

# Mary Kom's Collaborative Autobiography: Negotiating Authorship

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**Abstract:** This paper demonstrates how Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom's *An Autobiography: Unbreakable* is a 'mediated,' collaborative, and authorized autobiography. Writing in the context of autobiographies of American athletes, James W. Pipkin calls such an autobiography as "a kind of authorized biography rather than a true autobiography" (9). However, Duncan McDuie-Ra is critical of how Mary's 'successful' life story was co-opted within the narrative of the Indian nation-state and of how she "has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace," while "figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget" (304). While this paper agrees with McDuie-Ra when he speaks of the construction of Mary into a figure of "a national hero," it is however wary of the way he discusses this construction—totally ignoring the violence, often gendered, associated with such a construction. Further, he claims that his arguments are based on how this figure of "a national hero" is constructed in her autobiography, apart from the role played by the national media. What he has ignored is the contradictions within the autobiography—the silences and fissures that indicate Mary's 'silent' refusal to be constructed thus.

This paper then interrogates the politics of collaborative writing, or more specifically mediated writing, through an examination of these silences and fissures vis-à-vis the production of Mary's autobiography while raising pertinent questions on authorship.

*Keywords:* Authorized autobiography, authorship in collaborative writing, India's Northeast, Manipur, Mary Kom, Kom community

## Introduction

Mangte Chungneijang Mary Kom's (henceforth Mary's)<sup>1</sup> *An Autobiography: Unbreakable* is a typical rags-to-riches tale of how a daughter of a landless farmer becomes an internationally renowned boxer. While the title of this book itself announces the genre of its writing as "An Autobiography" as well as its author as "M.C. Mary Kom"; there is a complication when the title page shows the names of "Mary Kom with Dina Serto" written in the space assigned to an author on this page. However, in spite of these two separate written pronouncements, the copyright page still insists that: "Mary Kom asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work". The book begins with an epigraph on the subject of this autobiography (i.e., Mary) highlighting the boxer, her international achievements, and her connection with women's boxing. The book is divided into 17 chapters with a Prologue and an Afterword that trace the journey of her life from her birth in Sagang, which is described as "one of the biggest Kom villages" (Kom 3),<sup>2</sup> to the present as she resides in a government quarter in Langol Games Village in Imphal, the capital of Manipur. In addition to these sections, the Contents page also has a list of five Annexures on medals and awards she won, letters of appreciation she received, her words of appreciation for the sponsors, and her favourite Bible verses. The Acknowledgements page clearly hints at the collaborative aspect of this book as Mary goes on to thank her "dear family friend" Serto for "the efforts" and "for helping" her "write the story of" her life (155). This statement could be read along with two of her comments made in the

autobiography. The first comment appears in Chapter 2, wherein she considers “Hindi films as boring” and the reason she gives is: “We didn’t understand the language” (19). The other comment is made in Chapter 5. She writes: “The only languages I knew were Manipuri [Meiteilon] and my own Kom language. Outside Manipur, I became acutely conscious of my inability to communicate effectively in either Hindi or English” (55). These comments further suggest that Serto along with Ajitha<sup>3</sup> may have mediated in the writing of Mary’s life as they straddle between the roles of a translator and an editor.

Consequently, two keywords constitute this paper, namely, *mediation* and *collaboration*. Both processes are involved in the telling of the story of Mary’s life. Another related term is *translation*. It is a method adopted by the translator-editors of this autobiography to assist her in the writing of her life story in English, a language she is not fluent in. The aim of this paper then is to show how her autobiography is simultaneously mediated, collaborative, and translated and how this simultaneity of three processes raises significant questions on authorship vis-à-vis, what Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson would call, “women’s autobiographical practice.”<sup>4</sup>

With this purpose in mind, the paper first examines the role of the translator-editor as a ‘cultural mediator’<sup>5</sup> who collaborates in the gendered making of what Duncan McDiue-Ra referred to as ‘a national hero’.<sup>6</sup> Then, it sifts for silences and fissures to highlight instances of authorial subversions as well as to unearth their underlying gendered politics. Finally, the paper concludes with a note on authorship of a life writing informed by these processes.

