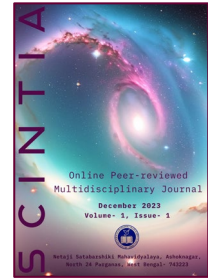


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“Fight, Koni, Fight,”: Male Hegemonic Sport and the Female Athlete in Moti Nandi’s *Koni* (1975)

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Abstract

If gender is a series of performance -driven acts, then, Moti Nandi’s (1931-2010) novel *Koni* (1975) articulates the ideals of normative masculinity away from the not-muscular soft ideals of femininity. Nandi, through his sports literature, conceptualises the role of sports in culture and society. Although written primarily for adolescents, his sports novels including *Koni* (1975), *Stopper* (1974) and *Striker* (1973) have been crucial representations of the different forms of the dominant power structures in the middle and lower -middle class Bengali society. A marginal, in his novels, usually picks himself up from his pathetic state and announces his arrival on the victory podium through sheer hard work and a bit of luck. In that context, the protagonist, of the novel *Koni*, does not get individualised as Nandi does nothing to reflect a female athlete’s separate journey or does not quite delineate *Koni*’s different embodied existence away from hegemonic masculine sporting norms. The novel rather emphasises the role of her male trainer -Khitish Sinha (Kshid -da) - and his journey to re-establish his ‘manly’ credentials. In the process, if *Koni* gets ‘discovered’, ‘trained’ and finally becomes triumphant, then, it’s more of a victory of the male system of sports management and the emergence of a legitimate athlete’s body within that system. In this research paper, my emphasis is not only on how a female athlete struggles inside the patriarchal structures of society including sports but also to identify her individualised and complex journey, through pain and pleasures, into a different body -subject. An attempt is also made to understand how, in Nandi’s novel, sport gets institutionalised in a hierarchical society as one’s caste, class and gender come regularly to mediate one’s sporting acts.

Keywords: Body-subject; Gender; Hegemony; Patriarchy; Performance.

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Introduction

Moti Nandi (1931 -2010), through his sports literature, conceptualizes the role of sport in culture and society. Although written primarily for adolescents, his sports novels including *Koni* (1975) *Stopper* (1974), *Striker* (1973), and *Ferari* (The Absconder, 1990) have been crucial markers of the different forms of the dominant power structures in the middle and lower -middle class Bengali society. A marginal, in his novels, usually picks himself up from his pathetic state and announces his arrival on the victory podium through sheer hard work and a bit of luck. But these boyish wish -fulfilments do not necessarily disturb the status quo in society. Nandi’s faith in mechanised work -ethics remains constant all through his writing career. In that context, the protagonist of the novel, *Koni*, does not get individualized as Nandi does nothing to reflect a female athlete’s separate journey or doesn’t quite delineate *Koni*’s different embodied existence away from hegemonic masculine sporting norms. The novel rather emphasizes the role of her male trainer Kshid -da and his journey

to reestablish manly credentials. In the process, if Koni gets ‘discovered’, ‘trained’, and finally comes up on the podium then it’s more of a victory of the male system of sports management and the emergence of a legitimate athlete’s body within that system. Koni is, thus, not distinguishable from any other male champions. Yet, Nandi scores with the story of an athlete’s journey through the muck of poverty, elite structured sports system and all the other disadvantages of a caste, class - torn Bengali society. In this paper, my emphasis is not only on how a female athlete struggles inside the structures of society and sport but also to identify her complex individualized complex journey through pain and pleasure into a body -subject. This Merleau-Ponty (1996) idea of a body-subject points to the indissoluble link between one’s subjectivity and the body.

