

## The Role of Fathers in Shaping Female Athletes: A Study of Sports Biopics *Dangal* and *King Richard*

**Seema Devi**

Research Scholar, Department of English and Foreign Languages  
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak (Haryana)  
Email: seema.rs.eng@mdurohtak.ac.in  
Reg. no. 2118131087  
Mobile No. 8168934571

**Dr Naresh Rathee**

Associate Professor, Chhotu Ram Arya College, Sonapat (Haryana)  
Email: narrathi@gmail.com

### Abstract

This research paper critically examines the complex effects of parenting on the lives of female athletes, as depicted in the sports biopics *Dangal* (2016) and *King Richard* (2021). Further, it explores the psychological pressures that parents, especially dads and daughters, face in their dual responsibilities as coach and carer. The research explores themes such as paternal ambition, the effects of stringent training on family connections, and emotional growth under pressure through the lens of Erik Erikson's psychosocial development stages and Albert Bandura's social learning theory. The film medium highlights the emotional complexity of the raising interaction, and the study closely examines the father-daughter emotional bond through cinematic techniques. This research contributes to the discussion of parenting in the competitive world through numerous biopics, a sensitive issue in athletic accomplishment and family dynamics. In these biopics, we explore the core themes of ambition, sacrifice and love as common denominators in the complexities of the parental role and family connections.

**Keywords:** Sports biopics, parental influence, emotional resilience, athletic development, cultural narratives.

### Introduction

Modern cinema commonly depicts fathers as mentors and instigators of their daughters' sports activities. The sports biopics *Dangal* (2016) and *King Richard* (2021) showcase the psychological and emotional bond between parent figures and their daughters. Both films present fathers as makers of feminine power in opposition to the patriarchal framework, posing a conundrum about who is in control, who sacrifices, and who pursues ambition in the inner world of the home. There are many challenges for female athletes. Usually, families are not supportive of female athletes because they think girls are incapable of playing sports. The boys are often supported, on the other hand. But in the present day, things have changed; some families have given their girls equal opportunities in sports. The girls have also brought pride to the family by winning medals abroad.

The family, especially the father, is the main source of energy for female athletes during their careers. They give emotional and material support that may have a profound effect on their athlete daughters' careers. The encouragement from the father and the family will make the female athletes more willing to push further and achieve success. Dads and

families inspire girls to pursue their aspirations with confidence and perseverance. They get their daughters into sports and cultivate their interest from a young age. "Typically, it is the fathers who initiate the process, encouraging their daughters to engage in physical activities and thus instilling a love of sports early on" (Smith and Johnson 45). The first touch is the main cause of a lifelong passion for sport, which in turn lays the foundation for eventual success

Two films that represent the efforts of Mahavir Singh Phogat and Richard Williams, fathers who taught their daughters to be the best athletes in the world against all odds, are *Dangal* (2016) and *King Richard* (2021). *Dangal* is the story of Geeta and Babita Phogat, the father-daughter wrestling duo from the Indian countryside. They were trained only by their father, Mahavir. *King Richard* is the story of tennis geniuses Venus and Serena Williams. Richard, the father, was of a strong will and trained them. Both fathers believe in their daughters' capabilities despite social conventions and financial difficulties, and they persist. The films explore the notion of fatherhood and its importance in the sporting lives of the daughters, as well as its role in their mental and emotional development. Both films explore the father-daughter relationship as a reflection of the psychological battles between ambition, discipline and love. The films show how fathers blend the extremely demanding, rigorous coaching with a deep emotional love for their daughters' welfare and achievement, thereby emphasising the crucial role of parental influence in the development of athletes, especially in sports where success depends heavily on early training, sacrifice and psychological strength. Ambitions and family expectations are in a complex interaction that influences the girls' psychological decision-making about their athletic careers. The interactions of love, authority, and discipline within these families highlight the psychological aspect of ambition, which affects both dads and daughters. The present analysis focuses on the impact of Mahavir's and Richard's roles as trainers and carers on their daughters' psychological growth under intense competitive circumstances.

