

**FROM ACRIMONY TO HARMONY: A CRITICAL REFLECTION OF HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY IN
‘DANGAL’**

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INTRODUCTION

Somewhere in the heart of India’s wrestling grounds, where sweat colludes with passion to earn admiration and dust conspires with ambition to defeat pride in a battle of physical and emotional strength, we heard the story of a man named Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former national wrestling champion, who challenged the gender-dominating traditions in the Indian society (what feminists would term ‘hegemonic’) to train his two daughters, Geeta Phogat and Babita Kumari, as wrestlers to achieve his ambition of winning an international gold medal for his country. This real life story was narrated in a movie, titled “Dangal,” produced by Aamir Khan and Kiran Rao (Aamir Khan Productions) with Siddharth Roy Kapur (The Walt Disney Company India). Directed by Nitesh Tiwari (Cain, 2017), the movie contends with more than just a true life story, physical combat, and wrestling competition. It transcends the wrestling arena to explore the intricate layers of societal construction of gender and gender norms, and the relentless pursuit of dreams. Guided theoretically by the concept of ‘edgework’ and the ‘enrichment hypothesis’, I present an argument that Dangal reinforces and challenges the dominant, rigid version of masculinity— “hegemonic masculinity”.

Plotted against the background of Haryana’s gender traditions, Dangal subverts the very essence of hegemonic masculinity—understood as the social norms that sustained men’s domination over women (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Join me on this task as I dissect the movie’s portrayal of masculinity; exploring its strengths, limitations, and the intense shift that occurs when tradition collides with nationalism and the ambition of a man thrust upon his daughters. From the wrestling pits to the emotional struggles within the Phogat family, I will be reflecting on this movie with the aim of unravelling the complexities of hegemonic masculinity, gender roles, and constructions of gender norms by societies. In this arena of ideas, I present the following questions to grapple with:

- 1) How does Dangal challenge the traditional construction of gender norms?

- 2) What does Dangal reveal about the power dynamics between masculinity and femininity?
- 3) How does Dangal help us comprehend the concept of hegemonic masculinity and gender roles using edgework and the enrichment hypothesis?

Narrating Dangal: Analysis of how hegemonic masculinity is reinforced and challenged

Acrimony and the war with traditional gender norms

The movie started with Mahavir Phogat (played by Aamir Khan) demonstrating how he gave in to social pressure to settle down with a profession that provided a steady income and get married in order to have a “normal” family life, which prevented him from competing in the Olympics (Pande, 2016). This is evidence that society constructs norms for both masculinity and femininity. At this point, it will be inaccurate to continue to argue that traditional gender norms are hegemonic. Phogat constantly feels bitterness for abandoning his dreams due to societal pressure and also for the poor state of Indian wrestling at the international level. He continues to nurture his dream of winning a gold medal for his country in the area of international wrestling. Passing down his personal dream to his family, he desires a son to achieve this. What a great display of nationalism and plans for his unborn boy child! He was looking forward to having sons but fate gave him four sweet girls.

After several failed attempts, Phogat had already given up on ever having a son who can actualize his ambition because he thinks only a boy can fulfill his dreams of winning gold in international wrestling. However, he saw hope and changed his conviction the day his two daughters [thrash two boys](#) of their age grade (Gupta, 2016). Inspired by this very event and a renewed belief that winning is all that matters—gold is gold, regardless of gender—Phogat defied social gendered expectations and criticisms and decided to train his two daughters to wrestle despite the fact that the sport (i.e., wrestling) is exclusively associated with masculinity. I suppose this is a massive display of single-

