



Between the Mythical and the Human: Matrices of Writing the Sports-Heroes

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Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to foreground how mythologies intervene in the writing of sports autobiography. The autobiographical accounts of athletes are not limited to their personal lives. These narratives rather transgress the ‘biographical’/‘historical’ and develop in the form of myth(s). In the course of mythologizing, athletes at times emerge as quasi-divine figures executing miraculous feats. Thriving on mythical allusions, these accounts endow sportspersons with heroic virtues and traits. Autobiographies of athletes however highlight the ‘glorious’ but do not completely evade the mortal limits of sportspersons. The affirmed heroes conspicuously emerge as mere humans, subject to mortal constraints. The paper, in this light, aims to trace the convergence of mythological and human/biographical constituents in the autobiographies of American boxer Muhammad Ali and Brazilian footballer Edson Arantes do Nascimento (Pelé).

Keywords: Myth, Autobiography, Heroic, Monomyth, Popular Culture

I

In the modern times, traditional heroes are hard to come by; nonetheless, the domain of sports frequently claims to purvey the heroes of mythical proportions. Representations of sports are immersed in “a constant reenacting of the heroic” (Whannel 46). In a similar vein, autobiographies of sportspersons are imbued with mythical elements or legendary substance. These life stories catapult sportspersons into heroic realm and reshape their on-field achievements into mythical designs. In the times when ‘celebrity’ overtakes the ‘hero’, these narratives imply that sportspersons still evince some degree of traditional greatness.¹ The life stories of

sportspersons employ mythical tropes and allusions to exhibit superhuman characteristics. In some instances, sports autobiography unfolds as a heroic tale where the autobiographical subject undertakes an odyssey and returns home triumphant overcoming all adversities. Displaying the acts of remarkable audacity and unflinching spirit, these narratives seek to ensure a place for athletes among the larger pantheon of archetypal heroes.

The genre however attempts to gratify the common urge for heroic; it does not intend to efface the human facet of athlete. It is generally argued that “no identity can exist by itself and without an array of opposites, negatives and contradictions” (Archetti 154). Consolidating this assertion, sports autobiography candidly encapsulates frailties, excesses and promiscuous conduct of the autobiographical subject. The heroic ideals are juxtaposed with aberrations which render sportspersons human and fallible. They are often found susceptible to poverty, injury and other humbling forces. Underscoring the human side of sportspersons, autobiographical narratives spell out their on-field struggles, defeats and failures. Moreover, the elevated persona of an athlete is subdued due to the references made to his gaudy lifestyle or material possessions. In this sense, sports autobiography presents a confluence of the mythical and the human. Entailing this duality, the life stories of athletes reinscribe the Janus symbol, the Roman god “with faces on both sides of his head”, symbolizing “one thing and its opposite at the same time” (Pipkin 15).

II

Muhammad Ali’s heroic stature is undisputed in the public eye. Dennis O’Neil and Neal Adam’s comic book *Superman versus Muhammad Ali* (1978) displayed the two popular icons on the front cover, donning their boxing gloves and ready to face each other in the ring in the presence of other superheroes, celebrity figures and common spectators. The contest between the two icons was described as the “Man of Steel” against “the Greatest of All Time” (Nama 260). The image confirmed Muhammad Ali’s status as a superhero in the popular domain. In a similar manner, writer and athlete George Plimpton glorified Muhammad Ali as “electrifying bronzed god”

who produced exceptional powers (Dorinson 129). The statement tends to divinize the pugilist considering him a possessor of supreme gifts. Ali's autobiography *The Greatest: My Own Story* reaffirms his heroic standing. The use of 'superlative' in the title itself suggests that the autobiographical subject belongs to "a different order of being" or a distinct "ontological category" (Dyer 43). It elevates the protagonist beyond the level of mere mortals. The heroic culture is "inherently inflationary" as the impetus always remains on the magnificent and extraordinary (Rojek 97). Ali's autobiography is permeated with superlatives as the protagonist announces himself to be 'the greatest', 'the smartest', 'the strongest', 'the prettiest', 'the fastest', 'invincible', 'unbeatable', 'unconquerable', 'unmatchable' and what not. Even his fights are presented in superlative terms as "The Biggest Heavyweight Title Match in Boxing History" (98), "The Greatest Grudge Fight" (110), "the rarest event in sports history" (342) or "the most destructive" fight (354).

