

NATIONAL AND RACIAL IDENTITY POLITICS OF NORTH-EAST INDIA AND ETHNIC IDENTITIES WITHIN: THROUGH A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF MARY KOM 'BIOPIC' AND HER 'AUTOBIOGRAPHY'-UNBREAKABLE.

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Abstract

Racial consciousness is commonly experienced by North-East (NE) Indians often in confrontation with dominant Indo-Aryan and Dravidian races. Invariably miffed with a popular ethnophaulism 'chinki', a social distance is psyched among NE Indians with East Asian Mongol features having no apparent racial similarities with the rest of Indians. 'Racialising' based on physical differences guides majority Indians with a quick glimpse of *unfamiliar* North East India through a popular cultural lens. However, the perceived one-race NE people further comprise of multiple ethnicities within. What gets represented and not in the imagination of a national identity exists in the connection between culture and psychology of the nation, as members are bound by the bearings in their mind of mutual connection (Benedict Anderson, 2006). Is there a pause in such bearings of national belongingness among the NE Indians? This paper will explore the politics of national, racial and ethnic identity formations of 'North East' in the Indian socio-cultural contexts and their psychological consequences. Foregrounding with vignettes of frequent queries made upon NE Indians' nationality, an attempt has been made to illustrate the dynamics of racialisation and appropriating of cultures through 'mainstream' Indian cinema. The paper emphasises on the crumbling of a minority ethnic identity and its engulfment into the popularity of dominant Indian culture by critically analysing the making of M.C. Mary Kom's biopic film, a world champion and Olympic medallist in Women's boxing. The researcher adopts an auto-ethnographical approach to analyse Mary's case characterised in the film, its casts, narrations, stories plotted, songs, film promotion and public reactions from majority as well as ethnic minority Indians on social media by providing the emic perspectives while examining the cursors of identity struggle. This analysis will be done in comparison with Mary Kom's autobiography, "Unbreakable".

Key words: identity formation, racialisation, normalisation, imagined community, biopolitics.

The *blurring* national identity of North East Indians

“We the people”—the utterance, the chant, the written line—is always missing some group of people it claims to represent.

—Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*

‘A month ago I called vlcc for massage at home service. A young lady physiotherapist of 27 years from Delhi came to deliver the servicer. On the first eye contact, she went all agog in finding her curious subject in me. After a while, she couldn’t hold her curiosity and asked, ‘didi, where are you from?’ I replied, ‘Manipur’ (hoping she, a graduate in social science as she claimed, wouldn’t ask further where Manipur is). To my utter disappointment, she asked, “didi, is Manipur in Nepal or Myanmar?’ I sighed! She seemed to have understood my disinterest. A few moments later, her curiosity grew and couldn’t resist herself from enquiring the same. Forcing myself to smile, I explained to her about Manipur and North East geographically while thinking to myself, this must be the 1000th time in my 18 years of living in Delhi that I am directly asked the same question. I am seriously ‘bored to death’ about this curiosity of ‘educated Indians’.¹

The above anecdote is a frequent encounter of everyday life in Delhi for the North East (NE) Indians. From the enquirer’s viewpoint, the ‘confusion’ on identity may be understandable as is caused by racial similarities between North East Indians and the South East Asians. However, even this seemingly trivial ‘othering’² through such uncanny naivety³ strengthened the deep-seated social exclusion and *misrecognition* schemed within me, and I can say for other NE generally, over the years. In many other contexts, the *un/misrecognition* of NE even leads to violent discriminations in metro cities of India (Titikhya Barkataki - 2017, Duncan McDuie-Ra -2012 &2016). The question of engagement here is not even about the ‘intents’ but of the ‘symptoms’ of *unrecognition/misrecognition* and the more subtle underlying ‘politics of recognition’ (Charles Tylor, 1992) based on the *bio-race*. Tylor writes,

“The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being”.

In the heart of the post-colonial Indian politics of multiculturalism lies ‘racialism’ as intrinsic to existence and the meanings of these existences are the centre-stage of ‘who we are’

¹ The impetuous questions, especially coming from Indians who claims themselves as ‘educated’ such as, ‘is Manipur in Nepal or Myanmar?’ or ‘Is Nagaland in Bhutan or Thailand?’ ‘Is Sikkim in China?’ etc. to North East Indians invoking a question about their nationality as ‘some other country’ is considered offensive.

² Enquiry with assumption of the enquired as outsider.

³ Because the question is not, ‘Where is Manipur?’ but ‘Is Manipur in Nepal or Myanmar?’