handedly challenging hegemonic masculinity. Sadly, for his two daughters, this was an imposition. If Phogat had sought his daughters’ cooperation, it would have been a valiant demonstration of challenging hegemonic masculinity. Phogat refused to have another regret due to social pressures so he chose to be at war with the society and break the boundaries around traditional gender norms to reconstruct new ‘non-bordered’ norms by training his two daughters towards becoming the first female wrestlers in Balali, and bring his family, Haryana, and India to achieve international glory. Becoming a wrestler required getting entangled with discomfort and being pushed to the edge. As a high-risk leisure sport, wrestling qualifies as an example of edgework activity for women (Lyng, 2005; Mellor & Shilling, 2021). Any child at Geeta and Babita’s age would have preferred comfort to discomfort. The training process was tough. While Phogat thinks he was teaching them about discipline and the best way to become great at wrestling, the girls thought their father was being overly strict, harsh, and heedless to their needs. They were made to dress like boys, deprived of entertainment, restricted from eating some food, and made to cut their long ‘girly’ hairs. Although the hair-cut was necessary to prevent lice infection given the condition that they were being trained in the mud, the father’s acts were considered as reinforcing hegemonic masculinity. Gupta (2016) stated: the song, “[Haanikarak Bapu](#)” eloquently expressed the feeling of a typical girl witnessing the hegemonic parental pressure to become someone beyond her own wish. Although the girls can resist becoming wrestlers, they were unnecessarily obedient (Gupta, 2016) because they could not go against their father. However, the girls did resist becoming wrestlers but it was not direct and confrontational. This resistance wasn’t to engage in leisure sports (Shaw, 2001) but away from it. From trying to manipulate their mother to plead with and go up against their father to sneaking out of the house to entertain themselves, and tampering with their father’s alarm to avoid early morning strenuous wrestling exercise, the resistance came in different smart but cunning ways. During one

of these resisting moments, Phogat was seen frustrated and perhaps realizing that he was pushing his ambitions too hard on the girls at the cost of their happiness and fun moments. Surprisingly, there was a twist in the movie. While the girls thought their father was an authoritarian, their friend who was customarily being married off at a very young age (precisely 14 years) persuaded them to reconsider weighing between two options: to either join their father in breaking the boundaries around gender norms in Haryana and become professional wrestlers, or choose get married like her when they come of age. Gupta (2016) explained: the friend, Sunita claims that the two sisters were lucky to have a father who cares about their future and treats them like his daughters while other men in Haryana (including her own father) see a girl child as some sort of a burden that needs to be sent off into marriage as soon as possible.

Harmony and the pure challenge against hegemonic masculinity

In the one-third part of Dangal, we watched how Sunita's persuasion changed the girls' perceptions of Phogat and influenced their decisions to accept his dreams as theirs. This was the turning point in the movie when the dreams and passions of Phogat and his daughters harmonized. At this point, resistance to Haryana's norms around wrestling became easier. This point also represented a shift from individual resistance to collective resistance (Shaw, 2001). The sisters' change of intention to pursue wrestling, and the resultant determination to excel represents a form of resistant agency (Laurendeau & Sharara, 2008; Shaw, 2001). Their newly-found determination, which seeks to resist gender stereotypes, mirrors the themes explored by Laurendeau and Sharara (2008). By breaking free from Haryana's hegemonic wrestling norms, they assert their rights to pursue their passions and ignore social ridicule. Despite facing resistance in Haryana and even his wife and daughters, Phogat's persistence on training his daughters was more remarkable. He believes that his girls are not lesser than boys. Using Laurendeau and Sharara (2008: 1) wordings, 'women could

be every bit as good as guys'. Collectively and individually, the three (i.e., Phogat and his daughters) were set off to resist and challenge the hegemonic wrestling norms of Haryana. Supported by the mother and Omkar, Phogat's nephew, the challenge against hegemonic masculinity entered a new phase.