### **Translator-Editor as Mediator-Collaborator in the Gendered Making of “a National Hero”**

In the context of colonial India in *Translating India: The Cultural Politics of English*, Rita Kothari observes how “the administrative and cultural preoccupation of the East India Company in the mid-nineteenth century necessitated a more exhaustive attempt at ‘knowing the Orient’” (9). One manifestation of this process, according to her, was translation (9). Translation that Kothari is referring to here is predominantly translation into the English language. In post-independence India, she finds a link between the emergence of public sector undertakings such as “the establishment of the Sahitya Akademi (1954) and the National Book Trust (1957)” and the independent Indian nation-state’s “nation-building” process (36, 60). During the initial stages, English translation did not figure “in this scheme of ‘nation-building’” (36). However, both “the Nehruvian vision of the nation in the fifties and sixties” and “the post-liberalised India in the nineties” facilitated by the English-speaking “Indian middle class” saw the insertion of English translation in the nation-making agenda (3). This new agenda of the Indian nation-state resulted in the rise of English-language publishing market in India during the 1980s (61). A similar process is still at work in contemporary India and it is visible in the production of Mary’s autobiography. This section demonstrates how a collaborative nexus between the translator-editor, the Indian nation-state, and the publisher mediates in the gendered construction of, what Duncan McDiue-Ra has referred to as, “a national hero” produced in this autobiography.

In “‘Is India Racist?’: Murder, Migration and Mary Kom”, McDiue-Ra is critical of how Mary’s ‘successful’ life story was co-opted within the narrative of the Indian nation-state and of how she “has come to represent a Northeast that Indians can embrace,” while “figures such as dissident Irom Sharmila represent a Northeast that Indians wish to forget” (304). While his observations on the construction of Mary into a figure of “a national hero” is an acceptable fact, what is unacceptable is the way he discusses this construction—totally ignoring the violence, often gendered, associated with such a construction. The first problem is with the use of the term ‘hero’—which could be seen as an attempt to masculinize Mary. It is true that conventionally ‘boxing’ was considered a domain for men, and the entry of women such as Mary into this domain is a successful attempt to break this stereotype. Similar arguments have also been made in the context of Muslim women boxers in Kolkata by Supriya Chaudhuri and Payoshni Mitra. Both Chaudhuri and Mitra also underline the

liberatory potential of these women's preoccupation with boxing. Chaudhuri calls it "a rare freedom" accessible to a "boxer in the ring" who is concentrated "on the ends of sport" (1770), while Mitra sees this preoccupation as their attempt "to forge a new identity for themselves" as they dismantle "a stereotype by breaking into a territory that has for long belonged to men" and assert themselves as "active subjects" (1843). Still, when McDuié-Ra makes a gendered invocation of the figure of "a national hero," he is, perhaps, feeding into the same stereotype. In McDuié-Ra's vocabulary, even if the term "hero" refers to a neutral gender, this reference is problematic as the masculine form comes to represent both genders. This neutrality/invisibility of the masculine is also found in his discussion on gender vis-à-vis boxing or in the section dedicated to gender titled "Empowered Woman" or while comparing Mary with Sharmila. In fact, Mary is masculinized with qualifiers such as "a 'tiger' in the ring" and her "fit" and "athletic" body is contrasted with the "frail" and "thin" wasting body of Sharmila (318). Consequently, gender features merely at the level of description throughout his essay, while his arguments on gender difference remain essentialist.

All three scholars, similar to the Jamesonian hypothesis about "all third-world texts" as "necessarily national allegories", also attempt to show Mary's autobiographical narrative as a national allegory. In McDuié-Ra's allegory of the nation, Mary is both the self and the other vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state: "She is included in the 'us' of the Indian national imaginary, while also continuing to be cast as 'other', though an exceptional 'other', capable of illuminating a path to a more integrated nation" (319); while Chaudhuri and Mitra justify Mary's detachment from the secessionist politics of Manipur on account of her affiliation to the marginal Kom community, which similar to all minority communities in India are constantly coerced to "prove" (Mitra 1844) or "assert their loyalty to the nation" (Chaudhuri 1770). So in Mary's autobiographical writing, the narrative of her life story is found intertwined with the narrative of the Indian nation while the translator-editors act as 'cultural mediators' who assist in this weaving together of two narratives. The remaining part of this section shall demonstrate how it is done.