### **Psychological Theories of Parenting and Coaching**

A detailed investigation of key psychological theories of parenting and coaching is necessary to understand the father-daughter relationships in *Dangal* and *King Richard* on a psychological level. Erik Erikson's psychosocial development theory posits that an individual passes through eight stages of development. Each of these stages has its own psychological conflict (*Childhood and Society* 247). Erikson's themes of identity vs. role confusion (in adolescence) and generativity vs. stagnation (in adulthood) are essential developmental issues for both athletes and their fathers. Mahavir Phogat and Richard Williams, in their coaching of their daughters, instil a sense of identity and self-esteem in them, particularly when they encounter the demands of athletic performance and societal pressures. Fathers demonstrate generativity (a desire to contribute significantly to future generations) through their nurturing of their daughters' growth.

According to Albert Bandura's social learning theory, people learn by watching, imitating, and modelling. People can learn behaviours, beliefs and attitudes, especially from role models, says Bandura (*Social Learning Theory* 22). Social learning theory outlines how the Phogat sisters and the Williams sisters develop the mental and emotional tools for success by modelling their fathers' style and learning from the feedback they receive during training sessions. Theories of authoritative and authoritarian kinds of parenting also describe the psychological dynamics in fathers' interactions with their daughters. Baumrind describes authoritative parenting as a balanced approach that is strong in expectations, warmth and support (ibid. 34). Authoritarian parenting is marked by strong control and a lack of emotional warmth. Mahavir Phogat's style is more like the authoritarian model. However,

Richard Williams, although quite rigorous during training, is a kind of authoritative parent who allows the children to express themselves by offering emotional support and promoting open communication. These different parenting techniques are affecting the athletes' emotional well-being and mental resilience.

### **Fatherhood in Sports Biopics**

Fatherhood is a signifier of social wishes and identity in sports films. In one of his books, sociologist Toby Miller contends that "sports films are not simply about winning; they are about the invention of subjects who exemplify a nation's ideal of discipline and moral virtue" (*SportCulture* 23). In *Dangal* and *King Richard*, the fathers' roles are not only providers of familial care but also ethical dreamers shaping their children's characteristics as a form of resistance to society's biases. Mahavir Singh Phogat's tough sessions with Geeta and Babita stand as a challenge to the male-dominated patriarchal culture. At the same time, the fact that Venus and Serena were coached by Richard Williams is an affront to the racial hierarchies and class exclusivity of American tennis. In a way, these stories are the education and the political aspect of fatherhood.

The movie pictures of such fathers show them as both loving and rigorous, not nurturing or authoritarian. On the one hand, the fathers' demands for discipline and their relentless desire for perfection are emblematic of the kind of norms that society at large expects from women and marginalised groups. But what differentiates these images from the usual patriarchal ones is the hidden objective of freedom underneath the facade. "You are going to be the best in the world," Richard says in the film *King Richard*. The result is a plan for the whole world to see." Mahavir's utterance in *Dangal*, "Hamari betiyan bhi kisi se kam nahi" ("Our daughters are no less than anyone"), functions as a speech against gendered hierarchies in a parallel way (Tiwari 01:23:15–01:23:25).

Both films are driven by the unshakeable belief Mahavir Singh Phogat and Richard Williams have in their daughters' abilities. For Mahavir's daughters, success is defined as his quest for the glory of the community and the rejection of traditional gender roles. In a similar vein, Richard Williams' desire for his daughters, Venus and Serena, is fuelled by the idea that at the pinnacle of tennis history, they could overcome the hurdles of race and class. Both fathers push their daughters to the limit, hoping that via their daughters, these sports can transcend the belief that women can only succeed in male-dominated fields – wrestling for *Dangal* and tennis for *King Richard*. Their desire is the heart of the coaching strategy, a combination of tenderness and tight discipline.