The movie transitioned from acrimony to harmony, revealing that pursuit for success requires the unity of passion, hard work, discipline, and resilience. Despite the demanding rigors of the training, the girls found themselves getting along with their father. They were very quick to defeat Omkar, their cousin, in combat. After several rigorous but flexible training sessions with their father, Geeta was ready for regional, state, and national competitions; she was ready to face male challengers in Haryana and prove to the society that girls can match up with boys in combat. A girl challenger in a face-off with a boy wrestler; this was strange in Haryana. There was an initial resistance but this was news and news can become profit with the right strategy. Her [first challenger](#) was the best boy wrestler in the pit whom she freely chose by herself. Although it ended in a marginal defeat, Geeta was an outstanding and tough opponent. She received massive admiration, gifts, and respect from the society that thought she would not last longer than a couple of seconds. Never again was she and other girls looked down upon by men in that community. She became an inspiration for all genders. This fight marked the end of the gendered norms around wrestling in Haryana, the first success.

With the support of her father, mother, and older cousin, Geeta and Babita continued their journey to winning gold medals for India at the global level. The sisters were so skillful and outstanding that boy wrestlers became afraid to be called up against them in the pits. This also included Geeta's first challenger whom she had defeated on more than one occasion. Amidst resistance, humiliation, rejection, denial, and lack of support, Phogat relentlessly trained his two daughters to win trophies

at the regional, state, and national levels. The sisters were excelling and pinning down opponents to the ground. With no challenger left, it was time for one of them to travel to represent India and compete for gold, winning it for Papa Phogat. By this time, Phogat and his daughters have inspired numerous girls and even their parents to declare their passion for wrestling and want to train under the instruction of Phogat. They were already receiving massive support from their community and were soaked with love, respect, and admiration. Everyone wants to be associated with them. Girls are now becoming bold enough to compete with boys. It was during this time that Geeta declared her interest to train at India national academy since she will be representing India to win gold.

In the second half of the movie, there was a little transition back to acrimony and emotional tussles in the Phogat family. Getting into the national academy for advanced training, Geeta threw away discipline and the technique taught by Phogat (calling it ‘old’) and got spoiled. Her academy couch and her friends played a huge role in this. Dangal portrayed this as the reason for her many defeats in several tournaments. During one of her visits back to Balali, she challenged her father to physical combat to prove her point that his technique is archaic, after she dared to fault it. Fortunately, she won by virtue of age, not by technique. This moment created a discord between her and her family. I do not wish to discuss this acrimony further under this heading. I am already liking this harmony spirit. In the long run, the discord was resolved and the Phogat family reunited to chase for gold and continue their collective resistance. They continue to face resistance and obstacles but it was no longer in the course of challenging hegemonic masculinity; it was in the pursuit for the gold medals—Phogat’s life-long ambition. With [harmony](#) and support, Geeta eventually won the gold.

In recognition of Phogat’s heroic display and support of challenging hegemonic masculinity even though he has been accused of being a patriarch, Pande (2016) captured the last scenery of Dangal as follows: In one of the film’s last scenes, Geeta was anxious to compete in the Commonwealth

Games against a stronger wrestler who has defeated her twice. Phogat, Geeta’s mentor, coach, and father, advises her to give it her all and go for the gold medal because, in the end, that is the only way she can become an inspiration to other girls in the country who feel uncomfortable to be associated with a masculine-dominated sport like wrestling. Indeed, the pursuit for the gold medal appeared to be the final attempt at challenging hegemonic masculinity in the sport of wrestling in India. That was just the right motivation needed to defeat someone who had beaten you twice. The final success was a conglomeration of goals which both Phogat and his daughters subscribed to. It appeared however to be ranked differently in their minds. For Phogat, the gold was most important while the daughters mostly needed to break the ‘gendered’ boundaries around wrestling in India.