(McDuié-Ra. Duncan-2012). However, the postmodern society necessitates a socio-culturally conceptualised 'National' identity as a universal phenomenon (Anderson, 2006) despite the difficulty to define an inclusive concept of Nationalism. In the face of often demeaned/reduced/undignified national identity that NE Indians live with, a strive for belongingness, accurate recognition of ethno-cultural values is inevitable. In so doing, the nation that one is born in or politically bound to, serves as an anchoring dock. However, since NE India, in its entirety belongs to a distinctively different race, history and culture unlike the rest of India⁴ (Gregory Sousa, 2018), a difficulty arises in simply identifying ourselves as 'Indians'. Calling oneself as 'Indian' only brushes up a pseudo and superficial sense of 'Indianness' which unreservedly dismisses contradicting meanings of 'who and how Indians are'. 'Chinki' is a derogatory term used against Indians from the North East who are now of 'Indianly Unique'⁵ phenotype. Internalisation of aversive projections (Dr. Nafees Ahmad, 2017) from fellow country people makes North Easterners consider themselves *lesser* of an Indian. This repercussion also comes from *arbitrary enquiries* made upon of North East (NE) Indians in metro cities of their exotic food habits, sexual availability (typically perceived of females), their sense of fashions as either questionable or exemplary, etc. This undeniably compels NE to develop a constant need to assert themselves from the geographical as well as psychological margins in everyday life as migrants in the metro cities. A shared sense of marginalisation invoked from assumed legitimate enquiry⁶ made by dominant Indian identities upon all NE Indians and geo-socio- racial proximity between these states are major reasons for homogenising the NE as 'one entity'. India is undoubtedly a melting pot of races, an ethnological museum in some sense. However, claiming *multicultural* elusively homogenizes the people and their lived experiences into a 'culturally invisible' mainstream (borrowed term from Renato Rosaldo, 1989). This unwittingly neglects the racial treatments among NE and ethnic diversities within the geographical boundaries of these states themselves. What is most commonly overlooked is that the so-called 'North Easterners', like any other 'undoubted Indians', live with general conceptions, imaginations and memories of 'being Indian' in their own indigenous senses until blatantly challenged by repeated questioning on 'whether they are Indians'. Reasons of repeated queries can range from lack

⁴ Although people who are considered as Indians originally have different sources and mixture of races, the present Indo-Aryan race makes up 72% of the Indian total population concentrated in the northern and central part of the country whereas Dravidians constitute 25% living in South of India. North East comes under the Mongoloid race and along with other minority ethnicities make up of only 3% of the total Indian population (Gregory Sousa, 2018). The division made here between North-east Indians and 'rest of Indians' is generally used to withhold a more distinctive characteristics between these two major divisions in terms of appearances, lifestyles, food habits, traditions, cultural values, religions etc.

⁵ Seemingly deceptive due to typical East Asian genetic origins yet surprisingly of Indian nationality with little 'Indian cultural bearings' in general sense.

⁶ There is an implicit power dynamic in terms of ownership of the country between the enquirer and the enquired.

of adequate knowledge about these regions, the attitude of ‘pluralistic ignorance’⁷, NE being at the margin of geo-political spectrum to arrogant socio-cultural negligence by the nation politics as a whole. One can say that NE Indians who historically share East Asian origin relatively more strongly (Rumani Saikia Phukan 2015, Sukanya Sharma, 2004-05), have been paving their path of self-discovery and accurate identity while facing exasperating mystification by the dominant cultures. North Easterners, since merger to Indian Union (Kyoko Inoue, 2005), have remained an Indian nationality yet culturally a perplexing fusion of their indigenous beliefs, practices and lifestyles, some East Asian traditions and food habits⁸, some choice of ‘Western’ fashions contextualised within the economic standards of these regions⁹, and some Indian familial and cultural values¹⁰. Most of them who have migrated to metro cities hoping for better education and job opportunities merely survive with a chronic identity dilemma of being ‘Indian’¹¹ or ‘not’, socio-culturally and psychologically. The entire NE regions are yet to be considered significant parts in the discourses of Indian modern history, Indian nationalism and contemporary society for reasons vast and convoluted to discuss in this paper. However, amidst all the homogenising attributions around NE as a whole, it’s important to be mindful about the inherent socio-cultural differences between these states and the multiple ethnic identities that exist between smaller communities within each of these states. The major concern of this paper is to highlight the psycho-social misrecognitions, complications, and the geo-racial-politics involved in ‘racial identity formation’ of the NE people while also delving into the multiple ethnic identities within. To illustrate, a successful sports personality of Manipur, M.C. Mary Kom¹², is chosen for a comparative analysis of the ‘biopic’ film constructed on her life by ‘mainstream’ Indian cinema (Bollywood) and her autobiography, “Unbreakable”. This choice was thought through, based on *familiarity* of this personality as promulgated by the media and constructed by entertainment industry, nevertheless missing out on many important aspects of a small community ‘chinki’ girl becoming the face of India to the world in sports domain. This presentation had to be carved out from self reflections on lived experiences of formative stages in Manipur and significant years (18) spent in one of the metro cities, Delhi. This is an attempt to bring forth the perceived, internalised and constantly challenging doctrine of being an Indian of uncommon race frequently appropriated, *misconstructed*, and largely ignored.

⁷ A social psychology term to refer to a situation in which majority privately reject a norm, but incorrectly assume that most others accept it and therefore go along with it. In other words, no one believes, but everyone thinks that everyone believes.

⁸ Common local ingredients and herbs, preferences of vegetable stews over fried or food cooked in oil.

⁹ Preference of western branded clothing styles but within their economic limits.

¹⁰ Concept of extended families though usually entire community is treated like an extended family in smaller towns and villages of north east.

¹¹ Racial Discrimination and Violence against Northeasterners and the Bezbaruah Committee Report, 2014 Author(s): Hoineihing Sithou and Salah Punathil Source: Explorations, ISS e-journal, Vol. 1 (1), April 2017, pp. 90-101 Published by: Indian Sociological Society

¹² a pioneer in Women’s boxing world championships and Olympics

Mary Kom: Indian Sport star, Manipuri boxer, “Chinki” Kom Woman? Or...?