These two intertwined narratives begin with the Prologue. The "I" who lives in Imphal, Manipur, is not only Mary, a Kom woman from Kangathei village, but also a government officer with "a government quarter" as her "house" and hence, a subject of the Indian nation (1). This subject of the nation is narrating her journey from her "adopted village" Kangathei to Imphal even though she was born in Sagang, a Kom village. Later in Chapter 2, the relevance of Kangathei in this narrative of the nation is highlighted. Her adopted village is described in relation to its distance from another town, Moirang, which is a historically "significant" place for the Meiteis as well as "a meeting place" for the Koms (9). Furthermore, the road that leads to Kangathei is named after one of the presidents of India: Dr. Kalam Road. Kangathei is also the site of a crash of an Indian Airlines Boeing airplane. These descriptions show how Kangathei emerges as a strategic location that has a shared history for both the Koms and the Meiteis while the reference to the road and the crash site of a national airlines connects this location to the larger nation that cartographically contains both these communities. At this point, it is unclear whether it is Mary, the author, or Serto, the translator-editor, who is making these connections. Yet, on closer examination a sentence appears in this chapter that reads thus: "They speak to each other in a dialect of Manipuri known as 'Meiteilon'" (9). Meiteilon is not a dialect of Manipuri rather it is its other name. The language of the 'dominant' Meitei community of Manipur is referred to as 'Manipuri' by the Indian state and its agents. This misinformation about Meiteilon sheds some light on the contentious authorial voice of this chapter. It seems unlikely that Mary would not know this. Hence, this instance questions the authority of this autobiographical writing and puts it up for scrutiny.

Mary's mother is much disappointed on giving birth to a daughter. This unwanted daughter is then masculinised in the narrative as she is described as someone who "wanted to be a fighter like those martial arts heroes" (19), who played "against grown men" (20), and who "seldom played with the girls" (21). The authorial voice further announces that she was "never interested in the pursuits of girls", her friends were boys, she was conscious of her "boyish appearance", and "feminine clothes"

did not “look good” on her (25). It seems the narrative is suggesting that this masculinised Kom subject is now ready to enter the masculinised world of national sports because “sports always seemed like the way forward to me [her]” (26). Then, through the invocation of a sporting venue, Khuman Lampak Sports Stadium, a stadium that hosted one of the National Games in the 1990s, the nation enters the world of Mary's sporting ambition (25). In her sporting quest, her decision to choose boxing is shaped by two events: one is the first exhibition matches of women boxers in the National Games in 1999 and the other is the success of Dingko Singh, another Meitei from Manipur, in the 1998 Bangkok Asian Games (29). Apart from Dingko, her “other childhood icons were Muhammad Ali and his daughter Laila Ali” (30). Thus, an event at the ‘national’ level and two ‘national’ heroes act as inspiring agents to this would-be national subject. This is yet another attempt to bring the Indian nation together with Manipur (here synonymous with Meitei) nation and into the narrative of an individual Kom woman. Does this suggest again another instance of a lingering editorial presence here? This does not stop here. The turning point in her career that sets her “on the right path” is “a chance meeting with Rebika Chiru”, another Meitei woman boxer, who “would often walk past the house wearing a National Games tracksuit” (30). Here, Rebika embodying both the aspirations of a Meitei nation and an Indian nation together attracts a Kom woman, while boxing becomes a possible site where the conflict between the two nations could be resolved by integrating the former into the latter. Has the editorial intervention overshadow the authorial voice here? To find this out, a look into the world of boxing in Manipur is warranted. This world is Meitei dominated with Meitei boxers such as Sarita, Sandhyarani, Rebika, and Dingko and with predominantly male Meitei coaches. Moreover, in the narrative, two Meitei coaches pivotal in shaping Mary's career are described in terms of their achievements at the national level: her first coach, Oja Nipamacha is “a National Institute of Sports (NIS)-trained coach” (24) and one of her best coaches, Oja Ibomcha is “a National Boxing Champion in 1986” (30), who was given the Dronacharya Award in 2010 by the Government of India (34).

The conflict between the state-run Manipur Boxing Association (MBA) and the national Sports Authority of India (SAI) replicates the larger conflict of nations/nationalisms within Manipur. In the midst of this conflict, Mary seems to be shuttling “between them to ensure that” she keeps “both happy” (38). She highlights the reason for doing so thus: “if” she trains at SAI her “chances of getting to the Nationals are low”, while “if” she trains “only at the state coaching centre” her performance tends to go down because “SAI has better coaches and better facilities” (38). The narrative also seems to imagine a more positive outcome in case these two warring groups reconcile by joining “hands” (38). The editorial intervention seems to be slowly but steadily taking over the role of the authorial voice with such integrationist and nationalist aspirations. All this while, the Kom woman boxer remains a mere spectator to the conflict of nations/nationalisms staged in her boxing arena. Moreover, the author who asserted in Chapter 2 that “Hindi films were boring” and that “we didn't understand the language” (19) is also “happy to oblige when asked to sing, with a Manipuri song or a popular Hindi film song” (33). This contradiction is not merely an instance of an editorial interpolation but rather it indicates the hegemony of these two languages and their accompanying cultures within the boxing community represented by SAI, wherein Mary is “happy to oblige” as she wishes to gain an entry into the same community.