Both fathers also face significant societal and institutional obstacles in their attempts to make their daughters world-class athletes. Mahavir's struggle in *Dangal* is further complicated by the entrenched patriarchal standards that define wrestling as a male sport. His daughters cannot even train, let alone compete. Tennis, Richard's sport, is largely white and elite, with few Black players reaching the top levels of competition. In *King Richard*, Richard faces racial hurdles. Thus, these cultural standards profoundly anchor the societies they must navigate. The two fathers' resolve to overcome these obstacles powers their daughters' achievements. It echoes wider societal battles for equal rights for women in sport, as in *Dangal*, and for racial equality, as in *King Richard*.

A superb illustration of authoritarian discipline and persistent expectations is Mahavir Phogat in *Dangal*. He designs the toughest training sessions for his girls; some workouts are physically challenging and, at times, excruciating. He believes the only way his daughters will succeed is via sacrifice and extreme discipline. This method has been successful in producing elite athletes, but it also puts psychological pressure on his girls, who are expected to meet high standards. On the other hand, Mahavir's innate love and protectiveness come out

when he tries to protect his girls from the ever-present criticism of the world, especially in such a patriarchal society.

On the other hand, Richard Williams' teaching style is one of protection and smart strategy. He's focused on building a strong psychological basis for his girls, especially Venus, as they enter a white-dominated sport. Richard is more protective of the girls, saying mental toughness is a trait they need to learn. He frequently protects children from the harsh realities of competitive tennis. His plan is for his daughters to be physically and mentally strong enough to handle the trials that lie ahead. When you compare Richard's emotionally supportive coaching method with Mahavir's rigorous and authoritarian approach, the psychological effects on the daughters of Richard and Mahavir are clearly different. Both tactics work out successfully, but Richard's is more about mental resilience, while Mahavir's is more about physical training and toughness.

These portrayals defy standard gender stereotypes by showing fathers as feminist allies, although flawed ones. Their walk from domination to collaborative work is a metaphor for transforming masculinity. The films suggest that parenting, if it is an act of faith rather than power, is a way to alter things, a way to disrupt the systems of patriarchy and racism. Hence, these sports biopics portray fathers not just as individuals achieving success, but as agents of social change. Thus, the father is not only a teacher but also a revolutionary initiator.

### **Patriarchy and Empowerment in *Dangal***

Nitesh Tiwari's *Dangal* (2016) is a breakthrough film in the Indian sports genre that, in complex ways, explores patriarchy, empowerment and nationalism. The film tells the story of Mahavir Singh Phogat, a former wrestler from a small village in Haryana, who trains his two daughters, Geeta and Babita, to become wrestling champions, defying the social stigma of the male-dominated society around them. The film is not entirely clear-cut: it illustrates women's independence through the sport, but it also reinstates the father's rule. Mahavir Singh Phogat is a hero and a villain at the same time.

If we read the character from a feminist perspective, we can say that Mahavir's character fits the "paradox of protection" as defined by Simone de Beauvoir, i.e., a patriarch who gives women agency but limits it (*The Second Sex* 267-269). Training his daughters in wrestling is indeed Mahavir's decision, which goes against the gender norms of his village, where girls are strictly expected to stay in their homes and marry at an early age. His fight against society's laughter and family disapproval shows his breaking free from traditional constraints, transforming the domestic sphere into a site of political struggle. But they do not become independent from him; on the contrary, his daughters' power remains "checked" against his command. The rigorous workout, strict diet, and lack of freedom for the girls highlight how he is in control, but in the guise of a caring father.

According to feminist critic Laura Mulvey, women's empowerment plots in mainstream cinema are usually the result of the masculine gaze, which turns female achievements into narratives that validate male empowerment ("Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" Screen, 6-18). *Dangal* follows the same path: Mahavir's emotional and narrative investment is the reason behind Geeta's victories. The film does not reject male dominance by presenting the father as the moral compass. However, it acknowledges female power by making the father's vision central to the narrative. They gain power through him, albeit indirectly.