Hindustan Times news launched the #LetsTalkAboutRape# campaign in October, 2016, where many eminent Indians wrote their views on rape. In the second edition of the campaign, Mary Kom too wrote an open letter to her three sons explaining rape situations in India. However, closely linking up with NE girls being convenient targets of sexual advance in metro cities, her letter slipped into the rampant practice of racism in India that she herself confronted. She wrote,

“...There are other words that you will hear soon. You might be walking with me one of these days to hear your mother being called a ‘chinki’. That is a slur. That is racist. I am Indian and I know you are growing up to be proud Indians. ... A lot of women from our State are targeted for the way they look and the way they dress. ‘Chinkies’ are not fair game. My country has given me fame and recognition but I am not recognised by each person on the road – as an MS Dhoni or a Virat Kohli will most certainly be – but I do not deserve to be called ‘chinki’. A man recently broke out into what he thought was the Chinese language and I stopped him and spoke to him in firm Hindi and ticked him off...”

The letter illustrates a general dismissive attitude towards North East Indians using slurs like ‘chinkies’ to further demean them. Mary Kom represents India to the world, is an incumbent MP of Rajya Sabha from the sports field, but is also seen as any other chinki woman from the North East. Her sports performances and achievements earned from all over the world carry the pride of being Indian, yet stumble upon blatant disregards in her own country because of her racial differences and ethnic minority identity. Nevertheless, Mary’s sports star identity has outgrown the tug-of-war between ethnic, racial and national identities. For the ordinary migrants of North East in Indian metro cities, identity centres on the racial split between popular Indian race and their native ethnicities.

As confounding as the question of ‘Who Indians are’, the construction of identities in any of the North East states is equally complicated. Delving further specifically on a Manipuri identity, ‘being Manipuri’ caches manifold recognitions, as is in many states of mixed communities across the world. So, ‘Who is Manipuri’ to Indians and ‘Indian’ to the world? Manipurians, as Indian nationality are further grouped into three main ethnic communities - Meiteis including Meitei Vaishnavites, Meitei Bamons (Brahmins) and Meitei Pangans (Muslims) inhabiting in the valley and 29 major tribes in the hills dividing into two main ethno-denominations, namely Nagas and Kuki-Chins¹³ (Gangmumei Kamei, 2012).

Mary Kom belongs to a Kom community thinly spread over all districts in Manipur¹⁴ that comes under the ethnic category of Kuki-chins, who customise a cultural mixture of unique

¹³ Many so-called hill tribes are also well settled in the valley, however though valley meiteis are restricted from owning land in the hills.

¹⁴ Concentrated mostly in Churachandpur district, Tamenglong district, Senapati district, and Bishenpur district,

Kom traditions historically known for their warrior skills, folks and Christianity¹⁵. Kom communities also speak a different Kom dialect other than ‘Meiteilon’ spoken mainly by majority Meitei Hindus, which is the official language of the state (W. Nabakumar 2012).

The biopic film on Mary Kom’s life story was constructed by the mainstream Indian Cinema on an imaginative canvas about the world of Women’s boxing. In this world, Mary hails from a humble beginning in Kom family and community, trained by her own early lifestyles and later in local boxing gyms without adequate infrastructures. Both the autobiography and biopic film demonstrates her struggles through odds of life on domestic as well as professional front. This film was supposedly made on an experimental expedition to familiarise a thriving Indian Woman from a neglected marginal community in the male-dominant sport of boxing, who was unknown to majority Indian public despite her numerous achievements¹⁶, nationally and internationally. The film earned several accolades and received positive reviews from ‘mainstream’ critics who themselves lack knowledge about NE India, yet commenting on the film production through their overarching dominant cultural lens and lifestyles. The film certainly popularises Mary Kom having her character being dramatically performed on screen by well ‘branded’ Bollywood actor Priyanaka Chopra, who has earned her space in India’s (Bollywood) and International’s (Hollywood) largest entertainment industries (2014), but also neutralises her Kom identity into dominant Indian identity normally imagined through the dominant race and culture. Subsequently, the film ignited major critical debates amongst viewers across India around the choice of the protagonist¹⁷. “Why not a North-East female actor on the leading role?” Later, the debate shifted its focus on other aspects of the film such as storyline, location of shooting, actor’s technical performances in rings etc. Revisiting the earlier debates on different social networking forums and print media articles, some geo-politically relevant aspects of the film are analysed in comparison with Mary Kom’s autobiography, “Unbreakable”.

Is the face/race more important or the storyline based on living sports legend or the language?

Entering this millennium, Indian Bollywood Alchemist found Mary Kom almost out of the blue¹⁸, in their eager quest for new stories to project a new shade of national identity. Mary is *transmuted* from humble skill-disciplined-chinki-woman-boxer to Umang Kumar’s ‘Mother

¹⁵ Hill tribes were converted into Christians during British colonial period in late 19th century. Besides these divisions, the influx of Nepalis, Bengalis, Marwaris, Punjabis and other Indian communities in the valley never ceases, which further stirs the cultural blend already exist in the state.