The story of the introduction of women's boxing in Manipur and in India shown through Kom's life writing has no female coaches as contributors. Rather it pays tribute to Meitei male coaches and male-dominated state- and national-level training centres (36-37). It is as if the marginal Kom woman boxer has no choice but to navigate her narrative through the coordinates of either Meitei male coaches and Meitei boxers or male-dominated academies.

### Reading Silences and Fissures as Subversions and the Contradictions

The story of the Kom subject is not left behind in the making of this national subject. Indeed, her identity as a Kom begins with her birth in “Sagang”, which is “one of the biggest Kom villages” (3).

The translator–editors could not edit out Mary’s authorial assertions wherein she expressed her appreciation for Chinese “action-packed martial art films starring Bruce Lee, Jet Li and Jackie Chan” while dismissing “Hindi films” as “boring”. Mary further argues that “we didn’t understand the language”, that is Hindi, the national language of India (19). The pronoun used here is not “I” but “we”. Here, by invoking the collective, Mary seems to be asserting her identity as a member of the Kom community; it is also an assertion that seems to have escaped the censoring eyes of the translator–editors. One significant event in Mary’s life that she fondly remembers is the Annual Meet of Kom-Rem Students’ Union in 1998. It is this sporting event that also marks her entry into the Kom-Rem community as she writes: “I made friends as well as quite a name for myself in the community” (23). This is yet another attempt on her part to forge her identity as a Kom woman. There is further strengthening of her bond with her Kom community as she grows as a national and later an international sporting figure in the narrative. The Kom community is consistently there to share and celebrate her victories and to support her during her moments of crisis/need such as the two incidents of theft in Bangalore and Bihar or the money collection to support her travel expenses to the Olympics. The authorial narrative resurfaces in the overwhelming presence of the national narrative imposed by the editorial voice to assert Mary’s attempt to connect with her Kom community. This happens when she is touched by the sincere encouragement she received from the Kom-Rem Student Union for her first tournament outside Manipur, and she writes: “I felt then that I must win, not only for myself but also my people” (44). The Kom-Rem is now her “people”. During the theft incident in Bangalore, she writes “with relief and gratitude” and wonders “at the network of the tiny Kom community” that has “managed to provide help to a young girl stranded with no support” and “so far away from home” (45). On the occasion of Mary’s first international victory in 2001, the authorial voice shows the Kom community’s reaction which is one of pride on her achievement and expresses Mary’s desire “to assert the identity of my [her] tribe ‘Kom’ within my [her] own country and the world over” (53). The authorial voice is found engaging in strengthening this connection as the narrative reveals that even her husband, Onler’s suitability to be her mate is attributed to the fact that they belong to the “same community” (60) and hence shared “common roots” (62).

Mary not only learnt to work at home but she also learnt to work outside in the field along with her father. Hence, in her case, there is no gendered division of labour as she obediently performs both roles equally well. However, this was before her “long-distance marriage” with Onler, who is then referred to as “Mary’s husband” (69). After this marriage, there is a [gendered] role reversal where Onler does the household chores, while Mary travels to the world and goes out of the house “from camp to camp” (69). What could be inferred from this?

After this [gendered] role reversal, Mary’s government job puts her in the position of a matriarch breadwinner but an upholder of patriarchal values passed on from her parents while she simultaneously sustains both her own and her parent’s families. The Kom woman here joins hands with the state forces to fight the enemy of the nation–state as Manipur in her own words is described as “politically sensitive and disturbed” (28) and later as “an insurgency-torn state” (74). At this point, the nationalist translator–editors and the author seem to have converged to write a single nationalist narrative while working together in the making of an obedient god-fearing national subject.

This convergence reaches its peak in chapters 7 and 8 that are respectively on the assassination of her father-in-law by “unknown insurgents” (75) and her first pregnancy. The chapter on the assassination is titled “The other face of Manipur” and the political situation in Manipur is described as “an insurgent-torn state since 1980s” (74). The title of this chapter suggests that this is the ‘other’ face of Manipur. However, it is not the ‘other’ face but rather the actual face of Manipur that many official statist narratives are indifferent to and the single narrative formed by the merging of the authorial and the editorial voices seems complicit in maintaining this indifference. She is also critical of the parallel governments the “military groups” in Manipur run (74).