Koni, a ‘meyemaddani’ (tomboy)

Koni begins with a straight -jacketed difference between two men or rather two body -types. On the one hand stands Bistu Dhar -elite classed, educated, and rich but also overweight, lethargic, and overindulgent. He has internalized the societal gaze which dismisses an overweight person as worthless and morally corrupt. He wishes to go slimmer to become more acceptable. His fat body gets mocked, ridiculed, and dismissed by Kshid -da who is in his fifties and loves a minimal life. He is dark -skinned and in thick-glasses looks pretty determined and uncompromising. He represents, in contrast to Bistu Dhar, an ‘ideal’ body - well shaped out, athletic and flexible. Thus, if Bishtu Dhar is indulgent with food, a car and regular massages and all the other comforts that money can buy for him, Kshid-da resorts to ideals of a disciplined body, keeping his blood -pressure and cholesterol level under acceptable limits – a scientific discourse of a body dependent on proper intake of food, regular health check-ups, discipline and regimented workouts. Kshid-da says: “I exercise every day...Isometrics, calisthenics, barbells-every single day” (Nandi, 1964:2). Bishtu Dhar cannot resist being jealous of this man’s masculine aura: “In his mind, he had begun to exchange his obesity with the man’s slim frame” (Nandi,1964: 6). Kshid-da finds Besto da ‘weak’ as the later can’t dictate terms to his body: “You’ll never be able to make a slave of your body” (Nandi, 1964: 7). In Koni, Kshid-da’s disciplined masculinized body is projected as the ‘ideal’ to which others can only look at with jealousy and a sense of wistfulness.

At the beginning of the novel, a group of boys and a tomboyish girl swim desperately to get at the raw mangoes floating on the Ganges. For Koni and her group, it is the promise of fun and friendship that binds them together. Even when it is an ugly fight to get at the crumbs thrown at them by society, a sense of camaraderie is there beyond the dominant ethics of winning and losing. Nandi represents Koni as a person with a cane-like thinnish frame with long hands. She is aggressive and possesses a kind of deep desperation to win even the little fights in given situations. Her words are raw and high on intent and not feminine by societal standards. She engages her peers on equal footing, fights for her space and has enough courage to fight for her cause. It is her socialization and upbringing in an urban slum that is instead of curtailing her freedom has facilitated uninhibited mixing with the boys. Consequently, Koni is less anxious with her body, has more mobility, less restrictions at home and as a marginal is ever ready to fight with purpose and a nonchalant steadfastness.

However, this uninhibited hunger for a fight on the part of a woman gets Koni the moniker of ‘meyemaddani’. Even Kshid-da cannot decide the biological identity of Koni. However, it is not biology which decides a person’s gender identity. The strict gender norms, concretized through years of socialization, finally settle the male-female identities. In her article “Throwing like a Girl” (1990), Marion Young explains the differences in male-female body movements as cultural constructions rooted in different forms of socialization and this is how John Hughson and others in their book *The Uses of Sport: A critical Study* (2005) summarize Young’s arguments in this context: “In a patriarchal form of society... women are brought up in ways that deny them the ‘subjectivity, autonomy and creativity’ that such a society accords to men” (Hughson,2005:150).

Thus, Koni’s biological identity of a woman is not enough to understand her behavioural pattern near the river. Her manly thinnish body -frame is almost devoid of the regular markers of ‘feminine’ grace. She further emphasizes her

‘manliness’ as her peer group consists solely of boys. Her desperate fights for a few pieces of raw mangoes and her violent action-driven ‘manly’ language also add to her ‘manly’ presence. If gender is a series of performance-driven acts, then, Koni articulates the ideals of normative masculinity away from the ‘depressed,’ ‘bruised,’ and often ‘weeping’ and ‘not muscular’ soft ideals of ‘femininity.’

Kshid -da and the Masculine Sporting arena

Kshid-da’s rulebook is marked by discipline, a no-nonsense training regime and a regimented work-ethic. A trainer, according to him, should be a psychologist too. He should further command respect from the trainees with his self-effacing personality. At home he is duly complemented by his wife who, however, is a little aggrieved by the fact that she must run the house on her own. She runs her tailoring shop successfully and has done well enough to get back her mortgaged jewellery but still nurtures the dream of giving more time to her household works. On the other hand, it is the Jupiter swimming club which is the preferred arena of manly performances for him: “I want to do some real work. Something that will prove a point to everyone. I’ll create a champion. I’ll build her [Koni] in my own image” (Nandi,1964:31).