¹⁶ Mary Kom has won one gold medal and two each of silver and bronze at the international level, and 12 gold medals at the national levels, apart from others. Her achievements have been fairly recognised with a number of awards including the coveted Padma Bhusan (2013), Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna Award (2009) Padma Shri Awar (2005) and Arjuna Award (2003), Gold in Five time world amateur boxing champions and one Bronze in Olympics.

¹⁷ Where is Mary Kom’s Story by Konsam Panthoi. Check e-pao.net

¹⁸ Saiwyn Quadras reports on print media that he found Mary Story in small boxing sports columns which were never paid serious attention earlier. He also reports he doesn’t know how her story struck his mind and started researching and writing her script in June, 2011 only.

India' through mainstream imagination. He shared this with the news reporters while talking about Mary Kom film,

'I told him (Saiwyn Quadras) to give me something that would become the Mother India of my career'.

After the super-hit biopic portraying Mary Kom as a symbol of imagined 'Mother India, the regular encounters of subtle racism in her own country quite oblivious to the mainstream cinematic nation builders particularly because of defensive stance on racism which is best kept 'unaddressed'. And this enduring gap in the traditionally followed national building imagination through cinema is the point of ideological clashes amongst assorted Indian viewers. The clash is majorly on the representation of 'Manipuri Woman Boxer', a marginalised Indian race¹⁹ by a popular dominant 'Indian face'. The significance of this clash may be dismissible to a mere entertainment seeker, but this *misconstruction* and *misrepresentation* agitates those who identify themselves with the relentlessly marginalised 'other' Indians, 'the chinkies' reminding them of their long deprivation of *fair* recognition. A NE Indian race was deemed important to be appropriated to penetrate (as a rare chance to assert identity) through the thickly lopsided pile of mainstream Bollywood faces.

So, what's in the face chosen for Mary's character? Here, the face is not merely a face. It is a face that represents 'a race', the kind which is systematically subjected to social negligence or perpetually interpreted through mainstream media's *deductions* of racial and cultural diversity. A face that carries the race drives social interactions, helps navigation in the social world and also elucidates the basic demographic information which is central to becoming Mary Kom in real life and is expected to be reflected in her 'biopic'. Unlike other biopics where one can trace a closer resemblance between the reel and the real characters in terms of race at the least, if not particularly ethnic backgrounds, Mary's biopic forecloses the generic endemic issue of modern racism in India with no motive to engage even in symbolic dialogues. No Caucasian actor has played the role of historical black personalities or vice-versa, or ever imagined to have Eddie Murphy or Johny Depp playing the character of Jackie Chan? Or imagine having Madhuri Dixit's role played by Andrea Tariang if her Biopic is made?^{20, 21} Priyanka Chopra's face as Mary Kom was a collective defense camouflaging and escaping a serious national issue on racism against North East Indian mongoloids. In psychoanalysis, this defense is termed as *reaction formation* in which emotions and impulses which are anxiety-producing (openly addressing racism) or perceived to be unacceptable (racism is politically incorrect) are mastered by exaggeration of the directly opposing tendency (Mother India phenomenon). Racial politics, either subtle or overt, is a form of social oppression. It is a source of guilty pleasure to the oppressors who are secretly

¹⁹ North east as a whole is marginalized based on racial differences though often confounded by many other factors

²⁰ One common argument majority Indians argue is of Ben Kindley playing the character of Mahtama Gandhi by overlooking his paternal Indian lineage that reportedly had helped him in the film besides his acting talent.

²¹ Choice of casting a new face who shares same race as NE in the film would at least indicate sensitivity to the issues of North East, an acknowledgement of their own negligence and reflections on it.

practising it but a nightmare to the oppressed who live with it. However, this argument shouldn't undermine the creativity and challenges of making a biopic in terms of choosing right casts who could also perform satisfactorily (a common rationalisation given by film crew). But, the film was circumvented for quick production by relying on the availability principle without much research on intricate issues or serious audition of casts who simultaneously renders a subject of structural (Bollywood) oppression – racial exclusion (Sally Haslanger, 2004) from playing a leading role. Understandably, the film wasn't constructed on the theme of racism per se, yet racial identity remains an important component of social appraisal that continues to favour dominant mainstream race. My straightforward argument here is that mainstream Indian film making is an archetype of the subliminal racial politics enacted out in the country.

The debate on social media fatefully gets dissolved between a heightened sense of *misrepresentation* and defence of systemic racial politics²² (Isha Aran 2016), vehemently preserving commercial values and elitist business of the entertainment industry. Leaving aside some inexplicable technical and obvious political issues²³ and anticipated marination with Bollywood masalas, expectations from Mary Kom's 'biopic' were not simply of a fictional commercial film where the production team could exercise their creative power beyond limits²⁴. But this film was inspired by and based on Mary Kom's real-life stories that could also serve as an opening to the cultural and racial gaps that the methodical 'othering'²⁵ has instilled in the psyche of Manipurians in particular and NE as a whole because of their common racial identification. The predicament continues as the film was cultured more on mainstream imagination and consciousness leaving behind the important nuances of Mary's identification with Kom community, one of the minority tribal community in Manipur. 'Magnificent Mary' was titled, being a willfully earned pride for Kom community; the film made could serve as an agent of uplifting her tribe and familiarising politically marginalised Manipur state to common recognition. The director of the film, Omung Kumar himself, had been quoted for not knowing about Mary Kom²⁶ until the script writer, Saiwyn Qadras presented and explained it to him²⁷ in 2012. The entire Mary Kom biopic project appears to be a hasty business enterprise with desperate, overwhelming and unrighteous sense of 'owner-ship' over her story which was highly fictionalised²⁸ to make 'a success' for the debutant director by thoughtfully juxtaposing 'World Champion and former Miss World' on the same canvas. In the director's own recent recount on the making of the film, Omung

²² Systematically keeping North East people under a 'glass ceiling' in Bollywood cinema from playing a lead role.