In the biographical terms, *The Greatest: My Own Story* relates the personal account of a black-American pugilist, Cassius Clay, who appears on the national scene with a gold medal in the Rome Olympics in 1960. Perturbed at his slave identity and mistreated by the fellow white-Americans, he renounces his slave name and converts to Islam. He adopts an Islamic name, Muhammad Ali and becomes a spokesperson of the people of his race. Owing to his new identity, the boxer is treated as a traitor by the white world. His boxing career is threatened when he refuses to join U.S. Army during the Vietnam War citing his religious beliefs. Ali unabashedly exposes the hypocrisy of white-America on the racial issues. He undergoes several hardships but the boxer confronts the adversities with resilience and determination. Muhammad Ali eventually claims back his World Heavyweight Title after being forced out of boxing for many years. In this way, the personal narrative recounts a tale of individual will against the backdrop of racism, religion and Vietnam War and thus entails the clear constituents of history. In the act of narrative-building, the autobiography however transgresses the 'historical' and enters the domain of 'mythic'.²

Call to Adventure

Muhammad Ali's life story is modeled upon Joseph Campbell's idea of 'monomyth'. Campbell, in his book *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*, argues that all heroes embody 'monomyth' which is defined as the mythological adventure of the hero who "ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man" (28). Muhammad Ali's life story encompasses the essential rites of a 'monomyth' i.e. adventure motif, initiation motif and return motif (Campbell 28). The protagonist receives the 'call to adventure' after his return from the Rome Olympics. Having won the Gold Medal in the games, the pugilist rightfully expects a hero's welcome: "To me, the Gold Medal was more than a symbol of what I had achieved for myself and my country; there was something I expected the medal to achieve for me" (Ali & Durham 59). Ironically, Ali endures the opposite of what he deserves for his glorious accomplishment. Following his Olympic success, he and his friend Ronnie visit a restaurant meant only for the whites. The white waitress whispers to him, "We can't serve you here" (64). Ali nevertheless believes that his Olympic medal "would be a solution to the whole thing" but the restaurant owner firmly refuses to serve the "niggers!" (64). Feeling "shamed" and "shocked" (65), Ali and Ronnie leave the restaurant. The pugilist realizes: "Whatever illusions I'd built up in Rome as the All-American Boy were gone. My Olympic honeymoon was over" (68). Christopher P. Jones, in his book *New Heroes in Antiquity: From Achilles to Antinoos*, asserts that "an Olympic victor must necessarily enjoy divine favor, and that to dishonor him is to run the risk of retribution" (39).³ Humiliated by the disrespect, Muhammad Ali throws his medal in the deep waters of the Ohio River and decides to take on the White America. The moment Ali resolves to undertake this quest, he acknowledges the divine 'call to adventure'.⁴

The Quest

The 'initiation' of quest makes the hero withstand a "succession of trials" which he must survive during his expedition (Campbell 89). Overcoming the ordeals is a prerequisite of the mythical enterprise.

Following the mistreatment at the restaurant, Muhammad Ali (then Cassius Clay) becomes disillusioned with Christianity and subsequently converts to Islam. His action draws animosity from the white sections of American society. Immediately after the religious conversion, his first heavyweight fight which he reckons as his 'First Coming' is jeopardized by the promoters.⁵ They advise Ali to resort back to Christianity and stay away from the black Muslims in the Nation of Islam: "Your conversion is only a few months old. Allah will understand" (Ali & Durham 101). The promoters also lure him in the name of money; nevertheless Muhammad Ali, exhibiting the heroic spirit, conquers the mercenary temptations and settles without the fight. He emerges as a selfless hero who remains true to his mission i.e. "to live the kind of life that can make contribution to freedom, justice and equality for the black man in America" (x). In sacrificing the world heavyweight fight, the boxer symptomatically elevates himself to a legendary level. In the world of mythical adventure, the hero's center of existence undergoes a transformation and "what formerly was meaningful may become strangely emptied of value" (Campbell 51). For Ali, the quest of uplifting his people takes precedence over his boxing ambitions. Even when he returns to the ring, the outcome of his fight holds little 'value' in itself but inevitably caters to his quest: "I ain't been beaten ... I've been chastised. Allah gave me a little chastising ... to wake me up and remind me of what my mission is" (Ali & Durham 27-28).