If Kshid-da has failed to be a ‘man’ at home, then, masculine sporting arena bolsters his male ego away from the feminized home space. However, even at home, he has a strict regime and disciplined living norms. He prefers boiled food for its better nutritious value. If Bengali people have weaker physique and negligible presence in sports, then, Kshid -da puts the blame on oily food. He even forces his wife into this regime of ‘shuddh’ (pure) vegetarian fare despite her protests. Messner contextualizes this gender relation in these lines: Gender relations are based on power. Not only do men as a group exert power over women as a group, but the historically derived definitions of masculinity and femininity reproduce those power relations.

Family is, thus, a crucial arena where patriarchal faith is worked out. Even when Kshid-da does precious little to run the family, he still has patriarchal prerogatives to run the scheme of things at home. Again, at his club he dictates terms in matters of health, food intake and in training related matters to bring the active, powerful, adrenaline-driven charged -up and useful normative masculinized bodies into action. Long accused of effeminacy, Bengali people have this basic suggestion from Kshid-da to get into a better shape: “Kshitish believed that the typical Bengali meal was not healthy. It ruined the stomach and weakened the body, which was why Bengalis could not do much in any sporting arena. Boiled food preserved most of the nutrients, proteins, and vitamins” (Nandi,1964:16).

Jupiter Swimming club is a public sports club with its strict rules, systematic functioning and a well -defined power -structure with MLA Vinod Bhar as its president. The swimmers are appreciated or depreciated by the sole standard of the trophies they bring to the club. But Kshid-da wants more than the laurels that these swimmers bring to the club. For him, discipline and a constant upward journey into excellence is what counts and swimming, like any other sport, is about a fight against time and sitting on one’s laurels is positively a backward journey. However, if swimming clubs are structured units with specific standards, Kshid-da is also off-staged by his lack of experience as a competitive swimmer. Bodu Chatterjee, another important functionary of the club, thus, thinks Kshid-da has no business to train the swimmers: “Kshitish has never swum a single stroke. I’ve never known him to take part in a competition. Why should the boys and girls listen to him?” (Nandi,1964: 8).

Kshid-da, on his part, discounts his lack of experience as a swimmer and situates himself with other celebrated swimming coaches of the world like Talbot, Carlyle, Galasher and Haines who never had a competitive swimming career. A coach, as per Kshid-da, would rather hone a potential champion’s skill and motivate a trainee to cross all barriers. In this search for a champion, however, he does not quite intend to disturb the structured discipline of swimming or violate the hegemonic rules of a sporting discipline. Instead, he situates himself firmly within the dominant structure. In the novel, Kshid-da desperately looks for a good competitor who would ultimately vindicate him and his training regime within the structure and its deep -seated rules.

From here on, Koni and her trainer fight together but it is always Koni who must unlearn a lot to 'learn' what Kshid-da and his hegemonic discipline of sports has to offer. Koni lives with her many siblings at Shyampukur slum in Kolkata. Her father is long dead, and she is now dependent on her brother who earns a measly one hundred and fifty rupees per month as a motor mechanic. When Kshid-da visits her home, he is struck by the poverty in which the whole family is lost: "A wooden cot, no mattresses, a few oil-stained pillows. A few shirts and trousers hung on a string stretched across the wall. The thatched room had just one window, overlooking a sewage-filled drain" (Nandi, 1964:52).