²³ Film wasn't allowed to shoot and screen in Manipur because Hindi cinemas are banned by underground militants in the state since 2000.

²⁴ For arguments on creativity, Indian film making has to reach a stage where Sachin Tendulkar's role is played by Danny Dengzongpa.

²⁵ North East, the 'other' Indian is always subjected to cultivation/domestication.

²⁶ She started winning international medals in 2001.

²⁷ The making of the Mary Kom film by Manipur Times.

²⁸ Unknown to mass Indian viewers who lack knowledge on Manipur and its cultures.

(September, 2018) says, “An extensive research was carried out by my team as they waded through online information and newspaper archives, including Kom’s videos which played a key role in our research”. This research data couldn’t have possibly touched upon the cultural and political intricacies in which Mary struggled throughout her life, even today²⁹. No matter how much objective research and observation is done in general on the “other,” so to speak, the subjectivity of the issue still falls short and could possibly even introduce more stigma or stereotypes. While looking for general trends, the personal is cast aside.

Manipur or any other North East states, for more than six decades have not found a general recognition of being a part of Indian National imagination. Using Mary Kom’s name as *only* a ‘signifier’ (a new story, biopic, champion fighter) to vaguely demonstrate inclusive ideology, the film has subtly slipped back to the self-serving prophecy³⁰ of ‘unchallenged’ National identity absenting ‘other cultural miscellaneous’ subconsciously. Anderson Benedict (2006) in ‘Imagined communities’ wrote about the difficulty in scientifically defining ‘nation’, especially after World War II, that led him to hypothesize instead that the concept of nation can be considered as an ‘ideology’ that is ‘imagined’ at the time of nation building and that imagination is bound to be limited. This is perhaps where the mainstream finds its rationalisation by spotting geographical seclusion, confusion of looks, lesser revenue generations from NE etc. and hence a legitimate justification of being ‘indifferent’ to their cultures. However, he underlined the fact that nations were not merely determinate products of some given sociological conditions like language or race or religion but also of *becoming* what is imagined into existence. Here too, Indian cinema hasn’t fully noticed potential NE cultural component of *the becoming* image of the nation. Owing again to Benedict’s philosophy on substantiation of culture and creative processes situating in the dimension of cultural reconstructions and media, I argue that nationalism or nation building through media imaginative constructions can also serve to blind people altogether.

Drawing from Salman Rushdie’s ideas of progressive views of India in his post-colonial novel ‘The Satanic Verses’, Sumita Chakravarty (1993) traced through her initiative of systematic study on Indian cinema how Bollywood masala films gradually captured the global trans-national culture since Indian independence and Indian cinema has traditionally been the carrier of Indian imaganitation of nation building through various films like Guide (1965) Shri 420 (1955) and Bhumika (1977). Studying the symbolism and its ideological construction of Indian national identity, she showed how ‘imperso-nation’ played out in masquerade and disguise has characterised the representation of national identity obsessively evoking the concerns over class, communal and regional differences and *neutralising* of these issues during 1947-1987. Likewise, in many later writings on Indian cinema and nation building, Bollywood is seen as a medium to reflect upon and highlight the pertaining issues of different phases of Indian nation development constantly drawing on binaries like West-East, upper caste-lower caste, India-Pakistan, patriarchy-feminism, Hindu-Muslims etc.

²⁹ The film is banned as it is made in Hindi language. Manipur Govt. gave her false promises thrice to make a road on her name. (Unbreakable)

³⁰ A prediction that directly or indirectly causes itself to become true.

(Viridi:2003, Dudrah:2006, Mazumdar:2007, Ilma Molnar:2010). Millennium Bollywood films have shifted paradigms in filmmaking from larger-than-life glammers to showing sensitivity towards the nuances of pertaining national issues such as fighting corruption (Gangaajal-2003 et.al), NRIs returning home (Swades-2004 et al), questioning education systems (3 idiots-2009, Munna bhai MBBS-2003), reimagining history of freedom struggles (Rang De Basanti-2006, The Legend of Bhagat Singh-2002), Women/gender issues (Padman-2018, Pink -2016), issues on poor labours (Peepili live- 2010) - to name a few. Only few have tried to capture another common stereotypical vicissitude of North-East in India such as Dil se (1998) and Tango Charlee (2005) that engages with themes of insurgency with a neutralising streak of dramatic triumphs over such issues in few scenes of confrontation. Chak De (2007) India briefly ignited the issue of racism but presented it only as a trivial matter with no backgrounds of NE girls in Indian Hockey team while snippets of cultural issues were highlighted for characters from different parts of India.

