



Susan Østgaard and Beathe Hofseth, Directors,
Light Fly, Fly High

Norway/India, 2013. 80 minutes, color. \$89.00 (K-12, public libraries, and select groups); \$350 (universities, colleges, and institutions).
<https://www.wmm.com>.

THIS FILM opens with an attractive yet boyish woman taking a shower, over which is dubbed the voice of the defiant, bathing woman speaking in Tamil about how being Adi Dravidar (“original Dravidian” = Dalit in North India) and a woman demands “obedience.” However, she quickly states, “this is my life.” Her name is Thulasi. At the age of twenty-four, she has now been boxing for a decade in the “light fly” category

(48 kg). She ran away from home at the tender age of fourteen because her father wanted her to marry an elderly man. Recounting this, she says in broken English, “married life is jailed life!” Boxing liberates her from the commitment to be the stereotypical woman who submits to becoming a stay-at-home housewife.

Another Adi Dravidar family, who initially supported her alternative vision of life, adopted Thulasi, but now she has only one year remaining to prove herself competent to make the national team that would go to the Olympics. Her chances look good, since she ranked third in the country during the previous year, having even defeated the reigning champion of India on several occasions. Her adopted family thus goes out on a limb and secures a loan to cover her costs, most of which get lost in a corrupt sporting system in which government funds are purloined for personal gain by coaches, sponsors, and so on.

Under pressure to perform well, the film then follows her female team traveling by train to the competition, where she will fight in her light fly class. She loses the match, due to a sore shoulder. Angered and frustrated, she gets in an argument on the return journey and is expelled from her fight club. Thulasi is determined to turn around her bad luck, so gets a “boxer” tattoo on her shoulder. Only one last chance remains to make the nationals before turning twenty-five, but her stepfather is trying to convince her to settle down and get married, due to her loss. She stubbornly refuses, despite a doctor’s prognosis that her bad shoulder has a 50/50 chance of failing her again in the next round. To everyone’s surprise, she wins her qualifying match, but is refused a place on the national team for refusing the sexual advances of Sir Karuna of the selection committee.

Her boxing career ends at the age of twenty-five, but not the story, since she files harassment charges against Sir Karuna, who is arrested, but later let out on bail. Meanwhile, Rajesh seeks permission to marry her. We see the festive preparations for the wedding taking place. On the wedding day, however, we spy a forlorn Thulasi dreading the nuptials. She refuses to consummate the marriage with her husband, so he punishes her by banning her use of a mobile phone. In addition, he will not allow her to leave their humble dwelling, where she sleeps uncomfortably on the floor. She is also forbidden to work, wear jeans, or use Facebook. “My life is boring,” she opines in English. Meanwhile Sir Karuna makes several attempts to bribe her to drop the lawsuit, but she refuses, then leaves her husband and moves back in with her adopted family.

Just when Thulasi’s luck seems to have run out, she suddenly gets a phone call from an international fitness club (Gold’s Gym) and gets offered a job as a personal trainer. This allows her to finally achieve economic independence, so she divorces her husband, buys a motorcycle, then moves into her own flat, where she dreams of one day starting her own gym. As we witness her riding off into the sunset, the credits begin scrolling, and we learn that her court case has still not been settled, and unlikely to be adjudicated in the near future, despite the fact that governmental forces closed her former boxing club.

Thulasi’s narrative was filmed over a three-year period, so we benefit from seeing her life evolve. It shatters many of the stereotypes people have of both women and so-called “untouchables” in India as being disempowered beings totally subjected by a harsh, paternalistic, and stratified social system crying out for reform. By ending on an ambiguous note that simultaneously suggests life is what you make it but is also

fraught with injustice, the film leaves the viewer wondering if caste issues will ever get completely resolved in India. Thulasi shows us what is possible, but also grimly reminds us of the limitations of human agency. After all, the structure of society impinges upon that very human freedom craved by the heroine of this engrossing film. It works well in the classroom with Loïc WACQUANT's excellent book titled *Body and Soul* (2004) to discuss Bourdieu's concept of practice theory.

REFERENCES

WACQUANT, Loïc

2004 *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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