Supernatural Aid

Throughout his precarious adventure, Muhammad Ali makes unconventional choices that defy mortal inhibitions. These choices are largely driven by the hero's moral virtues and character; however, amidst adversities, he is also "covertly aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper" or he discovers that "there is a benign power everywhere supporting him in his superhuman passage" (Campbell 89). The presence of a divine help in the life of pugilist is confirmed in the chapter titled 'Shorty is Watching'. 'Shorty' here is a religion-neutral name for 'God' who watches over the life of Muhammad Ali as a benevolent protector. The autobiography is replete with references such as "Shorty's in your corner," "Shorty had to be with you" (106), "Shorty put a motor

in his body” or “he’s like Shorty wanted him to be” (278). This supernatural aid sails the hero through the most stringent of his ordeals. When the draft board intends to recruit Ali in the Army for the Vietnam War, he seeks an exemption stating: “[To] bear arms or kill is against my religion. And I conscientiously object to any combat military service that involves the participation in any war in which the lives of human beings are being taken” (157). The Colonel astutely proposes some concessions; Ali notwithstanding deflates the manipulative moves. Under moral dilemma, the words of the Prophet comes to his rescue: “If you feel what you have decided to do is right, then be a man and stand up for it ... Declare the truth and die for it” (168). His refusal to be a part of Vietnam War, “a holy, patriotic crusade,” lends him in severe strife (141). As a result, the pugilist is temporarily jailed, his title is invalidated and he is debarred from boxing.

Hero’s Exile and the Trickster Archetype

The mythological journey eventually leads the hero into an arena of wilderness. It shifts his “spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown” (Campbell 53). Ali’s exile from boxing lands him into a similar unaccustomed territory. The ban unfolds as an absolute impasse that requires immediate solution given the transience of boxing prowess. He is forced into an exile “that will eat up what boxing experts regard ‘the best years of a fighter’s life’” (Ali & Durham 172). Predicting his fate, the journalists almost devalorize him: “Cassius is totally indifferent to whether he’ll fight anymore ... He’s content to wait until the Courts decide” (264). ‘Waiting’ does not contribute to the general sense of heroic; a hero must act when the situation beckons him. Under the circumstances, Ali however undertakes the legal course on his ban but simultaneously resorts to affirmative action. The pugilist embraces the means of ‘villainy’ to break the deadlock. Like an avenging-demon, he “wreaks vengeance” on his rivals, however not in the strictest sense of the term (Fontenrose 85).⁶ He rather employs provocative tactics to engage his fellow-fighters, promoters and common masses in a dialogue. Ali brags about his skills, challenges his opponents, taunts them and writes defamatory poems about them:

“I don’t need no Coliseum,
I’m whippin’ Joe in his own gym!
Come one, come all
See Frazier fall!” (Ali & Durham 251)

In exhibiting a sham-hostility, Muhammad Ali evinces the traits of a trickster archetype.⁷ His entire campaign to get back to ring thrives on mischief and trickery. He hoaxes a “bloody street fight” with Joe Frazier that amplifies his case for a genuine combat (256). Considering the public response and the promoters’ interest, the Georgia State Senator assures him of getting a license to fight in Atlanta. Like a seasoned trickster, he beguiles the establishments into his maneuverings and eventually ‘returns’ to the ring.

The Hero’s Return

Staying out of boxing due to a forced exile is perceived as a symbolic ‘death’ of the boxer and hence his ‘return’ after a long lay-off reenacts the resurrection myths. In *Mythologies*, Roland Barthes elucidates that myth is derived from “a semiological chain that existed before it: it is a *second-order semiological system*” (113). Myth is a speech which is “stolen and restored” (124). He further adds that the “mythical signification ... is never arbitrary; it is always in part motivated, and unavoidably contains some analogy” (124). *The Greatest: My Own Story*, in this sense, is a mythical allegory, both structurally and thematically. It explicitly thrives on the established biblical cycle of Jesus Christ’s birth, crucifixion and rebirth. The chapter titled ‘The First Coming’ introduces the pugilist in the world of heavyweight fighting; whereas the chapter entitled ‘Rumblings from the Grave’ metaphorically traces his renewed attempts to emancipate himself from his exile/‘death’. The hero’s ‘return’ to boxing is illustrated allegorically in the chapters named ‘Resurrection’ and ‘The Second Coming’. The life narrative thus structurally deploys the biographical content in the mythical framework. It offers a range of figurative tropes that establish apparent similarities between Christ’s resurrection and Ali’s comeback: “He’s bein’ born again” (275), “coming out of the womb” (276), “bringin’ you back to life” (277). As Ali braces himself for his return fight, his teammate Bundini impatiently remarks: “Champ, not even Jesus Christ would tarry like you on *His* Second coming. He

wouldn't keep *His* goddamn disciples waiting like you doing. Hurry up. Shorty don't give nobody no Third Coming" (282). Similarly, the spectacle around his fights is reproduced in other-worldly terms. The spectators/'disciples' eulogise the hero with larger than life significations: "Good Lord A'mighty, the Lamb's come back" (283),⁸ "You can't beat God's son" (401). During the bouts, the followers see him "come to life" (404) and "rise from the dead" (402). With an abundance of such expressions, the narrative evokes an element of 'surreality' that surpasses the veridical and furnishes the allegorical.