In all films that touch upon themes pertaining to North East, Indian cinema shows profound reluctance on showing critical issues of racism faced by North East Indians recurrently. In the context of making Mary Kom's film, with heightened consciousness of racism among NE³¹ when Mary, just returned triumphant from the 2012 London Olympics, she was invoked to challenge the existence of racism and to immediately be the voice of 'peace-maker' during Mass Exodus of NE from the city of Bangalore (Duncan McDuie-Ra-2012 &2016). The biopic which was released in 2014 has no signs of what Mary had to fight in real life in parallel to her ring bouts. One can effortlessly see an obvious *gap and silence* in the cultural and psychological distance between the mainstream film making and NE Indians' unheard critics on choosing the mainstream race for Mary's role. Almost all the cinematic presentations of the idea of nation so far haven't registered the existence of North East Indians in its unique racial sense even after 70 years of nation building processes depicted in different genres of Bollywood film. Duncan McDuie-Ra (2016) writes in his book, 'North East migrants in Delhi: Race, Refuge and Retail' that colonisation has had a profound impact on what is now the Northeast. Talking about parallel colonisation in India and Northeast states separately where colonialism in NE was emphasised on baptising indigenous tribes into Christianity by the colonial anthropologists from beginning of the 19th century and continued until end of the 20th century. However, after Indian independence, in the inception of India as a new nation, the residuals of racism Indians fought for in South Africa and United States of America as pioneering democracy, has overshadowed their own racism with fellow NE Indians. Indians migrated out of the country actively voice against racism in other countries but turns a blind eye to the very racism within their own countries. A terror seems to loom over majority Indian mentality in opening the '*Pandora's box*' of racism which would compel them to see the abhorrent racist side which they are constantly fighting against the more dominant races

³¹ In August 2012, Mary Kom had just returned triumphant from London Olympics when she was obliged to take charge of the mass exodus of North East from Bangalore due to rampant racial attacks on NE people in north, central and south India.

of the world. The lucidity of this fear also underlies Bollywood film making that claims to a huge interest force to contribute in nation-building³².

Charles Cooley's (1922) implication of the 'looking glass mirror' concept might explain that racial identities are gradually developed through social interactions within a given national context. In other words, people surrounding us are mirrors in which we see ourselves. However, no sufficient social interaction has been made possible so far by Indian cinema between the NE and majority Indians other than appropriating NE to the popular culture. Similarly, according to G H Mead (1934), identities emerge from social interactions, such as observing and interacting with others, responding to others' opinions about oneself, and internalizing external opinions and internal feelings about oneself. Although these theories find their own relevance in today's context of NE being perceived as 'the other Indian', one might further critique that globalisation has made identities (racial or otherwise) more porous, just like cultures. For whom and how? NE nonetheless remains almost non-existent, politically intolerable³³ or socially awkward³⁴ for Indians to the mainstream nation's psyche. Foucault's theory of 'biopolitics' preserves humans as agents and subjects of racialisation and normalisation, exercising power politics (Foucault, 2012) over certain kinds of race within a nation. NE Indians are persistently subjected to the 'gazes' of majority Indians to include or not or 'people' to be kept under surveillance³⁵ somehow. Mary Kom's film or film making in India, in general, was under the subconscious surveillance of the Indian mass who are 'incapable' to adopt a new version of Indianness and change visions. This may not completely explain the Indian geo-racial-politics³⁶ but the film certainly is one of the symptoms of nation's racial predilection. The mainstream film makers, if wanted, could demonstrate collectively their capacity to put ethnically unique contents intact, if not necessarily race, for themselves, for 'the alterity' and for the ones who wish to be distinguished while still being Indians. Rather, incapacity to change or to rid oneself of a legacy inscribed in mainstream cultural stigmatisation is reflected in the entire storyline of the film which I have attempted to discuss in following sections. Racialisation, if not a restricted political form, is a program of action that consists of perpetuating and producing 'the other' within society in order to suit the mechanisms that lowers the voices of ethnic minorities.

The 'Sacred Cow' mentality streak and colonial zamindari imagination in plotting Mary Kom's story

According to her autobiography, Mary Kom, a Manipuri Kom girl, was determined by her passion for boxing sport. She was physically trained for sports by her early survival skills of managing household chores, babysitting her younger siblings, ploughing in the paddy fields,

³² <https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/movies/the-changing-face-of-nation-building-cinema/article26283650.ece>

³³ Declaration of many parts of NE as 'disturbed area'.

³⁴ Not behaving as per majority expects or not interacting with/as majority Indians.

³⁵ Not just social surveillance but the prolonged central govt.'s military surveillance since merger.

³⁶ Power politics exercised and controlled by central India on geographical and racial margins of the country.

handling heavy farming tools, carrying bundles of rice saplings, cycling distances to attend her boxing training classes. Owing to the Bollywood tradition, the idea of Mary's childhood struggles was constructed as a constantly infuriated poor aggressive girl. To return debt for her family, she risks her life by arbitrarily joining a street fight against a notorious street wrestler named Lalboi who commissioned her for upholding the fight for more than 15 seconds. This violent fight also helped her recompensate for their lost cow, named Chaobi, in the hands of the Zamindar. The idea to get into the fight was triggered by her conversation with her younger brother who emoted over losing their cow to which she promised to get the cow back. This was indicative of a brief flashback on the film maker's subconscious tilt towards the typical Zamindari system which was predominantly practiced in colonised India where the lower caste poor family were disproportionately circumscribed to pay debts. Mary also wrote in her autobiography that their cow is important to their family because it's their only possession but not because of 'cow worshipping culture' that Mary had to take punches on her face to get their cow back. Mary Kom, being born in Christian family, has a tradition of storing smoked pork, beef and other kinds of smoke meats in the house which majority India, and probably Bollywood community, would abhor, especially on the beef meat, and perhaps be offended. Meat in the diet for sports players and trainees in Manipur is the norm too, also all over NE.

