



A Critical Study of Media Representation of Women in Sports: Construction of Narratives around Sexuality, Male Gaze and Sexism.

Haris Hasan

Assistant Professor, Delhi School of Journalism, University of Delhi, India

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Abstract: *Sports and male masculinity have an innate bond with each other. The advent of sports as recreational activity and the manliness that goes with sports have an imbalance from the time memorial which has existed to this day. Sports and games to determine masculinity and judge a fine body has been a practice of sorts from ancient times. The swayamvara (in ancient India, a practice of choosing a husband, from among a list of suitors, by a girl of marriageable age. Swayam in Sanskrit means self and vara means groom in this context) stated in epics where sports competition would be the most appropriate way to judge or select a prospective groom or the medieval tourneys, based on similar lines where sports were played by a gender to win another gender is something common across cultures. When women entered sports first as distant spectators and much later as active participants, issues deeply engraved in the patriarchal mindset of sports have time again emerged as serious fault lines of sorts. There have been problems and issues with female participation in sports, the codes and rules governing them and also the media representation of women in sports over the years. The paper aims to discuss some of the critical issues with regards to female representation in sports by media. The representation has been based on some preconceived notions about the very existence of sports. Hyper masculinity associated with sports and numerous stereotypes with regards to gender and gender roles.*

Keywords: *Sports, Gender, Sexualization, Male Gaze, Framing*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sports and media have helped each other to grow in their own space. The media coverage of various sporting actions has transformed the future of sports in many ways. The way a game is played is often dependent on the variables of media coverage. Media coverage of sporting action is a serious study in itself where programming content and production values come to a testing mode. The advent of electronic media and broadcast journalism the passive coverage of sports suddenly changed to the more active one with live action being reported with the aid of multiple cameras to the delight of the sports audience. The media coverage of female athletes



is an interesting study where several dimensions of gender issues and their roles in societies often come to unsettling scores.

The sexualization of female Olympians dates to the early 20th century. Because modern sport developed as an avenue for men to cultivate and exhibit manliness, women's encroachment into this realm sparked anxieties. Sexualizing female competitors was one way to calm this angst

The societal norms across cultures have often debarred an active representation of females in sports. As sport enters new global territories, attending to questions of cultural difference is increasingly important to studies of women's sports fandom also. Women sports fans rarely appear as film protagonists, with the notable exception of the 2006 movie *Offside*, which tells the story of Iranian women soccer fans attending a World Cup qualifying match. When women are not playing any sports and participating as spectators even then the situation is grim as they are not allowed wholeheartedly in stadium and arena spaces dominated by toxic male masculinity. Women spectators are perceived to be no match for male spectators in terms of knowledge and other fan motives. Some of the Fan motives are stated below in the table. It is interesting to note that female fans and spectators will find it difficult to fit in as the notions about them in common parlance with respect to sports is often not positive, which in turn is constructed on biased media portrayal.

Fan motive	Definition	Example
Aesthetic Beauty	Drawn to the sport because one appreciates the way it is played or performed	Enjoying the sport of motocross because of the unique skill necessary to perform the range of jumps or tricks required to win judge approval.
Achievement	Internal sense of accomplishment that comes from the success of the team one is supporting	Sense of joy experienced by a New Orleans Saints fan after their team finally won the Super Bowl in 2010 just 4 years after Hurricane Katrina almost destroyed their city
Drama	Thrill obtained from a heated rivalry or key matchup between marquee athletes or teams	Watching the final round of Wimbledon as Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal compete for a Grand Slam win.
Escape	Following a team to experience a sense of departure from the day-to-	Watching the 1980 Olympic hockey team win the gold helped the American public



	day world around us	forget about difficult economic times
Knowledge	Monitoring how the sport is performed to increase one's understanding for how it should be played	A parent watching the slow motion coverage of an ice dancing routine in hopes of further refining the technique employed by her daughter during future competitions.
Social Connection	Ability to interact with friends, family members, or colleagues with sport serving as a background or rationale for supporting the relationship	Mother and daughter taking a trip to watch the women's field hockey championship as a way to bond

The broadcasters often capture the femininity of female spectators and market it as additional norms of some kind of aesthetic value to the broadcast. They are framed in away which is often misogynist and as a fulfillment to the clamours of male gaze. The coverage is full of sexism and fuels the male libido with imagery of women as trophies and things of consumption. The football coverage of mega events like FIFA Men's World cup is a classic example where latin and hispanic women spectators are often framed in live coverage for their so called 'voluptuous' figures and dressing sense. This in a way disturbingly fuels the existing ignition temperature of male fantasies regarding desirable women. The trend has been experimented with in other sports as well where perpetual camera focus on women is done in such a way that is completely out of context and is hell bent on proving the validity of male gaze and dominant male audience theory.

On the field and as active participants in sports female sportpersons are not spared either with continuous coverage of a kind where camera focus locates focal points of preconceived 'aestheticism'. Female athletes are judged more often on their looks and body types so much so that most of them have accepted the same as the norm of business. Male and female athletes playing a similar sport are portrayed differently. This has resulted in an average person thinking of female sportsperson not as an athlete but a sex symbol. The media coverage delving around on the various contours of the body and shape of female sports stars such as Serena Williams, often cited in media as 'black beauty', Maria Sharapova, Anna Kournikova, Danica Patrick, Sania Mirza, Stephine Rice, Yelena Isinbayeva, widely known as Beauty Bird or Allison Rebecca Stokke Fowler is a testimonial to this. Media and broadcast interests often become a harbinger of change on how a sport involving a kind of gender in participation is played and presented to the target audience which in turn is predominantly male . The consumption of sports has been modelled on the lines of problematic interpretation of binary of win and loss where the intrinsic values that a sporting action is capable of producing often gets eclipsed by trivia of superimposed imaginary of age long gender representation. The objectification of



female athletes is rampant with photoshoots of female athletes depicting their bare bodies becoming an established media representation norm.

Throughout the 18th & 19th century women's sport was practically non-existent. Leisure activities such as marbles, puzzles and skipping were the only forms of 'sports' that women were allowed or accepted to play. It was shown that in those days women playing sport was both 'unladylike' and potentially dangerous to their reproductive lives (Stell, 1991).

During the 1850's swimming became popular, and many women soon became drawn to this new and exciting era. However, as one can expect from those early days males and females were forbidden to share the swimming pool and therefore had separate days and times in which they could occupy the facilities. As expected again, women did not receive equal time, and to stick with the 'fashion' of that era they were required to wear neck to knee woollen costumes (Stell, 1991).

For the past decade female athletes both domestically and internationally have been portrayed in the media through their looks and body image. How the media portrays a particular sport or athlete can also impact on both the sport's or the athlete's credibility. With that in mind, we need to ask ourselves what sort of images of female athletes are commonly presented to readers, viewers and listeners. And how often do newspapers, magazines, television and radio devote the focus to the talent of women's sport (commission,2008)

45% of media attention towards female athletes is expressed in a sexual way (McCabe,2001). As we have seen Stephanie Rice is not promoted in the media for her talent. Yet she has won 3 Olympic gold medals? The media has used Stephanie Rice not for talent but her looks. One can only wonder if she was less attractive would she get the media attention that she does?

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