In Chapter 7, she gets a first-hand experience of the violence in Manipur with her father-in-law’s assassination. This chapter is sliced into two parts by a montage of photographs depicting happy

memories from Mary's life and career. These photographs stand in stark contrast from the violent event in this chapter. Mary's 'happy' family is now threatened as Onler "wanted revenge" and did not seem to care even if the consequence is "joining the insurgency" (76). A Kom family thus becomes the battleground where the conflict of nationalisms vis-à-vis Manipur is rehearsed. There is also a possibility to insert a new coordinate into this conflict with the entry of an aspiring Kom nationalist in Onler. However, this process is halted with the news of Mary's pregnancy in the next chapter. The birth of her twins inaugurates the birth of a new nation, whereby a Kom nationalist aspiration has been contained and assimilated into the narrative of an Indian nation. The birth of this new nation also entails the formation of two national subjects in Onler and Mary at the metaphorical level and literally with the birth of the twins.

At this point an interrogation of these silences and fissures and how they underline the gendered construction of this national 'hero' is warranted here. The narrative begins with a description of her house: "My house, a government quarter in Langol Games Village,<sup>7</sup> is only a couple of hours from Kangatheh village"<sup>8</sup> (1). She further describes this place which houses her residence thus: "There are policemen standing outside the campus. They have big guns. It's a common sight everywhere in Manipur. Both the policemen and the army men" (1). It could be inferred that, as the Superintendent of Police, she could not speak openly about state's forces' violence on the civilians. However, when she says that it is "a common sight" to have policemen and the army men "everywhere in Manipur," there is a subtle hint at the growing militarization. Reading further between the lines, the phrase "both the policemen and the army men" points to a dangerous liaison between these two groups commonly protected by AFSPA. By the time she was born in 1982, AFSPA was already imposed in Manipur. In spite of which, there is no mention of it anywhere in the autobiography. In addition, since 1982 to 2013, so many incidents of violence by the state and non-state armed forces on the civilians have been reported. Still, none of them gets even a passing reference, except of the assassination. Moreover, the splicing of the chapter on this assassination is significant. While it is 'insurgency' that has interrupted her life waking her up "to the reality of the world" around her (74), it is the pictures of her life that breaks the narrative of insurgency. I see this intervention as important. This rupture also functions as a narrative strategy to introduce a moment of suspense. When she says that "one incident woke me [her] up to the reality of the world around me [her]," it generates suspense for the readers. Immediately, after saying these lines, she talks about Manipur as "an insurgent-torn state since 1980s." Then, her father-in-law is assassinated. She calls it the waking-up moment. It appears as if she has already decided on who are her allies would be. The Annexure 4 confirms her stand as she shows the Indian army in a different light: "The immense contribution of the Army towards my academy is praiseworthy. The Army's encouragement of sports and their overwhelming support continue to inspire me. I remain thankful to them" (152).

In fact, the journalist Kishalay Bhattacharjee is critical of Mary's uninterest with Sharmila's cause. This makes him ask this question: "What makes our sportspersons so cagey about standing up against injustice when the common person can stick their neck out." Bhattacharjee's assessment of Mary is indeed limited as he fails to see the dynamics of the inter-ethnic relations in Manipur. Mary's indifference could be read amidst these relations that may not be collaborative but rather conflictual. However, having said that, I return to Chapter 16, wherein Mary talks about her encounter with the world of glamour and announces that the caption "Our Kom-mitment to the Nation" is her favourite from her photo shoot (127). This choice reflects the need on part of Mary to reiterate her loyalty to the Indian nation. When the national icon is asked to prove her commitment to the nation here, she does it by choosing an advertising caption that speaks of that national commitment. This burden is also visible in Chapter 9 titled "The comeback." In spite of the fact that "the people of the Northeast are often mocked in other parts of India" on account of their oriental looks and are called Nepalis, Chinkies, and names like ching-ching chong-chong, she insists that "whether or not" she looks "Indian," she is "Indian" and she represents India, "with pride and all my [her] heart" (91). Writing in the context of Muslim boxers in Bengal, Mitra talks about how sportspersons from minority commu-

nities in India are time and again compelled to prove their loyalty to the nation (1844–45). Agreeing with Mitra's observation, Chaudhuri<sup>9</sup> also asserts that "Mary Kom is not a political activist" (1770). Chaudhuri even justifies Kom's "distancing" as "part of the way in which sport, like art, operates in society." Comparing Kom to other women activists in Manipur, Chaudhuri argues that "if other women in Manipur have used their bodies to protest the actions of the body politic, Mary Kom has chosen, through sport, to achieve measure of freedom and detachment from the political turmoil surrounding her" (1770). Thus, for Chaudhuri, "the boxer in the ring, absorbed in her discipline, needs to shut out the world, and concentrate on the ends of sport" (1770).

