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Fusing Football and Nationalism - A Study of Moti Nandi's *Striker* and *Stopper*

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Abstract

Colonialism, right from its inception has employed diverse means of legitimizing itself. Sports in general and football in particular have served as "idioms for discursive construction" of the British rule in India. Football, as introduced by the British, while harping on the physical inferiority of the Indian body vis-à-vis the superiority of its European counterpart, tried highlighting the inadequacy of the average Indian populace. However, at the hands of the colonial subjects, it also became a means of fighting back. In 1911, Mohun Bagan's winning the IFA Shield not only united the whole Bengali community, but also challenged the so-far constructed image of them as a race of weak and effeminate *babus*. However, after independence, this "sporting nationalism" got replaced by "unfortunate fragmentation", wherein regional and communal affiliation transcended the national. This fragmentation became all the more pronounced in the following decades with the failure of the state apparatuses, labour strifes, student conflicts, state repression, etc., and reached its peak in the seventies when the war of independence in neighbouring Bangladesh brought a major influx of refugees to Calcutta. It was at this socio-historical juncture that the sport narrative with the theme of an underdog winning against all odds appeared with the publication of Moti Nandi's *Striker* (1973), closely followed by his *Stopper*

(1974). The blistered cityscape found its representation in the tussle between the football ground where corruption ran rampant and the individual who was trying hard to make his living out of it. In this paper, I will attempt to bring out how these two novels try to become vectors of bringing forward the myth of the underdog hero trying to consolidate the conflicting spaces in a charged climate of antagonism, where anti-colonial nationalism gave way to both regional and religious communalism as the populace fought over the spoils of decolonization.

Keywords

Colonialism; Nationalism; Moti Nandi; Striker; Stopper; Sports Fiction

Sport, particularly in the twentieth century, has become an influential and significant form of entertainment, social and cultural development and 'myth making'. Marshall McLuhan calls games the "dramatic models of our psychological lives providing release of particular tensions". As models they are the "collective" and not "private" dramatizations of the inner life. According to him, art and games enable us to "stand aside from the material pressures of routine and convention, observing and questioning" (McLuhan. 237-38).

Sport novels are said to have generated from the dime novels which were extremely popular in the United States between 1860 and 1920. Frank Merriwell, a popular dime novel hero created by Gilbert Patten, could probably be considered as the earliest hero of the sports fiction genre. He excelled at football, baseball, basketball, crew and track at Yale while solving mysteries and righting wrongs.[1] In English literature, we find references to cricket and football in the fiction of the Victorian era. Widely known as the "gentleman's game", owing to the unique culture of the sport and its emphasis on ideals such as grace, sportsmanship, character and complexity, cricket has always tried to portray these qualities as quintessential British characteristics. It finds its place as early as the 1830s in Charles Dickens's famous novel *The Pickwick Papers* (1837) and also later in the mid-fifties in Thomas Hughes's famous novel *Tom Brown's*

[1] http://dordt.libguides.com/content.php?pid=116297&sid=1134501 accessed 10.01.2012

Schooldays (1857). At the same time, there were other novels like *The Cricket Match* (1924) and *The Game of the Season* (1935) by Hugh de Selincourt which primarily dealt with cricket as their subject and could be termed as full-fledged sport narratives. Indian epics like *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* have mentioned sports of both combative and non-combative variety, as in dice games, archery and wrestling matches. While we find mention of different games in the Bengali novels of Tagore and Bankim, it was only during the 1970s that a something like a full-fledged genre dealing with sport narratives emerged.

