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Article

Pierre de Coubertin's Ode to Sport: A Feminist Reassessment of Gender Bias in Olympic Ideals

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Abstract:

Pierre de Coubertin's Ode to Sport has long been celebrated for its philosophical exploration of the moral and physical virtues of sport, emphasising its role in uniting humanity and promoting justice. However, this iconic poem has largely escaped critical scrutiny from a feminist perspective, particularly regarding its gendered portrayal of sport. This paper offers a feminist reassessment of the Ode to Sport, focusing on how Coubertin's representation of sport reinforces hegemonic masculinity and excludes women from the idealised Olympic vision. By analysing the language, imagery, and historical context of the poem, this study shows how Coubertin's male-centric ideals shaped the early Olympic Games and reflect broader societal views on gender and corporeality. Drawing on feminist literary theory and historical research, it highlights the exclusionary nature of the Olympic movement in its early years, as well as subsequent feminist challenges to these gendered narratives. The paper concludes with a consideration of how contemporary feminist athletes and sports movements have redefined sport as a space for gender inclusion, empowerment, and equality. It offers a critique of the legacy of the ode to sport and the possibility of a more inclusive vision of sport in the modern era.

Keywords: Pierre de Coubertin, Ode to Sport, Feminist Critique, Gender Bias, Olympic Games, Hegemonic Masculinity, Gender Equality, Sports Literature, Gender Exclusion

1. INTRODUCTION

Pierre de Coubertin is widely celebrated as the founder of the modern Olympic Games. A visionary educational reformer and advocate of sport, he firmly believed in the transformative power of athletics, not only as a means of physical and moral improvement but also as a unifying force between nations. His contributions to the Olympic movement shaped global sporting culture and emphasised ideals such as fair play, discipline, and international brotherhood.

In addition to his many contributions to Olympic history, Coubertin wrote the Ode to Sport, a poetic tribute to sporting competition. The poem was written in 1912 as part of an Olympic art competition and expresses his deep admiration for the virtues of sport. It elevates sport to an almost sacred sphere, portraying it as a noble pursuit embodying human excellence, justice, and moral strength. Yet while the poem is praised for its aesthetic and philosophical depth, it remains largely unexamined from a feminist perspective. This paper will reassess the poem, particularly considering the gender biases embedded in Coubertin's Olympic vision.

1.1. Pierre de Coubertin's Role in Establishing the Modern Olympic Games

The modern Olympic Games, which Coubertin revived in 1896, were strongly influenced by his personal philosophies

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on sport and society. He saw the Games as an opportunity to raise a new generation of men physically strong, morally upright, and intellectually capable. However, this vision was clearly gendered, as he strongly opposed the inclusion of women in the Olympic movement.

Coubertin's views on gender reflected the broader cultural norms of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which emphasised rigid distinctions between male and female roles. He argued that competitive sport was incompatible with female physiology and sensibilities and reduced female participation to the realm of spectatorship or non-competitive activities. As a result, female athletes were largely excluded from the early Olympic Games, and even when women were allowed to compete in 1900, their participation was severely limited.

Coubertin's stance was not just a personal preference but an institutional ideology that shaped the Olympic movement for decades. His beliefs became embedded in Olympic policy and retarded the progress of equality in sport. The poem therefore can be seen as an artistic manifestation of his ideals that celebrated athleticism as an inherently masculine activity.

1.2. Significance of Ode to Sport in Olympic History

The Ode to Sport is not only important as a literary work but also as a cultural artefact that reflects the ideological framework of early Olympism. Written in a lofty tone, the poem extols the virtues of athletic competition and associates sport with divine justice, moral strength, and physical excellence. However, the language of the poem implicitly reinforces traditional gender hierarchies.

The absence of female athletes in the poem is no coincidence it is a direct reflection of the exclusionary principles that dominated the Olympic movement at that time. The poem celebrates sport as the domain of warriors, conquerors, and noble competitors, all of whom are implicitly male. By glorifying sport as a test of strength, power, and endurance, it reinforces the idea that true athleticism belongs to men, while the role of women in the Olympic movement remains unrecognised.

Given its historical context, Ode to Sport is a revealing text for feminist analysis. By examining its language, themes, and rhetorical structures, we can uncover the gendered assumptions underlying Coubertin's Olympic ideals. More importantly, we can contrast these assumptions with contemporary feminist sports discourse to show the progress that has been made in achieving gender equality at the Olympics and the challenges that remain.