The recounting of hero's ultimate fight for the World Heavyweight Title is imbued with similar mythical charge. The fight is professed as "the greatest miracle since the Resurrection of Jesus Christ" (381). The underdog Muhammad Ali is pit against the reigning Heavyweight Champion, George Foreman and hence it claims to offer a spectacle identical to David and Goliath.⁹ Across three continents, fourteen nations propose to host the titanic clash, "the Fight of the Century" (382). Italian government bids to stage the grand event in an old Coliseum in Rome "where the gladiators fought" (366). The fight is eventually contested in Zaire, "in the heart of Africa" and hence the hero returns to his "ancestral homeland" to accomplish his quest (366). His rival George Foreman is also of African descent but, fighting Muhammad Ali, he represents the Christianity and the Great White Hope.¹⁰ As the hero enters the ring and raises his hand to salute the people he was fighting for, they respond as if "we've been rehearsing together all our lives" (394). In this mutual gesture, the hero stands "simultaneously above and with the people" (Hughson 97). He is 'with' them considering their shared ancestry and experiences; but, at the same time, the pugilist stands 'above' them as their possible redeemer. Going into the fight, these brethren infuse him with a belief, a "charge of electricity", while some "disbelievers" expect his mighty opponent to lynch him (403). The word 'disbeliever' has theological connotations and therefore the hero emerges as a "quasi-religious" figure (Rollin 93). During the combat, he performs "all kinds of miracles" and finally wins the sacred battle (Ali & Durham 409). His victory completes his mythological adventure. The hero is crowned with the World

Heavyweight Title which serves as the required elixir for the revival of his community (Campbell 182).¹¹

Not a Universal Hero

However, Muhammad Ali apparently exhibits the traits of a mythical hero; his heroism is still in some measures subject to scrutiny. The idea of heroism calls for a certain “degree of homogenisation in audience response” (Whannel 45). The public response is generally “fragmented” and an element of “consensuality” has to be produced in the process of narrativisation (45). Given the nature of Ali’s quest, *The Greatest: My Own Story* does not attempt to lend an aura of universal hero to the autobiographical subject. The life narrative acknowledges Muhammad Ali’s global recognition but refrains from establishing him as a classless icon. Except a few instances of racial reconciliation, the narrative primarily relates the conflict between the blacks and the whites wherein the autobiographical subject unapologetically asserts himself as a champion of his race. His followers, mainly non-white, perceive him as an embodiment of exceptional prowess and semi-divine possibilities. Conversely, for the white Americans, he is a bad nigger who deserves to be tamed. During his fights, they express their disdain for the ‘villain’ without restraint: “When it was over, I had won ... the audience threw everything they had in their hands into the ring – cups, bottles, peanuts, even a switchblade. And they booed me all the way to the dressing room and clutched at my robe. I had just made more enemies” (Ali & Durham 107). Far from his mythical aura, the white people identify the pugilist in villainous terms.¹² They employ metaphors that reduce him to be a non-human. Ali is sporadically referred as a “black rat” (121), “Frankenstein” (127), “cannibal” (130), “jungle animal” (56), and “monster-in-exile” (246). These descriptions dehumanize the autobiographical subject and imperil his mythical status to a certain extent. Hence, Muhammad Ali rises to “myth heaven, albeit half-way” (Dorinson 130).

III

Brazilian footballer Edson Arantes do Nascimento, famously known as Pelé, recounts his experiences on-and-off-the-field in his life story *Pelé: The Autobiography*. Like Muhammad Ali, Pelé holds a

legendary status and his autobiography augments the same. Chronicling the tale of three times world cup winner, the life narrative unveils the making of the Pelé myth. In his personal account, the autobiographer acknowledges that Edson, the boy from Bauru, represents a different identity from what Pelé has become. Describing the Edson-Pelé dichotomy, he ruminates that “both identities are separate and both are parts of me. They are the two sides of what I am” (Nascimento 287). He further reflects that Edson signifies “simple things” (286) whereas Pelé is a “mythical figure” (285). In other words, Pelé is a mythologised rendition of an otherwise this-worldly Edson.¹³ *Pelé: The Autobiography* takes this duality into account and coalesces the mundane and the magnificent. It presents the biographical journey of the football player and his eventual rise to mythical greatness.