On the other hand, the shifts in the emotional states of father and daughter allow *Dangal* to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the film. After Geeta leaves home for national-level training and begins to assert her independence, the film depicts a symbolic

battle between patriarchal control and female autonomy. When father and daughter reconcile in the final scene, it is the transfer of agency that is symbolised. Geeta has to be absolutely independent, as Mahavir is not there for her. Therefore, empowerment goes beyond the patriarchal system when a daughter realises her father's dream in her own way.

Moreover, *Dangal* reflects the slow cultural change in India with a gender focus. The present-day sports film, according to Shohini Chaudhuri, is also a reflection of the gender debate in India, where female empowerment in sports is considered a marker of the country's modernity, moving forward and not backward (*Cinema of the Developing World* 132-135). Conservative on the gender front, the film uses nationalism as a tool (medals, honour, and pride) to illustrate that female empowerment is the ultimate driver of societal liberation. In this regard, it is also similar to India—the country's complex gender discourse is still evident. However, there are some parallels in the protagonist's change from a cold-hearted father figure to a caring guide.

In a patriarchal society, *Dangal* tells a story of female empowerment. Mahavir Singh Phogat breaks down traditional gender stereotypes but also reinforces them. His idea allows women to achieve remarkable things, but only with the help of the father's and the mother's sacrifice. The film goes beyond these ideas by exposing contradictions – especially the fissures within patriarchy that contain the seeds of resistance – and shows that even mediated empowerment can lead to substantial change.

### **Class, Race and Resistance in *King Richard***

*King Richard* (2021), directed by Reinaldo Marcus Green, is a film that goes beyond the traditional sports biopic, telling a story of racial pride, social mobility and paternal defiance. The film follows Richard Williams, the father of Venus and Serena, as he fought against social, economic and racial discrimination in America in the 1990s to realise his dream of turning his daughters into tennis stars. In my view, *King Richard* is not just a tale of sporting success; it also embodies the politics of race, class and parenthood, presenting Richard's fatherhood as a radical act of resistance against a system that seeks to marginalise Black excellence.

Richard's eyes extend beyond the conventional framework of a sports goal; eventually, his plan evolves into a strategic move against systemic racial inequalities. His oft-repeated line, "I wrote me a 78-page plan before they were even born," is a perfect example of how he sees in that plan careful and strict preparation as a way to oppose the stereotype of Black failure (Green 00:15:42–00:15:50). Through the character of Richard, we get a portrayal of the American sports myth of meritocracy as a lie. The film takes the viewer through the transformation of tennis from a sport that was historically dominated by white, rich, and elitist players to a place where racial discrimination is not only blatant but is also fought against. In agreement with Bell Hooks, we can say that "Black masculinity has been systematically misrepresented as either absent or violent; reclaiming it within love and vision is an act of resistance" (*We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* 3). Richard's character embodies this reclaiming, transforming paternal power into one of self-determination.

Richard's attempts to protect his girls from the hurtful world of the music industry by being tough and demanding are a clear reflection of what Cornel West has called "prophetic pragmatism"—a belief that belief in God and discipline are the tools for survival in an unjust world (*Race Matters* 15). We see how Richard did not let his daughters compete in the juniors; he was very much in favour of schooling and was at odds with the coaches who wanted to exploit them—all of this emanating from an understanding of how race and class, when combined, present barriers for Black people to progress. Indeed, what may be considered controlling or obsessive behaviour is presented in the film as a means for Richard

to empower both himself and his daughters; it is through his assertive control that they are protected from systems that exploit Black talent while denying Black people the dignity and agency they deserve.

The film also reevaluates the prevailing narratives about Black fatherhood in US media by depicting Richard. In fact, according to the research findings of scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, popular culture has been either silent on or negative about Black fathers by portraying them as absent, irresponsible, or liberating figures (*Black Feminist Thought* 52). King Richard responds to this discourse by portraying a father who is not merely dull or harsh but rather embodies action, foresight, and unwavering protectiveness. The way he was pushing his daughters “to know their worth” not only made the *Island of the Father* a source of resistance against racism and patriarchy but also made it a place where the father figure originated the fight for social justice.