1.3. Research Question: A Feminist Reassessment of Ode to Sport

How does Ode to Sport reflect gender bias, and what does a feminist reassessment reveal about Olympic ideals?

This question guides us in examining the underlying messages of the poem and their impact on the wider Olympic movement. While previous analyses of the poem have focused on its aesthetic and ideological dimensions, few have interrogated its gendered structures. This study aims to fill this gap by applying a feminist literary analysis to the poem and placing its themes in the context of women's historical exclusion from competitive sport.

By re-evaluating Ode to Sport through a feminist lens, we can demonstrate how Coubertin's Olympic vision perpetuated gender biases and contributed to the marginalisation of women athletes. Furthermore, we can explore how feminist movements in sport have challenged these biases and paved the way for a more inclusive and equitable Olympic tradition.

A Feminist Critique of the Ode to Sport is Both Timely and Necessary.

Although women's participation in the Olympics has increased significantly over the last century, gender inequalities persist in various forms. Female athletes continue to face challenges in terms of media representation, funding, and institutional recognition. Historical texts such as Ode to Sport contribute to these challenges by reinforcing exclusionary narratives that portray sport as a predominantly male domain.

1.4. Purpose and Relevance of the Feminist Critique

By critically reassessing Ode to Sport, we can:

1. Highlight the historical exclusion of women from the Olympic movement.
2. Examine how language and rhetoric shape perceptions of gender in sport.
3. Connect Coubertin's vision with contemporary struggles for gender equality in athletics.
4. Challenge the legacy of male-dominated sports narratives and advocate for more inclusive representations.

This critique is not merely an academic exerciseit is a step toward re-imagining the Olympic ideals in a way that fully embraces gender inclusivity. By revisiting historical texts and questioning their assumptions, we contribute to an ongoing conversation about equality in sports and beyond.

2. METHODOLOGY: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FEMINIST LITERARY ANALYSIS

This paper employs a multi-pronged methodological approach, combining feminist literary analysis with historical research.

2.1. Historical Contextualization

- Exploration of Coubertin's personal beliefs and their influence on early Olympic policies.
- Examination of the broader societal attitudes toward women's participation in sports during the early 20th century.

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- Comparison of Ode to Sport with contemporary feminist sports discourse, highlighting shifts in perceptions of gender and athleticism.

2.2. Feminist Literary Analysis

- A close reading of Ode to Sport, identifying gendered language and imagery.
- Examination of rhetorical devices that reinforce masculine ideals of athleticism.
- Analysis of the poem's themes in relation to feminist theories on representation and power.
- By integrating these methodologies, this research provides a comprehensive reassessment of Ode to Sport, shedding light on its implicit biases and their lasting impact on Olympic history.

2.3. Structure of the Paper

To systematically address the research question, this paper is structured as follows:

2.3.1 Historical Context and Gender Bias in the Olympic Movement

- Examination of Coubertin's views on gender and their influence on the Olympics.
- Analysis of the exclusion of women from early Olympic competitions.
- Exploration of societal attitudes toward women in sport during the early 20th century.

2.3.2 Feminist Literary Analysis of Ode to Sport

- Close reading of the poem, identifying masculine language and imagery.
- Discussion of hegemonic masculinity and its reinforcement in the poem.
- Examination of rhetorical devices that frame sport as a male domain.

2.3.3 Feminist Reinterpretation and Contemporary Sports Movements

- Analysis of the evolution of women's participation in the Olympics.
- Discussion of feminist sports movements and their impact on gender equality.
- Reinterpretation of athleticism as an inclusive and empowering concept.

2.3.4 Comparative Analysis with Modern Sports Poetry

- Examination of how contemporary poets address gender inclusivity in sport.
- Comparison with ancient Olympic poetry and its portrayal of athletes.
- Discussion of feminist literary contributions to sports discourse.

2.4. Conclusion

- Summary of findings on Ode to Sport and its gender biases.
- Reflection on the importance of feminist criticism in sports history.
- Recommendations for inclusive reinterpretations of Olympic ideals.