This pressure on the minority to prove their 'nationalism' is an evidence of the pressure of the mediated nature of Mary's autobiography as much as the silences and fissures are an interruption to this mediation. I begin by arguing that these silences and fissures disrupt the mediated nature of her authorized autobiography. It appears as if the world of sports and the world that Mary's family inhabit both are untouched by the violence in Manipur except when her father-in-law gets assassinated. I see this absence of references to the political violence against the civilians as a result of the mediatedness of the autobiography, which gets fractured through strategic invocation of violence that were mentioned at the start of this section. It is not clear whether Mary supported AFSPA or she was against it, but her own personal experiences made her condone "insurgency." Her story is the less documented story of civilians suffering violence at hands of the "insurgents." Apart from the Prologue and Chapter 7, the political situation in Manipur gets one more mention in Chapter 3 when she talks about "bandhs and blockades" as "frequent occurrences in Manipur"—Manipur, which she thinks, is "politically sensitive and disturbed" (28).

The construction of Kom as a 'national hero,' McDuire-Ra observes, entails the violent suppression of dissenting narratives be it the rejection of the 'undesirable' protest of Sharmila Irom or the refusal to link the exodus of Northeast people from major cities in India in 2012 with racism. Also, there is a line of men who need to be credited in the making of this 'national hero.' Further, media's initial reluctance to report on Mary's first international win points to the fact that it did not consider women boxing as a serious sport or a news worthy of reporting. In fact, the world of women boxing at least in India and Manipur is still dominated and controlled by men—be it the coaches, the selection committees, the sports associations, or even the Association Internationale de Boxe Amateur (International Boxing Association) (AIBA). Moreover, Onler, her husband, whom Kom claims to be very supportive of her sporting career, also had this to tell her when she discussed her plans to participate in the Olympic in 2016: "it's extremely hard to raise two young boys [now it is three] and manage a home without a wife, and so I [Kom] should consider hanging up my [her] gloves" (129). These attitudes of all these men trying to control a woman's sporting career resemble the views expressed by her first coach, *Oja*<sup>10</sup> Ibomcha, in his reply to her when she approached him for the first time: "You are a small, frail girl. With your earrings, you don't even look like a boxer. Boxing is for young boys" (31). The irony here is that their role here is to assist women with boxing, yet they feel that it is still not a sport for women. Moreover, the influential people in Kom's life who were pivotal in 'making' her were predominantly men be it Onler, her father, her father-in-law, her coaches, the members of selection committees, and members of AIBA. All of them share credit in the 'making' of the 'national hero'—Mary Kom. In fact, all these men are trying to make a 'man' out of her so that she could excel in a sport that they considered 'masculine.'

There is also a paradox within the narrative perhaps attributable to the problematic politics of editorial mediation. In Chapter 17, she wishes to train women to fight against violent crimes against them. On the other hand, she does not extend her solidarity openly with women, such as Manorama Thangjam, who were victims of gendered violence in Manipur. Similarly, in Chapter 3, the short interlude about the bandhs in Manipur was a deliberate insertion on her part. It speaks of a violence that is so much part of the everyday life in Manipur. When she speaks of a mundane everyday incident, she cannot help but slip into and talk about the 'other' everyday—the everyday which her mediated autobiography has tried so far to avoid speaking about. However, time and again, it

surfaces sporadically even if it is for a very short while creating a space for an alternative story entailed in this individual rendition of Mary that interrupts the dominant narrative of the 'making' of a 'national hero.'

### Conclusion: The Question of Authorship

The model of women's autobiographical writing that Mary has adopted to tell the story of her life owes much to decades of feminist theorisations that began in the West in the 1980s initially as an "experiential model" that "essentialized woman" (Smith and Watson, *Women*, p. 10). Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson traced a genealogy of women's autobiography mapping it through a trajectory "from theories of gendered experience" through "theories of difference" to "theories of differences" in the postmodern and postcolonial contexts (4). They also highlighted the Eurocentric origin of the form of autobiography as evident in the fact that "the autobiographical 'I'" is "a sign of the Enlightenment subject, unified, rational, coherent, autonomous, free, but also white, male, [and] Western" (27). Moreover, they also observed that "theorists of postcoloniality have thus recognized autobiography as one of the cultural formations in the West implicated in and complicit with processes of colonization" (28). It is in the midst of this particular context that they brought up the issue of "collaborative texts" emerging "from the joint project of an informant lacking literacy and an interlocutor or editor interested in bringing the informant's story to a broad audience" (28). Entering this debate with Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak's "provocative question about the unspeakability of the subaltern," Smith and Watson emphasized on "the importance of oral cultural forms" and the need to "attend to the *speakerly* text, rather than remain preoccupied with the *writerly* effects of narrative" (28; emphasis in original).