Legend-building

Pelé: The Autobiography delves into the act of legend-building by relating local legends and suburban myths about the autobiographer’s birth and childhood (Parry 10). The first chapter sets the tone for mythical interpretation, particularly in the descriptions of the footballer’s birth. The autobiographer recounts that he was born in a village named Três Corações which bears religious significance for having a chapel of the sacred hearts. Três Corações, literally meaning the three hearts, refers to the holy trinity of Jesus, Mary and Joseph. Establishing an allegorical correlation with the divine figures, the footballer claims: “[I]t feels completely natural to me, it makes complete sense, that I should have been born in a place called ‘three hearts’ ... Três Corações has always been an important signpost for me ... The places where I was born, where I grew up and where I played football – they have given me three hearts too” (Nascimento 12-13). The description lends a mythical value to the autobiographer’s existence from the very moment of his birth. It seems to reinforce that “a special manifestation of the immanent divine principle has become incarnate in the world” (Campbell 296). The description, moreover, underlines the ‘natural’ concordance of the hero’s sacred birth with his future deeds. The autobiographer here ascribes his birth to his subsequent ascent as a champion footballer.

The claims of his unique embodiment are consolidated further by his father who, examining his son's "scrawny legs", prophetically declares: "This one will be a great footballer" (Nascimento 13). The birth thus serves as a prelude to the autobiographer's imminent heroics on the football field. His father's prediction, in a way, underscores the belief that "heroism is predestined, rather than simply achieved" (Campbell 294). Owing to his mythical standing, the hero's birth-place is deemed with equal sanctity and devoutness. The autobiographer proudly shares: "I'm honoured that the street has been named after me and there's even a plaque on that house saying that's where I was born" (Nascimento 13). The 'plaque' on the house and naming of the street serve more than the memorials of historical relevance. They rather signify the deification of the footballer and enshrinement of his birth-place. Similarly, the stories behind autobiographer's naming carry metaphoric and hagiographic implications. His father named him Edson after the inventor of electric light, Thomas Edison. Like his namesake scientist, Edson, the footballer, would eventually 'lighten' up the lives of Brazilians albeit somewhat differently. As in the case of numerous saintly figures, many local legends circulate about the genesis of his (nick)name. He validates that there have been "lots of stories" and "different versions" to his being called Pelé (43). The 'mystery' around the origin of his nickname is so precarious that the autobiographer himself is uncertain and he could only relate "the most probable version" of how he came to be known as Pelé (43).¹⁴

Magical Pelé

Joseph Campbell argues that the deeds of the hero correspond to the depth of his birth (296). Considering his 'sacred' birth, what Pelé displays on the football field is 'magic' and not merely a 'skill'. The mythologizing process includes "the attribution of magical powers or superhuman qualities" to the sporting figure (Whannel 122). Pelé himself refers to his "extra vision" and "sixth sense" that allow him to take control of the game (Nascimento 53). He claims to possess "an ability to anticipate what was going to happen, slightly before everyone else" (53). Among his other superhuman endowments, his talent to make a bicycle-kick – kicking the ball over the head while being in the air – partially empowers him to defy the laws of gravity.

His charisma reflects not only in his marvellous hold on the game but also in the aesthetic finesse that produces moments of epiphany on the field:

I picked up the ball outside our own penalty area and started running with it towards the Fluminense goal. One player came at me to tackle, then another, then a third, a fourth, a fifth, a sixth ... I just danced around them all before beating the goalkeeper as well. The São Paulo paper *O Esporte* heralded it as 'the most beautiful goal' ever scored in the Maracanã ... the paper had a bronze plaque cast which was mounted at the entrance to the stadium. The goal is known as '*gol de placa*' – the goal of the plaque – and whenever people in the Brazil describe goals now as a '*gol de placa*' they are comparing them to the perfection that I attained that day. (119)