Edgework and the enrichment hypothesis in Dangal

Throughout the movie, the adventure of Phogat and his daughters portrayed edgework. We saw from the onset how the sisters were forced out of their comfort zones to undergo rigorous training under their father’s stern coaching; how they were made to dress like boys and cut their hairs, and how they experienced being taunted by boys and people of Haryana. Conceptualized by Stephen Lyng, **edgework** refers to the pursuit of psychological or physical borderline experiences. It entails deciding to actively participate in difficult or risky activities that push people to the *edge* of their comfort zones (Lyng, 1990; 2005). Wrestling in itself is a form of edgework. It is a risky sport. The uncertainties of wrestling mirror the fun of edgework explained by Lyng. There is the fear of sustaining injury, the vulnerability of showing signs of weaknesses, and the gamble of grasping an opportunity that wrestlers must deal with. A split-second decision can lead to victory or defeat. All of this unpredictability was portrayed in Dangal as Geeta and Babita wrestled for excellence.

Lyng (2005, p. 4) explains: taking risks involves negotiating boundaries and exploring “edges”—described in a number of ways: the boundary between consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity

and insanity, and the line that separates life and death (Lyng, 2005, p. 4). In the movie, we watched how Phogat sets off on a quest that embodies edgework: his unwavering pursuit of training his daughters for regional, national, and international wrestling tournaments despite social critiques, institutional obstacles, and emotional tussles. His people called him insane to want to change the norms of wrestling to achieve his ambitions. His decisions to reject these norms, challenge gender roles, and nurture his two daughters in wrestling are all exemplifications of edgework. To break boundaries and create new ones, he shed off arrogance, risked his reputation, relationships with families, and social acceptance. He demonstrated resilience, passion, compassion, love, hard work, and emotional wellness. He even exhibited acts that were considered traditionally feminine such as crying, being teary when pleading, and assisting with house chores. Despite lack of support and equipment, he was able to improvise to single-handedly train his daughters as national champions.

Talking about men supporting women to break boundaries, the **enrichment hypothesis** also lends us some strength to harmonize gender norms and to allow for liberation in their exploration. This hypothesis highlights the significance of family and social support, as well as exposure to social special settings (Auster, 2001). Dangal revealed the crucial roles played by Phogat in the celebrated lives of his daughters. Phogat not only exposed his daughters to the art of wrestling, he served as their father, coach, and mentor. He believed in their potential, nurtured them, crossed boundaries for them, took all sorts of insults and embarrassment for them, and served as their greatest support system. The huge support received from Phogat, their mother, and cousin were largely instrumental in the sisters' subsequent achievement of excellence and in transcending constraints. Haryana also offered massive support to the sisters, although it was after the success of Phogat and his daughters' resistance. This hypothesis reinforces the need for harmony in breaking more boundaries without further creating gender disharmonies or clamoring for equal entitlements every

now and then. It is recognizing that men and women have their natural differences which, sometimes, reflect in their physiques and general make-ups. It is recognizing that these differences should be complementary.

Conclusion

In the emotional journey of Phogat and his daughters, Dangal reminds us that true strength lies not in acrimony but in harmony. With their father's guidance and unconditional devotion, Geeta and Babita followed their dreams and broke the boundaries around hegemonic wrestling traditions. In this way, they contributed to a redefining of masculinity and femininity, leaving a lasting mark on the wrestling mat and in the hearts of those young girls who are bullied and criticized for showing an interest in fields traditionally dominated by men. Although the movie challenges hegemonic masculinity, certain scenes serve to uphold it. Furthermore, Dangal exposed the misinterpretation of masculinity. The theoretical framework of edgework and enrichment hypothesis also helps us to understand the risks associated with participating in sports that are dominated by men, as well as the need for men to support and help women who are interested in exploring these areas in order to help them effectively deal with the associated risks. In addition, women should ask for men's support to investigate the risks and uncertainties in these areas, rather than claim equal entitlement as participants in their traditionally-ascribed domains. We must remember as male and female that before we were socially and culturally gendered, we were naturally human, created to coexist in harmony and not in acrimony. Unfortunately, we were not created the same to claim equality in all spheres. The hypothesis that we must support one another to break boundaries holds true in Dangal. [History](#) will continue to remember Mahavir Singh Phogat for securing a reputation for his women in the Phogat family, specifically in the world of Indian professional female wrestling.

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