The sport novel as a genre arrived on the literary scene of Bengal in the middle of a very tumultuous decade. The period between 1967 and 1977 witnessed total political chaos and mayhem in Calcutta. It had an elected city government for the first five years during this period and was ruled by the West Bengal government for the last five years. To add to the worries of the people, the initial five years witnessed three governmental changes – from a Congress government to a United Front government and then to presidential rule. The next five years of course again witnessed the Congress rule in the city, while during the Emergency, Calcutta existed without 'any real elected government' (Kohli 144). The basic components that contributed to the chaos and violence in Calcutta during this decade are: (1) labour strife, (2) student conflict, including urban terrorism unleashed by the naxalites, (3) the exploits of the local mafia and goons, (4) state repression. With the numerous lock-outs in the factories the people were rendered jobless and the government provided no assurance whatsoever. To add to everything, the ongoing war of independence in neighbouring Bangladesh brought a major influx of refugees to Calcutta which limited the scope of the inhabitants of the city even more. It was at this juncture that the sport narrative with the theme of an underdog winning against all odds appeared with Moti Nandi's *Striker* (1973). The blistered cityscape found its representation in the tussle between the football field, where corruption ran rampant and the individual who was trying hard to make his living out of it. There is a lament for the social stability that is absent. The underdog's story

becomes a myth, a utopian dream of a society with opportunity for each according to his ability.

While Nandi's sports novels have their protagonists from different areas of the sports arena like football, cricket, swimming, triathlon, tennis, my paper primarily deals with his two early sports novels, *Striker* and *Stopper*. While striker tells the story of a young footballer's struggle to make a mark in Calcutta's big clubs, the latter tells of the fight of a senior footballer to pursue the game against many odds.

Striker is about the young footballer Prasun Bhattacharya, talented, ambitious, poor and deprived. The story begins with Prasun's dream:

> I had a dream last night. A middle-aged foreigner got out of his car, his complexion as dark as night and walked up to our house. He said something to the crowd in Portugese.... 'I've come from Brazil. I'm sure you've heard of Santos Football Club.... Since Pele plans to retire soon, we want to prepare Prasun immediately, so that he can replace him later.'.... (*Striker* 1 [Trans. by Author])

Pele, Santos, Brazil—it is very amusing, the way Bengali imagination in post-colonial India is colonized by Latin American flavours. And from there the story brings the reader face to face with the harsh realities of Prasun's life. A school dropout he begins his career with a second-rung team. Later on he refuses to yield to his club's demands and becomes a pariah. However, we come to the end of the novel, he has overcome all odds—poverty, discrimination, match-fixing, corruption—and attained success. Sport, since it is structured in the tightest of binaries, either winning or losing, Nandi ends his novel with Prasun scoring a goal against the opponent team:

> I raised my eyes and saw the most amazing of sights—the Rangoon United goalkeeper retrieving my black and white world from his goal.... Spotting me in the glow of the fireworks, a crowd rushed towards me, chanting, my name (Striker 62-63 [Trans. by Author])

The *Striker's* great counterpoint is the *Stopper*, in name, in function, and in the novel, in age. If Prasun's story is about the metamorphosis of a teenager

into a pro footballer, Kamal's story is more about the attachment of the player to his game. Kamal's story is not just about football, but also about age, and the limits of the body. He is almost at the fag-end of his career and the novel repeatedly harps on his need to find a way in order to keep his club and himself afloat. Taken together, these two fictions depict a kaleidoscope of characters, each one of them revolving around football: the unsuccessful footballer, the impoverished but idealist coach, the corrupt officials, the disgraced ex-player, the fanatical supporters, the lively conversations amongst the spectators in the gallery—all of which add up to the portrait of the intimate goings on of Calcutta football.

One has to take a look at the history of football, as a modern colonial game that was introduced in india, in order to put Nandi's writing into perspective. It is a game form that was consciously introduced amongst the Indian subjects by their colonial masters, and that too for a legitimate reason. Colonialism, right from its inception has employed diverse means to defend itself. More often than not, it has been the 'need' to improve the condition of the colonized subject, which has been the recurrent legitimizing tool and justification for the colonial rule. The literary, political and social treatises of the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries which was the heyday of Britain's imperial enterprise, contribute to a great extent to this legitimizing exercise. During the 19th century, which is also considered to be the period of 'high imperialism', the British imperialists are said to have cherished 'an unambiguously heroic image of themselves as conquerors and civilizers of the world'. Besides the industrial and military powers supporting it, Britain's colonialist mission in the 19th century was also significantly distinctive in terms of the discourses of moral, cultural and racial supremacy that it tried to project (Boehmer 25). Thus, 'black Africans were considered bestial both because of the medieval and religious associations of blackness with dirt, and also because this provided a justification for colonizing and enslaving them' (Loomba. 64). The racial binaries not only contributed to the formulation of the racial inferior 'other' that needed to be 'civilized', but also strengthened the construction of the imperialist superior 'self'.