The reference to Pelé's 'perfection' hints at something more than sheer sporting excellence. It does not even allude to some mathematical accuracy. It rather focuses on the transcendental effects the goal generates in order to be 'the most beautiful goal ever'. The 'perfection' here indicates that the performer is in "harmony with the greater forces" of divinity (Carroll 92). At many instances in his life narrative, the autobiographer avows: "I was on song" (94), "I was the Pelé I wanted to be" (94), "no one could stop me" (131), and "God had his eye on me" (73). The footballer thus furnishes several moments throughout his career when he seems to be guided by some "intangible inspiration" (Carroll 97). Under heavenly grace, the statistics that Pelé achieves appear "unreal" even to him (Nascimento 120). He transforms into a "footballing machine", an automation executing some divine will (203).¹⁵ Pelé ultimately accomplishes the rare feat of scoring more than one thousand goals that renders him 'immortal'.

Hero's Feat: A Religious Rite

Allen Guttman, in his seminal work *From Ritual to Record: The Nature of Modern Sports*, contends that sports today are characterized by "the almost inevitable tendency to transform every athletic feat into one that can be quantified and measured" (47). He

further adds that the emphasis on ‘record’ endorses an “empirical, experimental, [and] mathematical” world-view in sports (85). Pelé’s distinction of one thousand goals, however, transgresses numerical quantification and unfolds as a feat that brings the ‘ritual’ and the ‘record’ together. A mythology is created around the moment of reaching the elusive landmark. In the course of narration, Pelé’s milestone is approximated with the ceremonial performance of a religious rite. John Carroll describes a rite as “an activity full of sacred resonances, with an elaborate mythology, celebrated on a grand scale ... approached with faithful seriousness, anticipated and prepared for weeks in advance, talked about incessantly, and providing a common attraction for a population” (92). Like a holy rite, the ‘preparations’ for Pelé’s marvellous feat commence in ‘advance’ as the hero crosses the 990 goal mark and gets “within kicking distance of the milestone” (Nascimento 167). The waiting ‘populace’ devotes “all the attention” to the impending occasion and seems to “talk about nothing else” (167). The celebratory atmosphere around the event can be imagined through the expressions such as “the scenes were incredible”, “crowd erupted in euphoria”, “fans were ecstatic” (168), “[t]here were parades in the streets”, “[t]here were flags and banners and drummers”, “a huge, contagious environment” (169), “[i]t was surreal”, (170) and “stadium was erupting with firecrackers” (171). Lending an element of sacredness to the event, “a special Thanksgiving Mass” is also arranged (169). Pelé’s deed thus elicits festive overtones with these moments of jubilation and public engagement. The ‘magic figure’ of a thousand goals is eventually achieved on Brazil’s National Flag Day, a “good day for commemorations” (170). Moreover, the monumental goal is scored at the Maracanã, the “biggest stadium in the world” (170). With this unity of ‘time’ and ‘space’, Pelé’s accomplishment is reproduced in a mythic form.¹⁶

Hero-worship

Pelé: The Autobiography presents numerous instances of fans’ devotion that draw “inescapable parallels with religious worship” (Rojek 53). The fans perceive the footballer in hallowed terms and obsessively attempt to possess him. They manifest what Chris Rojek terms the ‘St. Thomas Effect’.¹⁷ The term refers to a compulsive

desire to validate an object by 'touching' it (62). When Pelé and his teammates return home with their first World Cup trophy, the Brazilian followers endeavour to "embrace" them to authenticate their mystical presence (Nascimento 104). Pelé's charisma does not remain limited to his native fans; he rather transcends the 'local' and evinces a 'transnational' heroism. After an injury lay off, he makes a heroic comeback for his club team in Basel, Switzerland scoring five out of eight goals. In awe and wonder, the Swiss fans storm the field "intending to carry our players aloft, me and Coutinho especially" (120). Similarly, the football lovers in Africa welcome Pelé and his teammates with devotional eyes: "It was an experience that changed not just my view of the world, but of how the world viewed me. The interest in the team and in me was extraordinary ... everyone in Africa, it seemed, wanted to see us, touch us, almost as if they wanted to make sure we were real" (159).