However, Kshid-da has this romantic faith that poverty breeds champions. On her part, Koni lives for each day and is happy to participate in exhibitionistic sports meets whenever she can to take back home whatever little she gets in prize money or in other small tokens. Bourdieu (1992) characterizes this as the working class 'taste of the necessary' - this is instrumental rather than an aesthetic attitude that goes for whatever little is at hand. One such opportunity for an instant little gratification is this twenty-hour non-stop walking competition organized by a local club. Koni gets a kit bag and a towel for her efforts, but it is also a happy work out for her with friends. She had no bigger target in mind when she started but competed nonetheless with a kind of 'head held high' determination. She wanted some cash-prize from the spectators too but it is again her tomboyish look which denied her. Kshid-da, however, dismisses these walkathons as non-sport: "Nonstop walking didn't require any brains, only brawn. It didn't call for speed, strong muscles or competitiveness" (Nandi, 34). He would rather support a sporting activity which involves disciplined training. He, thus, again voices his support for a structured rule-bound and intelligence-based human exertions. The only thing positive that Kshid-da see in that boring walkathon is Koni - "a dark figure, tall and thin as a bamboo reed" (Nandi, 1964:35). He senses Koni could be turned into a champion with proper scientific training and adequate food intake at the behest of a sincere coach like him. In this scheme of things, however, a female athlete must follow the same ideology of aggressive and exploitative training that construct a male sporting hero. At the beginning Koni had little patience for Kshid-da's knowledge-based swimming regime: "What I know takes me across the Ganga and back. Why do I need to know anything more?" (Nandi, 1964: 38).

If the relationship between the coach and Koni is taken as a power relationship, then, it is indeed a two-way traffic with both trying to maneuver the situations even when it is the coach who has an upper hand with all the institutional, cultural and financial advantages of hegemonic sports structure on his side. Koni is sternly told that swimming must be learnt. This training-ethic of Kshid-da is a crucial factor in Koni's subalternity through sport: Sports invite subalternity in other ways; preparation for contest involves a prolonged period of self-absorption in which a focus on training, special diet ...can demand that an individual temporarily withdraws from the usual social obligations and relationship (Mills, 2005:1).

Under Kshid-da's tutelage, Koni would grow into a new body as per the demands of sporting success. That also means a wrenching away from her peers of the slum and the kinds of innocent sport they indulged in together. In an exhibition type swimming competition at Rabindra Sarovar Lake, Koni is pitted against a white-skinned, red-costumed girl of an affluent family and she does badly. This further necessitates Kshid-da's technical interventions. She is poor, physically weak, and technically a novice-clearly a pushover for the well-trained, fit, and stronger opponents belonging to upper sections of society. Kshid-da decides to use these data to convince Koni further: "The Red-costumed girl knew how to swim, that is how she defeated you. You can beat her if you learn" (Nandi, 1964:47). As a true guru, he even wants Koni in his own household to monitor her overall growth: "[Khitish] wants to take the responsibility of feeding and clothing her, building up her mental strength, which is the most important thing" (Nandi, 1964:50).

However, in the hierarchized system of sports based on systematic knowledge, nothing is arbitrarily done. Every club has its rules with a group of trainers in charge of the proceedings: "...every club has its rules...Only a trainer can certify someone as a swimmer." (Nandi, 1964:54). Koni is considered 'good material' but as per her self-appointed coach, she must learn proper swimming strokes unlike what she is used to do on the Ganges. Here is how he initiates swimming lessons for Koni: "Quick arm-strokes are most important -so that random way you swim in the river won't wash. The arm movements have to be clean, firm. The actual pace is powered by the muscles of the shoulders, back and arms -which is

why you have to exercise” (Nandi, 1964:55). Koni, however, does not have a bigger set of goals to focus on and, instead, sets up her eyes on an expensive nylon swimming costume. Her coach decides to use even this to further motivate his trainee: “I’ll buy you one...the day you can swim like that” (Nandi,50). It is Kshid-da’s personal fight too. Thrown out of Jupiter and even denied a chance to use that club’s facilities, he promises a payback with Koni in the lead. The training sessions soon turn into ugly fights with Kshid-da and Koni trying to do things keeping their own priorities in mind. While the coach wants Koni to learn a few swimming tricks in double quick time, she half-heartedly drags her tired body from the pool. Even the coach senses that his high-handed training schedule will not work unless there is more on offer: “I’m thinking we should organize two eggs, two bananas and two slices of toast [for Koni]” (Nandi,62). For the time being, two boiled -eggs, two bananas, bread toasts and a rupee in cash each day of the work -out are enough to motivate Koni to work harder. Sport has always been so male -centric, driven by set norms and ‘win at all costs’ ideas that it is no surprise that Kshid-da harps on the same hard-work driven ideology to inspire Koni: “...if one didn’t push oneself beyond one’s limitations, one would never overcome them...she would have to challenge the threshold. To get there, she needed a strong character and stubborn determination.” (Nandi, 1964: 63).