Thus, the European perception of Indians as 'passive' and 'effeminate' as distinguished from the 'manlier races' of Europe, certainly deemed it necessary for the latter to take charge of and control the former. Typically representative of this group of passive and effeminate Indians were the Bengali *babus* of the nineteenth century, who in contrast to the whole notion of colonial and European masculinity constructed a picture of a rather 'perverted' form of masculinity. The effeminate Bengali *babu*, thus became the representative of an inadequate and incompetent race of people that needed to be steered by a strong hand (Sinha. 2-4). The *babus* embodied all the negative assumptions about the colonized race particularly as 'embodied' in their clothing and consumption habits. While they became the subject of many satirical discourses by native writers who tried to project them as 'mimics' of the colonized masters as opposed to the 'authentic' natives, these very features rendered them unfit in the eyes of their British masters to be placed in a position of greater authority in the colonial power structure.

However, the noble task of remedying this defect of the colonized subject body and transform it so as to make it suitable for colonial projects was also central to the whole paradigm:

> The depiction of the Indian body as weak and inferior in comparison to the strong and superior body of the European and the subsequent effort to discipline Indian bodies to 'improve' them was at the heart of the politics of colonialism… sport was self-consciously employed in British educational institutions for Indians as part of the programme to 'discipline their bodies in the manliness and hardihood of the English public schoolboy'. (Mills and Dimeo 110)

Football was introduced not just as an idiom, but also as a tool for corporal transformation and control. Whereas in the schools and colleges it was meant for correcting the physiques of the weak and feeble bodied *babus*, in the army it was meant to be a

> …means of maintaining the vigour of the martial race soldiers while disciplining their supposedly 'impulsive' bodies… 'the same

> qualities, discipline and combination, were equally necessary in good soldiers and football players' (The Englishman, 5 October 1892). Football was implicated in the strategies of colonialism both as a discourse and as a technology of power. (Mills and Dimeo 119)

Thus even in premier institutes various forms of sports and recreation were included, which later on started being appropriated by the indigenous students as a means of subversion. Taking up, practicing and excelling at colonial sports like football became more of a nationalist enterprise which very soon got transformed from recreation to competition. The rigorous physical training and exercises were considered as a means of countering the British stereotyping of the Bengalis (and for that matter the Indian youth) as effeminate. Just cultivation of indigenous sports forms like wrestling were not good enough, the educated middle-class youth had to practice football, cricket and other forms of colonial sports in order to establish their physical prowess (Majumdar and Bandyopadhyay 11). The appropriation of these colonial game forms like football were looked as viable 'cultural weapons' to 'reassert Bengali masculinity' and 'resurrect India's sinking national prestige'. What made this enterprise more conducive was the fact that the increasing popularity of this game coincided with the nationalist movements in the latter half of the nineteenth and the early years of the twentieth century. Hence, the social antagonism that was quintessential to the political scenario at that particular juncture in colonial history successfully found its outlet in the arena of sports (Majumdar and Bandyopadhyay 13-15).

All these exercises reached their culmination on Mohun Bagan's historic victory over the East York Regiment and conquering the IFA Shield in 1911. Mohun Bagan's victory infused a sense of national awakening and confidence amongst the indigenous populace striking at the heart of the myth which harped on the invincibility of the British Raj. According to many historians, this victory can be seen as almost a culmination of the indigenous celebration of brawn and the whole cult of physical fitness, which can be hailed as a 'nationalist reaction' having potential societal, cultural and economic repercussions. Many scholars

have explained the victory not only as a 'Bengali martial reaction' to the charges of effeminacy that the British have labeled against it, but also as a 'nationalist response' to their 'cultural imperialism' (Bandyopadhyay 27-28). Soumen Mitra, one of the very early scholars on the football history of Calcutta states:

> Mohun Bagan represented Bengal with its obsession for physical strength and the yearning to cast aside the stigma of feebleness by beating the colonial power at its own game.... The 1911 victory reflected the image of the Bengali society surging in anger against the colonial rule. While sports became a symbol around which anti-colonial consciousness developed, football became an instrument for establishing the 'native superiority over the whites'. (Bandyopadhyay 28)