The vehement veneration for Pelé reflects in the sense that the fans preserve his belongings in the form of relics.¹⁸ During the 1970 World Cup, some ardent followers break into his room and run away with the ten team shirts allocated to him for the tournament (299). The autobiography offers many similar anecdotes where the fan behaviour parallels religious worship and even fanaticism. In a match against Colombian Olympic team, the referee sends Pelé off for his protest against an undue goal given to the opponents. As a result, the referee becomes an enemy to the crowd for his 'blasphemous' act of sending their 'god' off. Security and police personnel ultimately protect him from the crowd "baying for his blood" (164). The norms of the sport seem irrelevant to the fanatic 'devotees' as they bring Pelé back to the field and the referee is unprecedentedly sent off. In another instance, a referee, in amazement of Pelé's magical performance, infringes expected neutrality and awards him "a goal that wasn't really a goal" (120). His mythical appeal subdues political tension during the civil war of Nigeria as the country witnesses "a forty-eight hour ceasefire" and the followers throng the streets with white flags and posters saying "there would be peace just to see Pelé play" (166). Thus, Pelé emerges as a messianic-figure drawing reverence of religious proportions from his earnest fans.

Fallible Human

However, the life narrative illustrates Pelé's heroic endowment; it does not obscure his failures, fallibilities and limitations as a mortal. The autobiographer intermittently descends his mythical pedestal and undergoes public probe and ignominy. He recognizes that his "compatriots love Pelé, but they are tough with him too" (281). The footballer is often "accused of being a demagogue" for his general opinions and press statements (283). His decision to join American football club Cosmos also invites public criticism, particularly after refusing to play for Brazil in the 1974 World Cup. The life story does not attempt to establish Pelé as an epitome of virtue; it rather candidly unveils his sexual trespasses that lead to his divorce with the first wife. Under trials and tribulations, the football star acknowledges his human limits: "[W]e are not always in control of our own destinies" (285). Pelé's entire campaign of the 1962 World Cup is marred due to injury. His consequent predicament reflects in the use of expressions such as "watched ... from the stands", "the devastation I felt", "I cried so much", "It seemed so unfair", "I was sidelined" (128), "I was inconsolable", "I suffered a lot", "plagued with doubts" (129) and "the problems I faced" (130). Despite his global name and fame, Pelé seems to be outplayed by certain realities of his life. The autobiography records his misadventures in business and financial matters which relegate him to the verge of bankruptcy. Pelé endures his severest suffering when his son is imprisoned for drug trafficking. Having been vocal against drugs his entire sporting career, the situation renders him extremely vulnerable: "I felt shame, fear, doubt, sadness and hatred, and had crazy thoughts, wishing I had the superpowers of a Spiderman or a Superman to change the course of his awful story" (270). Here, the agonizing Pelé casts off his 'heroic' identity and admits his 'human' fate.

IV

Life narratives of sports achievers are thus shaped in an allegorical mode. These autobiographies capitalize on the already established archetypes and conversely cater to the mythical domain by providing heroes of grand proportions. The life stories project athletes as creatures who are subject "not only to the law of history but also to the law of eternity" (Pipkin 96). In these accounts, the sports

performers exhibit seeming similarities with the traditional heroic figures. Muhammad Ali's life narrative is traced in the form of a mythical adventure. Drawing allusions from the Bible, his autobiography attempts to establish him as a semi-divine being. His heroic stature is however compromised due to his Afro-American identity and thus he emerges as a 'racial' hero. Brazilian footballer Pelé's persona is no less mythical and easily fits into the superhuman template. His life story consolidates the Pelé legend endowing the footballer with celestial genius. The autobiography, at the same time, relates several instances where the footballer is subjected to powerful forces of destiny as well as public criticism. The life accounts of sportspersons therefore bring together the ambivalent elements that go into the making of a convincing sports hero.

Endnotes

1. Daniel J. Boorstin, in his book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, claims that our thinking about human greatness has altered with the course of history. Historically, hero was supposed to be a man who was "admired for his courage, nobility, or exploits" (46) and people "looked for God's purpose in him" (45). The war hero was the "prototype" of greatness as the battle provided opportunities for "daring deeds" (46). Boorstin opines that the Graphic Revolution provided the means of fabricating 'fame' and changed our understanding about human greatness (47). Differentiating between a hero and a celebrity, he explains that hero was a "Big Man" while the celebrity is a "Big Name" (47).
2. Garry Whannel, in his book *Media Sport Stars: Masculinities and Moralities*, explains two rather contrary techniques of sports narrativisation i.e. 'mythologisation' and 'reinscription' (56). 'Mythologisation' involves "the attribution of magical powers or superhuman qualities" to the athlete; whereas 'reinscription' is the interpretation of a sportsperson's life "according to dominant concerns at the time of writing" (56).
3. Christopher P. Jones cites several accounts of mistreatment towards Olympic winners in antiquity. The fellow-citizens of these athletes suffered eventually through natural calamities such as famines, plague and bad harvests (39-41).
4. Joseph Campbell explains that the 'call to adventure' is a time zone when the "familiar life horizon has outgrown" and "the passing of a threshold" is required on the part of the hero (47). In myths and popular tales, the 'call' is generally answered by the heroic subject. The

