Sania Mirza had been a man? Would she still have been at the epicentre of a strange and stormy love-hate relationship with her country? Would she still have evoked reactions that tend to swing between extremes of adulation and annoyance?... And our contradictory responses to her say something about how we respond to women who are non-conformist trailblazers and not afraid to be themselves. It’s almost as if we admire them and resent them at the same time... We can barely deal with men who set their own rules; to ask us to accept a woman who is individualistic, passionate, beautiful and yes, possibly annoyingly arrogant, makes us just a little nervous.<sup>45</sup>

The idea that society seems to first cherish, then revere, and ultimately bring down a strong woman is implicated in what Mirza says about being questioned over ridiculous controversies that affected her mental health, and ultimately her performance. The turn in the media from publishing about the upcoming player to publishing defaming stories about her for lucrative purposes makes her contemplate on her status as a woman in sport. She would be asked incessant questions pertaining to marriage, children, and clothing. Even today, she is asked relentless questions about her children and her role as a mother, while her husband, the cricketer Shoaib Malik, escapes such examination. In her autobiography, she dedicates chapters to explaining the controversies around her, inevitably turning her legendary life-story into one of vindication and

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<sup>42</sup> Mirza, Mirza and Gupta, *Ace Against Odds*, p. 133.

<sup>43</sup> Pirkko Markula, “Firm but Shapely, Fit but Sexy, Strong but Thin: The Postmodern Aerobicizing Female Bodies,” *Sociology of Sport Journal*, vol. 12, no. 4 (1995).

<sup>44</sup> Mirza, Mirza and Gupta, *Ace Against Odds*, p. 88.

<sup>45</sup> Mirza, Mirza and Gupta, *Ace Against Odds*, p. 136.



rebuttal. From the teenager being asked questions about premarital sex to her having to justify wearing a skirt for matches (there are religious aspects to this issue), the social aspect of being an athlete remains an integral part, and we can never forget that she is a woman in sports.

## Conclusion

Mary Kom and Sania Mirza select incidents from their lives to *build* their life-narrative. They approach their journey being wary of the gender-related concerns it entails. The texts project certain truths through a reflection of life: a ‘female’ experience of sports and the idea that gender identity plays a crucial role in an athlete’s career or experience. They highlight the troubles they faced and the lessons they extracted from them. Several chapters in both texts are pedagogical and insightful. They provide a first-person’s account of sports, and introduce the reader to its inhospitability towards women. The texts establish that it takes a village to build a female athlete. Further, from being bound by their domestic ties to the constant social scrutiny of their bodies, the texts problematise our understanding of sports as both liberating and confining; mobilising and regressive.

In an autobiography, the unique relationship of the writer with its reader activates an influence over the latter. The sharing of personal anecdotes and thought-processes, as the reader suffers and is excited with the athlete, aids its ‘transformative’ power to *move* the reader (to a better end). Additionally, a reader of an autobiography usually *expects* to be affected, or at least be faced with a guiding model: the understanding of how the athlete achieved their dream must also entail an understanding of their values and belief systems. Thus, the texts serve the double purpose of guiding the followers (aspirants, fans, and so forth) and vindicating the women.

Mary Mason attempts to establish differences in autobiographies written by men and women and concludes that women autobiographers generally come to an “identity by way of alterity.”<sup>46</sup> That is to say that they tend to formulate their own identity in relation to another person. On the one hand, this ‘other’ is absent in the texts and the athlete presents as a towering figure throughout. On the other hand, it should be noted that the athlete consistently identifies herself in relation to her journey. The dominant ‘goal’ or ‘trajectory’ of the narration is drawn towards the event of their greatest achievement (medals, winning a tournament) which comes at the end of the book. The ‘self’ is dominated by the journey, as sports autobiography demands.

Autobiographies by male athletes also predominantly discuss issues that they had to overcome: Milkha Singh (*The Race of My Life*) talks about restarting his life against the backdrop of the partition of India,<sup>47</sup> and Yuvraj Singh (*The Test of My Life*) addresses cancer and the role it played in his life and career.<sup>48</sup> Outside of India, we see baseball player Jackie Robinson (*I Never Had It Made*) addressing racial barriers, and wheelchair tennis star Dylan Alcott (*Able*) detailing his life and career with disability, and many more.<sup>49</sup> These texts rarely, if ever, grapple with gender. Their status as a ‘man’ remains unrecognised and unproblematised, and, ironically, they contest obstacles bigger than their bodies. Familial particulars are projected

<sup>46</sup> Mary G. Mason, “The Other Voice: Autobiographies of Women Writers,” *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 231.

<sup>47</sup> Milkha Singh and Sonia Sanwalka, *The Race of My Life* (Delhi: Rupa Publications, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Yuvraj Singh, Sharda Ugra, and Nishant Jeet Arora, *The Test of My Life: From Cricket to Cancer and Back* (Noida: Random House India, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Alfred Duckett and Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography of Jackie Robinson* (New York: Ecco, 1972); and Dylan Alcott and Grantlee Kieza, *Able: Gold Medals, Grand Slams and Smashing Glass Ceilings*, revised edition (Sydney: ABC Books, 2020).

as support systems and they find little (personal or familial) opposition in their chosen path. For them, it seems the ‘only way is up’. On the other hand, their female counterpart’s journey tends to entail challenges and struggles in their very private spaces (both filial and familial), where issues revolve around their gender and their traditional duty to their family and to their body.

What happens after the end of a book? What happens after one has become the world’s number one athlete? The autobiography of the American tennis player, Arthur Ashe, titled *Days of Grace*, denies the right of the public to indulge in the private life of an athlete (he had been diagnosed with AIDS and he struggled with journalists who wanted to publish his condition).<sup>50</sup> He maintains the social responsibility of athletes in leading the youth to better life-choices and ideals that he was himself inspired by. This brings our attention to the agency of athletes. What comes after they have served the purpose of winning medals, providing entertainment and excitement, and garnering nationalistic pride and purpose? Their journey holds currency as they serve the all’s-well-that-ends-well fantasy to the reader, and sell the idea that hard work does pay off. If one looks up a successful athlete on the internet, numerous articles, blogs and so on, that tag athletes as ‘perfect role models’ or figures of empowerment pop up. This aspect of an athlete-figure, as an influential character in society, guides the ‘transformative’ nature of their life-narratives. The texts selected divulging in the run-of-the-mill qualities that are associated with sports: determination, perseverance, and hard work. In doing so, they shift perspective away from women being perceived as weak and as mere victims to social evils. They highlight their status as strong bodied, strong willed, and as ones overcoming struggle as active agents of society.<sup>51</sup> They emphasise on the broader implications of their journey and show how personal narratives can influence and shape societal perception. This paves the way for a more equal future in sports. The texts possess a ‘transformative’ power in showcasing the strength, determination, and hard-work displayed by women. They challenge the restricted repertoire or ‘sphere’ that is traditionally associated with women and try to normalise a leading woman’s voice in the field. They help place athletes in the galaxy of (scarce) female icons for young girls today.

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<sup>50</sup> Arthur Ashe and Arnold Rampers, *Days of Grace* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), p. 24.

<sup>51</sup> Jennifer Hargreaves, “Querying Sport Feminism: Personal or Political?” in *Sport: A Critical Sociology*, ed. Richard Giulianotti (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), p. 188.