To summarise, this introduction has outlined the key themes and objectives of this paper. By reassessing Ode to Sport through a feminist lens, we challenge historical narratives that have marginalised female athletes and reinforce the need for a more inclusive and equitable Olympic movement. Through critical analysis and historical contextualisation, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to redefine sports culture in a way that embraces gender equality and empowerment for all athletes.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND GENDER BIAS IN THE OLYMPIC MOVEMENT

The Olympic Games are admired for their rich history, which speaks to the remarkable achievements, enduring effort, and global cooperation of people. However, that noble ideal masks the decades of gender discrimination that has accompanied the development of the Games. The modern Olympic Games were founded by Pierre de Coubertin, who had visions of the games rooted deeply into the gender biases of society at that time. His unwillingness to accept women in the Olympics was not simply due to bigotry but served to reflect broader cultural beliefs that considered competitive sports to be a male-only activity.

In this part, we will analyse Coubertin's exclusionary policies in relation to women's participation in the Olympic games. We will address the ways in which the early Olympic games policies enforced gender prejudice and their cultural context from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Understanding Ode to Sport with this perspective allows us to see how Coubertin's philosophies enabled systematic discrimination against women in athletics.

3.1. The Gendered Exclusion from Early Olympic Events and Policies

Since its inception, women were excluded from the Olympic Games, which were based on a fixed framework of gender roles. Their exclusion was not only based on Coubertin's opinions; it was also an overall institutional policy supporting social norms concerning gender positions in athletics.

3.2. The First Modern Olympics (1896) and the Exclusion of Women

The 1896 Olympics in Athens marked the revival of the Games, but they were only open to men. Women were mostly restricted to being spectators or ceremonial participants, and they were not permitted to compete. The following arguments were used to support this decision:

- Women lacked the physical strength and endurance required for competitive sport (Guttmann, 1991).
- Sporting competition would damage women's health and reproductive abilities (Hargreaves, 1986).
- Women's participation would undermine the aesthetic and noble qualities of the Games (Lenskyj, 1986).

Early female athletes and supporters of women's sports criticised the decision to exclude women. Coubertin and other IOC officials, however, continued to oppose it.

3.3. Limited Inclusion of Women in the 1900 Olympics

The 1900 Paris Olympics marked a small step toward female inclusion, but only in a highly restricted manner. Women were allowed to compete in just a handful of events, including Tennis, Golf, Sailing (in mixed teams), and Croquet.

These events were chosen because they were considered "ladylike" and did not involve excessive physical exertion or direct competition. Even then, female participation was minimalof the 997 athletes in the 1900 Games, only Twenty-Two were women.

4. RESISTANCE TO WOMEN'S ATHLETICS AND THE 1928 BREAKTHROUGH

Despite slow progress, there was still a lot of opposition to women's inclusion. The most controversial topic was women's involvement in track and field, which was perceived as a traditionally male sport.

The introduction of women's athletics at the 1928 Amsterdam Olympics was received with controversy following the 800-meter race. Arguments that long-distance running was too taxing for female athletes were revived after a few women passed out from exhaustion. Consequently, women were not allowed to attend the event until 1960 (Hargreaves, 2000).

The Olympic movement's pervasive gender bias is demonstrated by these policies. For every inch of advancement, female athletes had to struggle, frequently in the face of institutional resistance and social discrimination.

4.1. The Influence of Victorian Gender Norms

During this period, Victorian ideals of femininity emphasised:

- Delicacy and passivity: Women were seen as fragile and ill-suited for strenuous activity (Guttmann, 1991).
- Domesticity and motherhood: Women's primary role was within the home, raising children and supporting their husbands (Hargreaves, 1986).
- Moral superiority: Women were expected to be refined, modest, and reserved (Lenskyj, 1986).

These ideals conflicted directly with the values of competitive sport, which emphasised strength, aggression, and public displayqualities that were deemed inappropriate for women.

4.2. Medical and Scientific Justifications for Exclusion

Pseudo-scientific theories were often used to justify the exclusion of women from sport. Common arguments included:

- Physical exertion would damage women's reproductive health (Guttmann, 1991).
- Competitive ambition was psychologically damaging to women (Hargreaves, 1986).
- Women's bodies were not designed for endurance sports (Lenskyj, 1986).

These claims were not based on empirical evidence but rather on social prejudices that sought to maintain traditional gender roles.