- heavenly summons, if at all, are refused or remain unanswered, the adventure turns into negative and the subject “loses the power of significant affirmative action and becomes a victim to be saved” (54).
5. Burgeoning on the Biblical reference, the chapter four of the autobiography is titled ‘The First Coming’. It includes the build-up to Muhammad Ali’s first heavyweight fight.
 6. The element of revenge is a core theme of mythical tales. The disgraced hero-athlete seeks revenge and turns out to be “a rationalized and historicized version of the avenging demon” (Fontenrose 85). The demonic image of the athlete manifests in the tales of classical athletes such as Kleomedes, Euthykles, Oibotas, and Theagenes (page 83 onwards).
 7. In his path-breaking essay “The Structural Study of Myth”, Claude Levi-Strauss explains that a trickster is “an ambiguous and equivocal character” who retains a certain kind of “duality” (441).
 8. Lamb of God is a title used for Jesus Christ.
 9. The expression ‘David and Goliath’ is popularly used to describe an underdog situation where a relatively weak aspirant (David) fights against a mighty adversary (Goliath). The expression is frequently used in sports narration. David-Goliath story features in the Hebrew Bible.
 10. The term ‘Great White Hope’ was used for any white boxer who was expected to defeat heavyweight champion Jack Johnson, an invincible black pugilist in the early decades of twentieth century. In his autobiography, Muhammad Ali extends the use of term even for his fellow black athletes like Ken Norton and George Foreman as the white Americans expect them to beat the rebel Ali (21).
 11. Joseph Campbell’s ‘monomyth’ narrative demands the adventurer to return with a boon or a “life-transmuting trophy” which may aid to the renewal of the world (179). It completes the full round of his adventure.
 12. Keith D. Parry argues that heroisation is a dynamic process wherein “it is possible for a subject to move between hero and villain types” (14). He illustrates that Robin Hood heroes are recurrently “associated with villainous behaviour” and this behaviour is permissible provided “it is aimed at social and physical oppressors” (11). Muhammad Ali, in this sense, evinces certain traits of a Robin Hood archetype as well.
 13. The autobiographical subject is consciously aware of his mythical stature as he elucidates the Pelé phenomenon: “I have to ‘raise up’ Edson in order to ‘bring down’ Pelé ... But Pelé had taken on a new life of his own; he overtook everything. Everybody in the football world wanted to keep him around. And so I carried on being Pelé ... I’m proud Pelé is still here. After all, Pelé the footballer went to many places, scored many goals, won many trophies ... I have been honoured in

- hundreds of different ways in different countries around the world and the more you receive, the stronger the mythology becomes (285-86)”
14. The autobiographer narrates that the goalkeeper in his father’s team was known as Bilé. As an infant, he wasn’t been able to speak even after attaining an age of two years. Some witch-doctor rituals were performed for weeks and one day the boy miraculously shouted ‘Bilé’, which eventually became his nickname. Twenty years later, Pelé (then Edson)’s father would take him along to his training sessions where the three-year-old Edson emulated the goalkeeper Bilé. He relates: “I was only young and I somehow distorted the nickname and said that when I grew up I wanted to be a goalie like ‘Pilé’. When we moved to Bauru, this ‘Pilé’ became ‘Pelé’” (44).
 15. James W. Pipkin argues that many sportspersons in their autobiographical accounts perceive their body as a machine which carries out the commands given by the mind (53-54).
 16. Time and space are considered to be significant constituents for the creation of a sporting myth. Time refers to “the moment when the golden memory was created” (Whannel 52). These golden moments (such as Pelé’s thousandth goal) become “immortal in the space of memory” and are thus “laden with great mythic force” (53). Likewise, some sporting spaces evince a unique mythical “resonance and aura” (53).
 17. As per the Biblical story, St. Thomas doubted the presence of Jesus Christ after his resurrection. The ‘doubting’ Thomas authenticated it by ‘touching’ the wounds of crucifixion on Christ’s body (Rojek 62).
 18. Rojek opines that in secular society, the obsessive followers “build their own reliquaries of celebrity culture” which include objects such as chewed gums, tissues, lipsticks, cigarette butts and other belongings used by the celebrities (58).

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