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REVIEW

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Episteme, sports, and media: review of the film *Saina*

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In recent years, the Indian Hindi film industry has produced a number of films like *Mary Kom* (Kumar, 2014) on boxing, *Dangal* (Tiwari, 2016) on wrestling, *Panga* (Tiwari, 2020) on kabaddi, *Rashmi Rocket* (Khurana, 2021) on track and field, and *Shabaash Mithu* (Mukherji, 2022) on cricket. These show the empowering journey of athletes in India. *Saina* (Gupte, 2021), directed by Amole Gupte, is one such Indian Hindi-language biographical sports film that chronicles the career trajectories of Indian badminton player Saina Nehwal (Parineeti Chopra). In doing so, the film pays homage to the individuals who have significantly contributed to her perseverance and indomitable spirit.

By unlearning the prevalent episteme pertaining to the portrayal of women and sports in Indian Hindi films, this film establishes an episteme that makes the representation exhaustive. The film also demonstrates how the media plays a significant role, not only by publicising her accomplishments but also by consistently comparing her to other badminton players and evaluating her commitment. Consequently, the media and newspaper headlines preceding critical matches keep motivating her. The film also emphasises the sacrifices and dedication players should undertake when they become media sensations, are regularly approached by advertising agencies, and succumb to endorsement deals.

Acknowledging the contribution of Saina Nehwal

Born on March 17, 1990, in Hyderabad, India, Saina Nehwal is a renowned professional badminton player from India who competes in singles tournaments. She was named the world's best badminton player in 2015. She has won 24 international titles, including 10 Badminton World Federation (BWF) Superseries titles, and has represented India three times in the Olympics, clinching a bronze medal in her second appearance in London 2012. She also medaled at the Olympics, the BWF World Championships, and the BWF World Junior Championships all within an individual event. By winning the singles competition at the Commonwealth Games in 2010 and again in 2018, she made history by becoming the first Indian to do so. She was

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bestowed with the Arjuna Award (the second-highest sporting honour of India) in 2009, the Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award (the highest sporting honour of India) in 2010, honoured with the title of "Padma Shri" (the fourth-highest civilian award of India) in 2010, and conferred the Padma Bhushan—India's third highest civilian award—in 2016 by the Government of India. As one of the most recognised badminton players, she is contacted by numerous brands for endorsement opportunities. While her social media accounts are among the most seen and followed, the distinguishing characteristic of all her endorsements is a motivational social message conveyed across all the brands (Dhote, 2018, p. 103). While depicting Saina's journey, the film illustrates how the public perceives an image of her based on her characteristics, aesthetics, temperament, emotional state, social behaviour, and manner of living as portrayed in the media.

Episteme, parenting, and media

The film begins with a monologue stating, "India, my country, has a population of 1.35 billion, of which half are female. Ask any girl, and she will admit that many of her dreams remain unfulfilled. Darling son will go to college, while daughter will stroke kitchen fire! She turns 18, and she will be married off! End of story" (Gupte, 2021). The sociocultural analogies employed in this monologue are representative of the contexts in which patriarchal norms in Indian society regulate sexuality, reproduction, and collective processes. There are overt prohibitions that forbid women from engaging in certain crucial activities, denying them access to certain privileges (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021, p. 427). This episteme comprises the unacknowledged and disproportionately represented knowledge and experiences of Indian women who have been marginalised by dominant and monolithic cultural and media stereotypes. In this perspective, epistemic hegemony is executed "by a class that [is] dominant economically" (Bellamy, 1994, p. xxxviii), and a Gramscian notion of power identifies it as a continuous spectrum that never meets its totality, rendering power an essential part of this despotism.

The film opens with Saina addressing a group of journalists celebrating her victory over Malaysia's Tan Boon Hoe at the Commonwealth Games. The media makes a big deal out of Saina's victory, using phrases like "Saina Nehwal makes history," "Saina clinches two gold medals at the Commonwealth Games," and "Saina demolishes the opponent" (Gupte, 2021) as their headlines. This is followed by her post-match interactions with the media, photographers, and journalists. During this conversation, she is asked questions such as how she feels after the victory, what her turning point has been, how she controls her adrenaline surge, and where she draws her courage and power from. Saina responds in a flashback that lasts until the end of the film about how she abandons carefree childhood days and family gatherings as a child to pick up her "sword"—a badminton racquet—and become the best player in the world.