What was even more remarkable about this win was the fact that it united all Bengalis irrespective of their caste or community affiliations. Thus the 'members of the Moslem Sporting Club were almost mad rolling on the ground on the victory of their Hindu brethren' stated *The Mussalman*, one of the oldest Urdu daily newspapers in India[2]. The primary concern was to project a united front in the face of the imperial opponents and the arena of football became the arena of national struggle where the national identity took precedence over everything else. Unfortunately this sporting or football nationalism also gradually wore off within a couple of decades of the departure of the race who introduced it to the sub-continent in the first place. The tumultuous decades following India's independence in 1947 could not ensure its sustenance. The game that started as a marker of unitary social identity and progressed as an emblem of nationalism, started bearing the signs of social differentiation because of the inter-club rivalries based on regional and communal affiliations, thereby shattering the footballing nationalism.

Striker's debut was at a very crucial historical juncture when one takes into account the decade preceding it, which among other things is notable for

[2] http://mohunbaganac.com/SEPT08/History/History-1910-1919.html accessed on 22/04/2013

the rise of the political left based on issues that can be termed as 'democratic' which include land reforms, subsidized food in rationing areas, trade union fights, political freedom in educational institutions etc. All of them contributed to the rise of the student movements which shook the state towards the latter half of this decade in the form of the Naxalite movement (Samaddar 57). Nationalism as an ideology got discarded as a bourgeois ploy which restricted the individual from trying to forge unities with immediate international issues that were of major concern during that period. While there was rampant corruption and failure of the state machinery everywhere, nationalism failed to incite the individual subject to be loyal to the state (Samaddar 59-69). It might seem worth arguing that Nandi was trying to bring back that sentiment with its tolerant, secular, inclusive, egalitarian and non-discriminatory Nehruvian fervor. It is not by accident that the hero is an upper-caste Brahmin from a lower middle class family, and his close friends Nimai and Anwar are respectively from the refugee slum and an upper middle class Muslim family. The football comradeship transcends everything else. This statement becomes even more pronounced when Anwar was almost forced out of the team that was supposed to play against Mohammedan Sporting Club on account of his religious affiliations. But the team management had to revoke this decision against steep opposition by the players who refused to let such issues affect their team performance. The victory that followed and Prasun's words reflect how an individual can possibly transcend every other barrier in terms of class or community that separates him from his fellowmen:

> Anwar played that afternoon. Even though it was me who made that goal, he showed us how a single player can fight against an entire team. After the match got over, we exited the field carrying Anwar on our shoulders. (*Striker* 112 [Trans. by Author])

Interestingly enough, this single incident apart, Anwar and Nimai, who belong to religious and territorial minority groups in the story are not discriminated against anywhere else in the story.

While *Striker* shows the possibilities of the young male body in a utopian landscape where anything is possible, *Stopper* shows the limitations of that dream. The very idea of a sportsman entails the notion of the physical body. His body becomes the commodity that gets consumed in his struggle to succeed and gain recognition in a cityscape that is dominated by money, power and greed. At the same time he is a tragic figure too, because with the deterioration of his physical body, he is destined to fall. Kamal's agony arises from his search for values beyond the body and his failure to find them. The applause that he had gained as a footballer in his heydays is undermined by his recognition of its deteriorating force. This gives rise to an important debate that extends beyond the realm of sport, into our very own cultural consciousness.

The crisis that Kamal faces is not only the crisis of a footballer, but the crisis of his masculine identity in terms of corporeality, i.e. in terms of it being opposed to a young male body. His age, therefore, becomes not just a biological but a social as well as a performative category, wherein the performance is persistently under the scrutiny of the normative evaluative order (Gardiner 92-94).

The middle-aged hero of our story, who at times almost seems like a lone ranger marching ahead in a way portrays the plight of football itself in the Bengal scenario. His angst is not just about the oppression but the waning support and popularity of the game as well. Hence from between *Striker* and *Stopper*, Nandi's fictions cover the zenith and nadir of the football hero's experience.

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