Kshid-da commands routine work and even threatens to hurt Koni if the work is not done properly. With a stony face, he keeps an ‘eye’ on her with a log of wood to keep Koni inside the pool. The swimming arena, the lane - divisions and the training system under an observant coach—all these concentrate the sport in a particular locale and turn it into a regulatory regime with exclusive control getting exercised over a trainee. Here, the term ‘sporting panopticon’ is relevant to understand the power structure in modern sport through the organization of the swimming pool and the coach constituting a ‘panoptic’ space.

Legitimate ‘docile’ bodies in Sports

As per Kshid-da, sports need character, determination, and a degree of obstinate pride to excel. In the novel, however, Koni punches deep holes in that sports rhetoric by constantly reminding Kshid-da that it is always the promise of better food that works for her. He knows this too and uses every trick of the book to get her going. After all Koni is Kshid-da’s future too: his reputation, identity and recognition of being a different trainer with separate sets of values depend now solely with Koni: quicker she comes up as a swimmer, it is better for both of them. As a coach, Kshid -da’s belief -system recognises the need for better infrastructure but he also thinks it is the fighting spirit in a sportsperson that makes all the difference at the end: “Not everything comes easy, you know...a swimmer needs to work hard, writhe in pain, before he can grow” (Nandi,1964: 67).

Kshid-da further extends the idea of sporting hero into a national hero. By glorifying the emergence of sporting heroes, he simultaneously brings in the idea of the legitimate body and its uses: “A great swimmer stands for life and living, a General for death and destruction. A swimmer is far greater than a General. An all -conquering general is respected and hated in equal measure. But a great swimmer inspires the whole world.” (Nandi, 1964:68).

Sport is also a crucial marker of a class -based structure within which sport experiences happen. One’s caste, class and gender regularly mediate the sporting acts. Koni’s low economic background, for example, makes her vulnerable to class -based humiliations. To her coach’s credit, it must be said that he uses even Koni’s poor economic background to her advantages. Amiya and Hiya, thus, get marked as Koni’s class enemies. She requires, thus, scientific training along with a decent dose of class hatred directed against her competitors: “Kshitish believed it wouldn’t be right to blunt Koni’s grudge against Hiya. Let her nurture it. When the time came it would fire her and make her explode like a bomb” (Nandi, 1964:91).

On his part, Kshid-da also milks Besto-da to finance his family needs as also the needs of a future champion-Koni. Soon it is her turn to clinch a memorable victory against the reigning Bengal champion, Amiya -a victory all the sweeter as it comes after methodical training and years of suppressed anger at poverty, system and against class privileged competitors. This is how Nandi charts out Koni’s arrival into the big league: Smooth, effortless, and yet lethal, Koni pulled

ahead. As soon as she had touched the finishing board, she turned agitated...turning on her back to kick the board and plunging back into the water in delight. (Nandi,1964: 106). According to Michael Foucault (1977), three key disciplinary mechanisms facilitate the production of docile bodies-hierarchical judgment, spatial organization and examination. In the novel, Koni's efforts to get into the Bengal team for the national championship get frustrated by Kshid-da's rival group of people who manage the trials in various capacities of stroke judges, inspector of turns and time-keepers. While Koni gets red-flagged in 100-meter breast-stroke for the alleged 'double-kick underwater', in 200-meter individual medley, she again gets wrongly disqualified for 'technical' reasons. All these organized hierarchized judgment calls create a kind of docility in Koni. Even her coach could not question the wrong calls as the swimming arena is controlled in such a manner that Koni remains literally alone among the officials and the other competitors. And then, in 100-meter freestyle, Koni gets obstructed inside her own lane. These 'dirty tricks' happen at the behest of the powerful people in charge of the trial meet with the sole intention of barring Koni's entry into the state team. However, if a set of influential people opposes Koni, she is mercifully also supported by another powerful man inside the hierarchy - Pranebendu Mitra of Ballygunge Swimming club. He has another agenda in his sight though-the 'ijjat' (prestige) of Bengal: "We have to think about Bengal now, its honour and prestige -we have to put our insignificant rivalries behind us and build the best team." (Nandi,1964:115). In other words, sport is here promoted as a form of mimetic capital and as a resource for exhibiting strength, fitness and self-control through hegemonic performance -based sporting acts.