But more than that, King Richard sees sports as a territory defined by racial politics, where victory is both the triumph of one and the challenge of a group. The ascent of Venus and Serena from the public courts of Compton to the world stage of tennis reflects the fight for Black visibility in spaces traditionally dominated by white people. Richard’s decision to “change the game” is not merely a metaphor but a powerful, defiant act against systemic exclusion. His fusion of activism with fatherhood sets him apart, blending love, discipline, and social awareness into a unique brand of activism.

Ultimately, King Richard centres the Black father as the primary source of empowerment and resilience in a redefined context. Richard’s story is a perfect example of resistance through care, insight gained through hardship, and faith developed under repression. He defies the intersectional constraints of race, class, and gender that seek to limit his daughters’ opportunities through his unwavering pursuit of excellence and self-respect. The movie, therefore, celebrates Richard’s athletic achievements and underscores the radical power of fatherhood as a means of liberation.

### **The Transformative Power of Fatherhood**

Both *Dangal* and *King Richard* use the idea of fatherhood to tell the story of one of the most intense and redemptive transformations, affecting not only the futures of their daughters but also social perceptions of women in sports. Mahavir Singh Phogat and Richard Williams were very different in many ways, but they both were determined to believe in their daughters’ abilities. Their experiences show how, somewhat paradoxically, fatherhood, often understood as authoritarian and dominating, can become a space of empowerment, love, and ideological development.

The film *Dangal* explores the emotional aspects of fatherhood by showing Mahavir’s change from a stern patriarch to a loving mentor. Initially, he uses Geeta and Babita to fulfil his own unachieved dreams, thus wrongly projecting himself onto his daughters, a phenomenon Simone de Beauvoir calls “the paternal projection of selfhood” (*The Second Sex* 271). However, as their strength and self-confidence grow, Mahavir realises that to truly empower his daughters, he needs to let them be independent and step back. This change is marked by his silence during Geeta’s final match, which represents the transfer of power from himself to trust, setting both him and his daughters free.

*King Richard* also redefines Black fatherhood as an act of rebellion. Richard Williams’s love for Venus and Serena is a challenge to racist and classist systems that limit Black excellence. As Bell Hooks states, “The most radical gesture a Black man can make in a racist society is to love and protect his family” (*We Real Cool* 4). Richard, with his foresight, turns affection into an act of revolution; thus, he is the source of his daughters’ spectacular achievements, and he is also the one who helps to maintain their dignity and independence.

Both fathers defy norms of masculinity by accepting that power and care can coexist in harmony. Their passionate drive, driven by the love they feel, puts them in opposition to and enables them to dismantle patriarchal, racial and social hierarchies. As Michael Kimmel writes, men can rebuild power “by connection, not control” (*The Gendered Society* 218). In the case of Mahavir and Richard, one can see how fatherhood becomes a moral and emotional revolution. This revolution frees not only the daughters but also the fathers, thus validating the idea that change starts in the family.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, *Dangal* (2016) and *King Richard* (2021) illustrate fatherhood as a key factor in shaping the lives of female athletes. In both movies, Mahavir Singh Phogat and Richard Williams change society through their acts, words, and attitude, making it easier for their daughters to break barriers, along with tough training, discipline, and emotional support. Mahavir empowers Geeta and Babita to defy conventional gender roles in rural India, while Richard utilises Venus and Serena to break down racial and class barriers in American tennis. The fathers' power shifts from a hard, direct approach to a more supportive, guiding approach; thus, they give their daughters the freedom they need to achieve self-fulfilment. These stories, apart from their focus on families, reveal how fatherhood can alter society's perception of women in sports, thereby providing them with more opportunities to be recognised, attain equal rights, and gain empowerment. Ultimately, both movies portray the fathers not only as guides or coaches but also as key drivers of their daughters' personal development and social change, highlighting the significant impact that faith, foresight, and hard work have on both the daughters and society at large.

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