4.3. Cultural and Societal Views on Gender and Sport in the Early 20th Century

It is impossible to comprehend women's absence from the early Olympics in a vacuum; rather, it was a component of a larger cultural context that characterised sport as a masculine activity. With significant ramifications for women's involvement in sports, the prevailing philosophies of the late 19th and early 20th centuries strengthened strict divisions between men's and women's roles.

4.4. Early Feminist Sports Movements and the Changing Role of Women

Despite widespread resistance, women continued to push for their place in sport. Early feminist movements advocated for women's rights in athletics, arguing that physical activity was beneficial for both men and women. Pioneering female athletes, such as Alice Milliat, fought for women's inclusion, leading to the establishment of the Women's World Games in 1922 as an alternative to the male-dominated Olympics. These efforts gradually eroded barriers, paving the way for greater female participation in the Olympic movement.

4.5. Pierre de Coubertin's Vision for the Olympic Games: The Exclusion of Women

The philosophy behind Pierre de Coubertin sports was inspired by antiquity and revolved around the appreciation of masculine sports and the moral and discipline aspects of them. Just like the Olympics, Coubertin wanted to incorporate competition for men only and wanted to shift focus to strength, endurance, and competition. Strengths and athletic ability were the only aspects that he believed women possessed because, in his viewpoint, women did not participate in sports.

4.6. Coubertin's Philosophical and Cultural Influences

Coubertin was influenced by a myriad of cultural and intellectual ideas, "modern" and "feminism," supporting these concepts. The 19th century to early 20th century encompassed strict rules that placed men in charge of everything productive, including work, politics, and

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competition, while women were relegated to the domestic sphere of caregiving and moral teaching. These concepts were heavily backed by:

- Victorian-era gender norms, which emphasised women's delicacy and passivity (Guttmann, 1991).
- Social Darwinism, which positioned men as naturally stronger and more suited to competition (Hargreaves, 1986).
- The classical ideal of the male athlete, as seen in Greek art and philosophy, depicted sport as an arena for demonstrating male excellence (Beamish & Ritchie, 2006).

For Coubertin, sport was more than physical activity; it was a means of cultivating the ideal mancourageous, honourable, and physically strong. This belief was reflected in his writings, speeches, and policies, all of which dismissed the idea of female participation in the Olympic Games.

4.7. Coubertin's Explicit Opposition to Women's Participation

Coubertin was unambiguous in his stance against female athletes. He viewed women's involvement in competitive sport as unnatural, undignified, and even harmful to their health. Some of his most notable statements on the matter include:

- "An Olympiad with females would be impractical, uninteresting, unaesthetic, and improper" (Coubertin, 1912, p. 39).
- "Women have but one task in the Olympic Gamesto crown the victors" (Coubertin, 1912, p. 40).
- "Women's sports must be limited to that which is appropriate to their natural constitution" (Coubertin, 1912, p. 40).

These statements reflect not only his personal biases but also the dominant ideologies of his time, which saw physical exertion and competitive ambition as inherently masculine traits.

4.8. The Influence of Coubertin's Views on the Olympic Movement

Coubertin's opposition to women's participation was institutionalised in the early years of the modern Olympics. Under his leadership:

- Women were completely excluded from the first modern Olympics in 1896 (Guttmann, 2002).
- When women were introduced in 1900, they were limited to only a few "feminine" events, such as tennis and golf (Hargreaves, 2000).
- Women's athletics were not included until 1928, and even then, their events were restricted (Lenskyj, 1986).
- The Olympic Charter and policies continued to reflect gender discrimination well into the 20th century (Wamsley, 2012).

Coubertin's influence extended beyond his tenure as president of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). His ideological framework continued to shape Olympic policies long after his departure, delaying efforts to achieve gender equality in the Games.

To conclude, the modern Games were greatly influenced by Pierre de Coubertin's vision for the Olympics, but it was also characterised by a pervasive gender bias that kept women out for many years. His disapproval of female involvement reflected larger cultural perceptions that sport was a man's realm. Cultural norms, institutional rules, and pseudoscientific justifications that upheld traditional gender roles were the causes of women's historical exclusion from Olympic competitions. However, by opposing these obstacles and promoting more gender inclusion in athletics, early feminist groups set the stage for change.