One response to this Eurocentricism of autobiography is Doris Sommer's "Sacred Secrets: A Strategy for Survival," wherein she "argued [as observed by Smith and Watson again] that the *Testimonios* challenges the norms of autobiography as the narrative of an irreducibly collective subject whose acts of witnessing address the hegemony of Western individualism" (28; emphasis in original). Sommer's essay is on the autobiographical testimony of the Guatemalan leader, Rigoberta Menchu, who openly claimed at the end of her autobiography of "keeping [withholding] secret" (200). Sommer sees this act as "strategic" indicating that "her [Menchu's] testimony is 'not a personal story'" but rather "communal, grounded in collective memory and practices" (204). This results in a shift from the Western "I" to the collective "we," which is also found in what Carole Boyce Davies calls collaborative "life story production" (6). In fact, Smith and Watson saw Davies's "crossover genre" (Davies 7) as a form for empowerment of women formerly silences" (Smith and Watson xxvii). In Davies's particular case, the collaborative "Black women's texts" she discussed "contest established boundaries, offer alternative interpretations, create new public discourses, challenge hegemonic definitions of discourse" (Davies 17).

Writing in the context of caste practices in India, Sharmila Rege argues "that dalit life narratives are in fact testimonios, which forge a right to speak both for and beyond the individual and contest explicitly or implicitly the 'official forgetting' of histories of caste oppression, struggles and resistance" (13). Citing Pandian, she also puts forward his argument "that dalit life narratives have violated genre boundaries by depleting the 'I'—an outcome of bourgeois individualism—and by displacing it with the collectivity of the dalit community" (Pandian qtd. in Rege 13). This led Rege to conclude that "dalit life narratives thus historically created the genre of testimonios in which the individual self seeks affirmation in a collective mode" (14). Rege then underlines the significance of the "dialectics of self and community ... in dalit women's testimonios" (14). She reasons that as dalit women are "situated as women in the community," their "*testimonios*" thus "articulate concerns of gender, challenging the singular communitarian notion of the dalit community" (14; emphasis in original).

While Laura Brueck is in agreement with Rege regarding the "collective" as a characteristic of Dalit women's life writing, the former (Brueck) is, however, critical of "simplistically categorizing



it as *testimonio*, or narrative ‘witnessing’” (26; emphasis in original). Moving away from an essentialist view of the collective experience of Dalit women, where these women are essentialized as collectivity rather than as individuals, she argues that “relationality and collectivity of experience is not accidental or necessarily organic to a woman’s view on her world” but rather this experience “is actively, politically, and consciously constructed in the course of the narrative” (26). This makes Brueck highlight the danger of “essentializing” both “men’s and women’s Dalit life narratives” (26). In fact, the critical discourse for Dalit women’s autobiography as *testimonio*, according to her, is “normative” (26). Brueck complicates the pluralistic subject of Dalit autobiographies while discussing the autobiographies of two Dalit women: Kausalya Baisantry and Susheela Thakbhour. She reads the “subjects” in their “intergenerational stories” as “plurally constituted products of their own experience as well as those of many generations of women in their families” (34).

On the other extreme is Sarah Beth who raises pertinent question of identity linked with Dalit autobiographies. She writes of “ambivalences” in these writing on two grounds (545). First is “the authors struggle to reconcile their low-caste identity with their current urban middle-class status” (545). The other is how “their claims to represent all members of the Dalit community are challenged by Dalits of the younger generations” (545). Mary’s autobiography also shares some characteristics with Dalit autobiographies in being “collaborative” in Davies’s sense and, as demonstrated in the previous two sections, it shows the emergence of Mary as representative<sup>11</sup> of the Kom community. Moreover, there is a tracing of a trajectory wherein this Kom subject is inserted into the narrative of the Indian nation. Unlike the Bangla actress Binodini’s story whose erasure from the story of Indian nationalism underlines a betrayal (Chatterjee 154), Mary’s story is one of a forceful insertion of a recalcitrant subject into the story of many nationalisms, which are “diametrical” in Malem Ningthouja’s sense (121) or “conflicting” as observed by H. Kham Khan Suan (272). However, the point of discussion here is that of authorship that has connection with the manner in which the narrative is told or produced. The collaborative nature of some sports autobiography has been explored by James W. Pipkin. He also acknowledges the fact that “most sports autobiographies are cowritten” or “ghostwritten” (7), making him raise the question of “authorized biography” versus “true autobiography” (8). He looks at “three prominent collaborators: George Vecsey, Peter Knobler, and Roy S. Johnson” who had “cowritten autobiographies” (10). He arrives at an understanding that “while athletes may not write their books in the sense that they often lack the skills to craft them, their autobiographies are authentic because they are *their stories*” (11; emphasis in original). Separating the craft of writing from the performance of self in sports autobiographies, Pipkin compares an athlete with an actor (here Laurence Olivier). To further support this argument, Pipkin moves on to cite Kareem Abdul-Jabbar who described an “athlete’s role in the collaborative process” as “the verbal equivalent of what an actor does,” which is “performance” (12). In other words, the autobiography is a site where the subject performs him/herself and the cowriter (editor or translator) remains “a listener or reader” (12). The connection between the writer-editor/translator and the speaking/performing athlete is made by Pipkin in these lines: “The writer’s craft lies, first of all, in the ability to make the autobiography sound as if the athlete is speaking” (12). Furthermore, he also acknowledges the celebrity status of these American athletes. With the emergence of sports “as a branch of entertainment,” Pipkin observes, two trends: One is “movies stars and athletes” replacing “statesmen and business tycoons as America’s heroes and idols” in “the 1920s and 1930s” (128). The other trend is “the athlete’s celebrity statue” (128–29). However, Daniel J Boorstin, as observed by Pipkin, distinguishes a celebrity from a hero thus: “The hero is made by folklore, sacred text and history books, but ‘the celebrity is the creature of gossip, of public opinion, of magazines, newspaper, and the ephemeral images of movies and television screen” (130). This distinction makes Pipkins to consider “the latter” (that is, “the celebrity”) as “the appropriate term for the athlete” (129).