Dissolution of NE sports passion under mainstream cinema melodramatic attitude

In her autobiography, Mary narrates about her enthusiastic involvement in any form of outdoor plays in localities and various active sports that requires physical strengths. She won many medals in their school annual sports meets. However, the film step-hop-jumped into rendering Mary grounding to boxing as her chosen sport by running into a nearby boxing gym while chasing a local boy with whom she fought in the previous scene. Majority Indian attitude towards sports is yet to level up to understanding the worth of self disciplining, determination and composer requisite to becoming a sports person. On the contrary, culturally passionate sport attitudes are inherent in state like Manipur that produces relatively unparallel number of sports personalities in India which unfortunately majority Indians undermine. It is also somewhat imprinted predisposition of general Indian parenting to put their children into a situation where a choice had to be made between 'sports and parents/family'. This was painted in one of the scenes after Mary was accidentally discovered from a local newspaper that she won her first State level Women's boxing championship. On the contrary. Mary writes in 'Unbreakable' about her father's unconditional support for her passion for sports and helped her in finding the right kind of sports for her by seeking out various sports training centres and facilities in their locality as well as in Imphal, capital of Manipur where mainly meiteis populate. Though she hid her shift to boxing from athlete until her father discovers from newspaper about her participation from local newspaper. This moment of her parents acknowledging her choice rather gave a sense of relief, contrary to the scenes in the film of prolonged sulking by the father and a dramatic drift to encoring of 'thomjillo thomjillo' (smack, smack) while locality watches Mary's match bouts on television. Amongst the list of names she acknowledged as guiding her in determining her

choice of sports as boxing, Dingko Singh was a prominent male boxer whose winning news in 1998 Bangkok Asian Games in Manipur fed her wish to become like him. One needs to understand that a state like Manipur, Mary's birthplace, wouldn't have a second thought in creating space for any new sports introduced in the region irrespective of gender dominance and hence the wave of women's boxing spread fast and produced many other players like Mary Kom in both men and women's boxing sport, even though most couldn't reach what she accomplished in that field.

Preference of popular language over the true ethnic languages

In many scenes of the film, some Meiteilons such as Tumin leiyu (keep quite), Sida lao (come here), Taraba nang (have you heard me?), keidourage (what happen?), Thomjillo (smash/hit/attack), Taphou (calm down), Ngaikho (wait) etc. including few slangs like Hingchabi, Thubang, Sakthu are inserted in an attempt to preserve the essence and sentiments of Manipuries, but unfortunately not a single Kom word could be figured throughout the film. In a fast-paced soul boosting song played at the background of an initial boxing training scene in the film, the entire lyrics were written in empowering words chosen from Meiteilon typically found in Meitei folk songs and literatures. To give a tribal touch, the song was symphonised by Djembe drum³⁷ and intermittently by Scottish Bagpipe³⁸ sounds. The song goes as:

'Thoi Thoi Athoibi, (Thoi is usually an endearing name used for daughters in Meitei families)

Houro houro yakairo (wake up, wake up)

Houro houro leplaro, (wake up and stand)

Fallo nasa fallaro (spread out your arms)

Lingjel fabi emomni (O' brave daughter)

Houro houro (wake up wake up)

Manglo manglo manglano (dream the dream)

Chello kanna chello (run as fast as you can)

Pangthung youna Emom (till you reach your destination)

In another supposedly Kom language (a different dialect of Kom community) song for celebration at Mary's front yard after her winning of first national match, the lyrics was written in meiteilon only while the scene showed some Kom dance where people wearing Kom traditional attires. Some meiteilons are also heard in another Hindi song in the film, Chaoro echa pari chaoro (grow up my son, grow up). This insertion of meitei words and songs written in meiteilon is through the consultation of a Meitei Junior actor in the film, Bijou Thangjam, who belongs to dominant Manipuri identity, the Meitei ethnicity. This in itself limits a more accurate projection of Mary's Identity as Kom girl, a descendent of one of Kom chief's family³⁹ who transformed herself into a world famous woman sports star⁴⁰.

³⁷ Originally used by West African tribes.

³⁸ Believed to be Scottish tribal instrument.

³⁹ There is no necessary association of being a chief's descendent and being poor. Attributes that are considered to be brave, kind, dignified, hard-working determines a true chief's kin.