Her mother, Usha Rani Harvir Singhji Nehwal (Meghna Malik), has been instrumental in shaping little Saina into a powerhouse and the first Indian woman to reach the optimum position in badminton. Mothers typically devote a significant amount

of effort and time to their children's upbringing, ensuring that they thrive in every possible way (Villalobos, 2014, p. 4). As Usha Rani has been a district-level badminton player in Haryana, India, she desires that her younger daughter, little Saina (Naishaa Kaur Bhatoye), will one day play for India and reach the pinnacle of her career. She decides to enrol Saina in a badminton training academy. Usha expresses clearly that she expects Saina to master the sport, and despite the Lal Bahadur Shastri Stadium in Hyderabad (India) being about 25 kilometres from her home, she goes there with Saina for her enrolment. Under the guidance of her coach and with the motivation and utmost support of her mother, little Saina's game improves. Little Saina is told at the stadium that she can't join because the class is already at capacity. But she exhibits her skills and amazes everyone, attracting the coach Meru's interest (Ranjith Reddy). Saina's performance improves as a result of her coach's guidance and her mother's encouragement and unwavering support.

A major feature of intense parenting is the notion of parental determinism, which holds that the efforts of individual parents to build their children's skills and competencies influence their developmental and professional results (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020, p. 200). While Usha Rani strives to make Saina potent, healthy, and capable of succeeding in any circumstance, Saina's father, Harvir Singh Nehwal (Shubrajyoti Barat), takes a loan from his private fund account to provide her with expensive shuttles. When Usha Rani reprimands Saina for finishing second in a competition, her father comforts her and encourages her to concentrate on the game. This exemplifies how good parenthood encompasses "a concerted parental focus on maximising children's potential through early and intensive parental attention and stimulation" (Wall, 2018, p. 395). Usha convinces the coach to enlist her for district level and other such tournaments, and she surprises everyone with her talents and emerges victorious in these tournaments.

The film depicts a perception of the mass media as sources of news about a specific event that generates growing interest. Moreover, the transmitted message is constructed according to requirements of importance, journalistic integrity, and convenience, with the goal of broadening the coverage of the player's accomplishments (Sherwood & Nicholson, 2017, p. 149). Saina's achievements are regularly reported in newspapers with headlines such as "Saina wins an under-13 singles title" and "Saina Nehwal bags a triple" (Gupte, 2021). Her father continues to make minuscule reports appear to be big stories, and her mother meticulously preserves all of her medals and awards, exemplifying the exemplary nature of her parents. With media and newspaper coverage of her successive wins, she grabs the attention of the Badminton Association of India and is selected to represent India in international tournaments. This demonstrates how the media influences people's perspective and comprehension of sport by providing a narrative that has a pragmatic effect on the principles of sport (Pilar et al., 2019, p. 486).

Epistemic hegemony and media

As soon as Saina is crowned India's national champion, her coach Miru recommends that she enrol in the academy of Rajan (Manav Kaul), who teaches for

free and provides the best facilities required to perform well in international competitions. Saina, along with her male childhood friend and fellow player, Parupalli Kashyap (Eshan Naqvi), joins the Rajan academy and begins to encounter the Rajan's strict disciplinary nature. In addition to highlighting the significance of focusing exclusively on victory, Rajan cautions students that breaking even one of the academy's many regulations could end their tenure there. Saina wins the Philippine Open after becoming more agile through Rajan's coaching, training, and dietary instructions, and subsequently becomes a media sensation and sports icon.

In the meantime, she develops feelings for Parupalli and starts spending more time with him during and after the practise sessions. Rajan, observing this, cautions Saina that the shelf life of a player is very short, that youth is deceitful, which can distract and later destroy her career. He advises Saina that devoting her youth to a love is akin to suicide, and that her blossoming relationship with Parupalli may result in the Nehwal family's dream going unfulfilled and shattered. Moreover, he tells her that what she does to win a game is irrelevant; what is significant is what she sacrifices in order to win, implying that she should sacrifice her love. Here Rajan completely nullifies Saina's tenacity and commitment to badminton and exhibits layers of epistemic hegemony, which "represents a concern for the dominance of one view of knowledge and the subordination of all other forms" (Brough, 2013, p. 34). This is further emphasised when a disappointed and disheartened Saina explains to Parupalli why Rajan must make her realise how much her family sacrifices for her game and how Rajan cannot perceive that she has spent her entire life playing badminton. She keeps telling Parupalli that she no longer wishes to meet him and adds that while society does not question Sachin about why he married at the age of twenty-two, she, as a female, cannot express her feelings to anyone. Rajan's prejudices emerge from his specific misreading of Saina's credibility, such that he is "epistemically culpable" (Fricker, 2007) and displays a unique form of "epistemic irrationality" (Arpaly, 2003).