In Mary’s autobiography too there is a celebration of a celebrity. Yet, it is a different kind of a celebrity: a celebrity who is “representative” of two marginal communities, namely, a community of

women and the Kom community. In spite of this, the autobiography's qualifications as representative is limited because this life writing refuses to undertake the political function of a "testimonio" and rather operates through silences, fissures, and contradictions. There are attempts to construct a national celebrity in Mary's case. It is here that the roles of the translator-editor and the publisher surface and align with the interest of the Indian nation-state. This begins with the cover which has a picture of the celebrity (that is, Mary) wearing a pair of gloves that have the national firm, R.K. Global, written on them, indicating the sponsor of her gloves. Furthermore, another instance to highlight this national celebrity is the 12-page montage of photographs that also shows Mary's successes/achievements as a national player. The inclusion of Mary's ramp walks with national stars, sports people, industrialists, and designers built on to this construction that ultimately reaches its completion with the phrase: "One kom-mitment to the Nation"—which not only appears on billboards showing Mary but also is her favourite photo shoot. Even the misspelling "Kom-mitment" instead of "commitment" requires attention as kom-mitment could be read as the commitment of a Kom (as Mary Kom) as well as Kom (as the Kom community) vis-à-vis the Indian nation-state. One wonders whether it is the claim of Mary Kom or Mary (a Kom) or a mediation by the editor/translator.

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### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Popularly known as Mary Kom. In order to distinguish Kom as the subject as well as the authorial voice of this narrated life from Kom as her community, she will be subsequently referred to as Mary. Born on 24 November 1982 in Sagang village, Churachandpur district, Manipur, she was the eldest daughter of Mangte Tongpa Kom and Sanakhom Kom. She is the "queen of [the Indian] boxing [ring]" (Kom 73), and has won five World Championships and an Olympic medal in 2012. Amongst the accolades she received for her sporting feats are Padma Bhushan in 2013, Rajiv Gandhi Khel Ratna in 2009, Padma Shri in 2005, and Arjuna in 2003 (146).
- <sup>2</sup> Subsequently, all references to the autobiography will only have page numbers.
- <sup>3</sup> In the Acknowledgements page, she is referred to as the editor (155).
- <sup>4</sup> See the Introduction to Smith and Watson's *Women, Autobiography, Theory: A Reader*.
- <sup>5</sup> A term borrowed from R. Taft, David Katan, Reine Meylaerts, Maud Gonne and Ondrej Vimr (cited in Roig-Sang and Meylaerts 9–10).
- <sup>6</sup> A term he used for Kom.
- <sup>7</sup> The venue of the XXX National Games held in Imphal in 1999. This complex was built to house the participants from rest of India.
- <sup>8</sup> A village in Moirang district where Kom grew up.
- <sup>9</sup> She was writing in the context of modern boxing and its modern and postmodern literary representations.
- <sup>10</sup> Literally, 'sir' or 'madam' (*O jaibema*): a courteous address for a teacher.
- <sup>11</sup> This characteristic of being representative defers the poststructuralist pronouncement of the death of the author (Barthes) and the conceptualisation of the author function (Foucault).

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