Beyond the norms: Sports as Pleasure

Despite the promise of togetherness, belonging and camaraderie within a group, Koni remains isolated in the Bengal camp. Unlike her fellow competitors, Koni has neither the means nor the inclination to 'perform' her femininity. Here is Tony Tanner on women athletes' need to use beauty products to daftly carry their 'feminine' selves: "Women athletes could not escape continuous pressure to prove their femininity while sport continued to be one of the most important ways in which young men sought to demonstrate their masculinity in the endlessly competitive world of capitalist work and play" (Collins,2013:47).

In *Koni*, women athletes take good care of themselves, have access to better living standards don't find any reason to disturb their structured feminine identities. When an opportunity arrives some of them do consider marriage a better career option than sports. Tony Tanner's comments, in this context, further highlight how women athletes are never made to lose sight of their 'feminine' selves in sport. Koni's predicament is a bit different though. All along, she has been dismissed as a freakish meymaddani -a 'manly' woman to be precise. In that scenario, if anything can rescue her from her depressing existence, it is this masculinized performance -based 'win at all costs' sporting triumphs: "... I'm not at all jealous of you. I live in a slum; I'm not even educated -how can I compete with you? But if we ever meet in the pool..." (Nandi,1964:127).

The final few pages of *Koni* depict a divided Bengal camp in the national meet. The team -spirit is disturbed not only by personal ego -fights but more crucially by petty groupism. However, some kind of unity gets forged at the end. This means that the collective expression of the 'bodily grounded aesthetic' can really serve a socially vital function by bringing together a few people in celebration of a triumph. In *Koni*, as the protagonist takes on her Bengal teammates, we have a development of what Hillis (1990) calls 'proto communities'. With her inspired panther-like leap into glory in the relay event, Koni gets even the local spectators excited. In this grand spectacle of a finish, she swims not only for her coach or for the sake of the Bengali identity but primarily for herself. Koni's body has been a battle -ground -a crucial site of masculinized training. However, the sporting arena is an escape from her oppressive domestic conditions. In this context, Supriya Chaudhury elaborates on how sports can mean a lot many other things than the patriarchal and hegemonic result -driven goals: ...the actual experience of sport requires submergence in the body that briefly obliterates awareness of our cultural conditions. The gender categories dissolve ...The body in sport ... [is] an intense, complex condition that is experienced by mind and body together as pleasure. (Chaudhury, 2012:195).

In Moti Nandi's novel, Koni seems to enjoy her time inside the pool, gears up for a fight against the odds and carries the expectations of her coach. She is aware of her new confident self even before she hits the finishing board as a winner in the national championships, signaling her 'escape' into a different and emancipated body-subject.

Conclusion

Saroj Dey adapted Nandi's text for his film Koni in 1984. At the end when Koni defeats Rama Joshi of Maharashtra to win the championship for Bengal, her coach was there to witness the emergence of Miss Kanakchapa Pal. As she soaks in the admiring gaze of the audience, we wonder what has changed in the intervening period. In Dey's film-text, Koni looked confident when she was fighting for the raw mangoes on the river. A medal at the championship, however, anoints her as a disciplined sportsperson in a hegemonic sporting discipline. Both in the novel and in the film version, Koni and her coach go through immense pain to earn this visibility in a hierarchized society and its disciplines.

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