⁴⁰ Check 'Unbreakable'

Manipur is a home to many such smaller Kom-like communities that aren't well recognised by dominant majority meiteis. Above all, this film is reeled in Hindi language helping to reach out to majority Hindi speaking Indian viewers but it subliminally falls back to 'illuminatti'⁴¹ of Indian cinema. Hegemonising communities through the recurring discourses of dominant cultures and languages is hypothesized at the backdrop of this experimental film by furthering the cultural gaps and stereotypical stances without adequate research on the 'subject' it endorses. Over the time, Indian mainstream Cinema has been showing progress in adopting more inclusive approach by making films like Dil se, Chak de India, Tango Charlie, III Smoking Barrels, and recently flashed news on making of another biopic on Manipuri male boxer Dingko Singh (also Mary's inspiration) to be enacted by another familiar face in bollywood, Shahid Kapoor. However, each of these films only hints at attempts of enculturation, tokenising NE to expand cinematic horizon without giving much credits⁴² to the source of diversity Indian Cinemas could grasp. Symbols of a particular race encompass the facial features, languages and cultural nuances of the concerned race. But the 'biopic' on Mary Kom fails to handle the hurdles Mary encounters in her professional struggles partly due to language barriers as the nationally dominant official Hindi language isn't her native tongue (also banned in Manipur) which was indicated in her autobiography, 'Unbreakable'.⁴³ Many more highly fictionalised scenes can be discussed, such as an individualistic aspect of families, borrowed from 'Western' culture is shown in the beginning scene where there is no one to help the couple when Mary was in labour, which is unthinkable of in closed knitted small communities in North East. The mainstream imagination of gender in the film, a girl coming out in the night after road curfew where there is no life after 9 pm on the roads, portrayal of Onler's (Mary's husband) identity and their meeting story, etc. have their own significant differences and relevance for further discussion which is not possible to be carried out in this paper.

Response to racism and a possible racial reverse stroke by NE?

Further owing to similar features with all other North Eastern Indians, as perceived by Indians (the mirrored images, the powerful Majority gaze) who have no or rare exposure to north east regions, Manipurians too come under the category of 'chinkis' as is ostensibly addressed by some in the Metro cities.⁴⁴ For instance, to some non - NE Indians ranging from illiterate street dwellers to highly educated society, people from NE carry socially questionable attributes and are subjects of enquiry on whether they are Indian, food they eat, way of dressing, different interests etc. The term in itself may not be as offensive as is considered by recently passed law (2014), but the humiliating tones, unwelcoming gestures

⁴¹ Elite industrial strategy to control world affairs by manipulating social constructs.

⁴² Showing authentic cultural background

⁴³ 'I express my best with my fists in the ring not with words'. Mary Kom (Unbreakable)

⁴⁴ Though the term was recently sensitised to majority Indians as 'derogatory term' by passing a criminal law against using it after *the-beaten-to-death* incident of Nido Taniam (22 years) from Arunachal Pradesh (February 2014) which was triggered by mockery on his hairstyle, using this term or enquiring if one is Nepali or Chinese hasn't stopped to this today.

and contexts of using this term in the presence of any North East Indian are the basis of interpretations (Duncan McDuie-Ra, 2016). Manipurians, on the other hand, use the term 'Mayangs', both in their home state and otherwise, in their conversations to indicate non-NE Indians with stereotypical attributes such as prying, smelly, no civic sense, loud, lacking in Indian geographical knowledge, intrusive, cunning etc. though is hardly blurted out. Duncan writes,

“Attention to the ways migrants respond to racism offers insights into the agency of migrants and the conditions in which agency functions. This matters for two reasons. First, responding to racism helps to affirm tribal and ethnic identities and pan-Northeast solidarity. Second, it helps to broaden the discourse of Northeast migrants beyond victimhood...concern for the ‘unfortunate Northeasterner’ has begun among concerned civil society organisations, intellectuals and journalists. Welcome by some, a number of respondents commented that their perspective frustrated them. Northeastners pride themselves in surviving the city...”

He further discusses the reasons for tolerating racism by NE in the cities is that tolerance is necessary for a visible minority in the big complicated cities, though his research respondents expressed their desires to retaliate in racist comments, taunts and name-calling as openly as the majority Indians do. However, they are aware of the threat in their longevity in the cities and further trouble their retaliation with invite from the majority. Here, the sense of safety in reacting or responding seems to be under constant threat which also becomes a major factor in silencing their own voices against racism. In case of possible direct responses, both the racial provocations and retaliations in subtle or violent ways get into the cycle of abuses, humiliation and demeaning one another without having positive regards of the differences and even possibilities of similarities both might be sharing.

Few NE like Mary Kom manage to pierce through the thick invasive majority Indian gaze over minorities yet the mainstreamised film has shrunk her life story into any other commercial film on Indian mainstream culture, but lesser of a biopic.

Conclusion

This paper engaged with the systematic marginalisation and dilution of unique ethnic identities within the NE states and further losing the truthfulness in meaning of lived experiences of NE in the larger 'mainstream' national imaginations. Here the word 'mainstream' is generally used to flag the sudden shift of NE ethnic identities when repositioned itself within overall Indian nation. This is in no way loosely ignoring the intricacies of cultural diversity even within the so called 'mainstream' either. However, unlike all other racial groups in India, only the Northeast mongoloid race faces the questions on national identity within their own country. Culture and race in itself is porous, unless manipulated by geo-cultural politics of domesticating, situating and appropriating 'the other' to suit the dominant imaginative national identities. This will continue as long 'the other' remains 'the other'. The contours and boundaries of these others can only be permeated through questioning the construction of 'the other' and opening up to the cultural gaps. After Mary Kom's box-office hit, the next cinematic mission on NE is Dingku Singh's biopic film,

to be impersonated by a familiar Bollywood mainstream Indian face, Shahid Kapoor, and the debate on racial *mis*representation of NE will continue unless the very *mis*recognition is thought through and presented accurately in its own minority ethnic sense by popular media.

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