Saina wins a number of major international tournaments, and after winning India's first Olympic medal in badminton, she becomes a media figure. She is also the subject of daily mainstream press and newspaper coverage, a regular interviewee for journalists, and the cover girl of major magazines. Commercials featuring prominent public figures, such as celebrities, performers, and athletes, raise consumer awareness of a product's brand and encourage customers to purchase (Keller et al., 2008, p. 320). The film highlights how the majority of sports brands place their primary emphasis on product advertising, and how celebrity athletes and sports figures like Saina promote and represent the brand through "advertisement or sponsorship or with collaboration on social media" (Shirodkar & Deshpande, 2021, p. 10646). Saina's hectic schedule as a brand ambassador for various products and endorsement programmes frequently prevents her from attending practise sessions at the scheduled time. She even misses a few sessions, and upon noticing this, Rajan becomes enraged and informs Saina that she no longer needs his coaching if she wishes to be photographed with soft drinks and featured on posters in corner stores.

Epistemic (un)confidence and media

Eventually, Saina loses her concentration and excellent form and is knocked out in important tournaments by significant margins. She also suffers a heel injury during a match when she slips and twists her heel. She feels depressed when the doctor tells her to undergo a two-month rehabilitation and forbids her to set foot on the ground. The situation worsens as messages about her retirement, losing touch, and badminton's number one ranking go viral. News channels like AGCPL News are seen broadcasting news like, "The bad news is that due to her injury, Saina Nehwal has slipped from World No. 2 to World No. She is so bad that she can't even step on the court, while her juniors are scaling new heights. The way the scales are tipping for Saina, the glorious sun of Saina's run seems to be dipping into the horizon" (Gupte, 2021). This exemplifies how local sports reporters, who are meant to provide objective coverage of players, scrutinise them and, in this case, Saina's injury.

According to studies, some athletes strongly feel that even their personal lives are "under media scrutiny," whereas others may feel the pressure of assessment when the media makes predictions based on their achievements. By spotlighting sports' world-class players, the media frequently generates unreasonable expectations for athletic performance. Athletes may feel the pressure to perform at a level comparable to that of media-covered star athletes (Frisby & Wanta, 2018, pp. 1–3). When people are subjected to invalidation, isolation, and marginalization, "epistemic *unconfidence*" (Lara, 2019) occurs. Within this construct, agents who enforce epistemic hegemony and prejudices are unable to recognise subjects as "intellectual beings" because their "experiential knowledge does not square with the frames of objective truth" (Lara, 2019, p. 5). Saina, lacking epistemological confidence in her abilities, explains to Parupalli how the media has "turned her into a flashback" due to her injury and a few poor performances. She further adds, "Something is going wrong. These last two years haven't been good. Something is missing" (Gupte, 2021).

Upon Parupalli's suggestion, Saina meets Rajan during her rehabilitation process and requests him to train her again. However, Rajan reminds her that she wastes his time, effort, and investment by failing to reach the number one position. In an emotionally-charged conversation, Saina tells Rajan that this academy is not the right fit for her, symbolising her "epistemic confidence" regarding her competence. In this discourse, epistemic confidence denotes "the degree to which someone feels a belief state approximates knowledge" and an individual's belief in achieving "a desired social position" (Leeuwen, 2022, p. 2). As soon as Saina leaves Rajan Academy, the news goes viral, and journalists even visit her home to determine if the rumours that Saina and Rajan are estranged are true, if Saina has been asked to leave Rajan Academy, and whether this is the end of Saina's career. In this situation, her mother advises her not to give importance to the media and just focus on her game. She further adds, "Don't allow self-doubt to creep in. You are a tigress. Saina Nehwal is your name" (Gupte, 2021). Saina joins the PP Badminton Academy of Jeevan Kumar (Ankur Vikal) in Bengaluru, India. With Jeevan's coaching and the unwavering support of her family and Parupalli, Saina wins important tournaments and finally emerges as the world's No. 1 badminton player after defeating the formidable Spanish

player Carla Martinez of Spain in the 2015 Syed Modi International Badminton Championship.

Conclusion

By chronicling the incredible career of India's poster girl for badminton, the film represents the epistemologies of every simple girl from a middle-class upbringing who has worked with dedication and perseverance to become the champion in her specific category in a country where cricket is revered. By highlighting the media's propensity to be critical and disparaging when judging athletes, the film urges the media to be more supportive, compassionate, and encouraging in developing and publicising an athlete's commitment to the nation, regardless of the result.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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