5. FEMINIST LITERARY ANALYSIS OF ODE TO SPORT

The Ode to Sport is frequently hailed as a magnificent ode to athleticism, self-control, and the ethical benefits of competition. A more thorough feminist literary analysis, however, identifies a hidden gender bias that influences the poem's portrayal of sport. Without mentioning any female athletes, Coubertin's discourse exalts a highly masculinised ideal of power, justice, and physical prowess. He reinforces hegemonic masculinity and conventional gender hierarchies by constructing sport as a solely masculine sphere using metaphor, symbolism, and rhetorical tactics.

In this section, we will assess the vocabulary and images in Ode to Sport, along with how Coubertin's poetic expressions marginalise women while elevating masculine athleticism. To demonstrate how these themes are woven throughout his writing, we will incorporate straight quotes from the poem's original French text along with their English translations.

5.1. Language and Imagery in Ode to Sport

Language and imagery are effective means of influencing ideology and perception. Coubertin uses poetic language in Ode to Sport to link sport to traditionally masculine values like justice, bravery, strength, and endurance. Women's exclusion from this ideal of athletic prowess is further reinforced by the lack of female representation.

5.2. Masculine Ideals of Strength, Justice, and Athleticism

Throughout the poem, Coubertin associates sport with virtue, justice, and power elements that have traditionally been associated with men. His depictions of athleticism place a strong emphasis on moral superiority, competitiveness, and physical dominance all of which are consistent with conventional ideas of manhood.

Table 1

Original French Line	English Translation
"Ô Sport, tu es la Force !…"	"Oh Sport, you are Strength!…"
"Tu es la Justice !…"	"You are Justice!…"
"Tu es le Progrès !…"	"You are Progress!…"

These sentences uphold the notion that true strength, justice, and advancement are the purview of men while also elevating sport as a sacred and noble force. Sport acquires a supernatural, authoritative quality using straightforward, unequivocal words, which is consistent with patriarchal ideas of male dominance in both the physical and moral domains.

Additionally, Coubertin's personification of sport as an entity of "force" subtly excludes women, who were traditionally excluded from physically demanding sports on the grounds that they lacked the requisite stamina and strength. Given that female athletes were excluded from the Olympic movement during Coubertin's lifetime, the association between justice and sport also exhibits gendered bias.

5.3. The Absence of Female Athletes in Ode to Sport

The most striking aspect of Ode to Sport from the feminist perspective is the complete absence of female athletes. Coubertin makes no mention of or celebration of women's involvement in sports in the poem. His idea that sport was a male-only activity is reflected in this omission, which is not accidental.

Table 2

Original French Line	English Translation
"Tu es l'Honneur du corps humain…"	"You are the Honor of the human body…"
"Tu es la Joie qui éclate dans les yeux…"	"You are the Joy that shines in the eyes…"

The absence of gender-specific allusions subtly positions the ideal athlete as male, even if these lines portray athletics as a universal experience. Although the phrase "corps humain" (human body) seems neutral, the male athlete's body is being lauded within the historical framework of Coubertin's worldview.

The early Olympic movement's larger gender issues are reflected in this exclusion. The idea that true athleticism was only for men was reinforced by the fact that women were mainly prohibited from competing during Coubertin's time. This exclusion of female representation in Ode to Sport reflects and perpetuates this exclusion, rendering women invisible within the poetic and ideological framework of the Olympic movement.

5.4. Rhetorical Devices and the Framing of Sport as a Male-Dominated Sphere

Coubertin employs various rhetorical devices metaphor, symbolism, and personification to frame athleticism as an inherently masculine pursuit. These literary techniques reinforce the cultural narrative that sport is a test of male strength, endurance, and virtue.

5.5. Metaphor and Symbolism: The Warrior-Athlete

The idea of the athlete as a warrior is one of the most prevalent metaphors in Ode to Sport. By drawing on historical connections between masculinity and combat, Coubertin elevates competition as a noble and heroic endeavour by equating sport with combat.

Table 3

Original French Line	English Translation
"Tu es l'Équité vivante…"	"You are living Fairness…"
"Tu es le Combat joyeux…"	"You are the Joyful Battle…"

Here, sport is depicted as a battle, emphasising the element of struggle and conquest. The term "combat" (battle) is particularly revealing, as it aligns athleticism with wara historically male-dominated sphere. The phrase "joyful battle" further reinforces the idea that competition is a source of honour and fulfilment, a sentiment traditionally reserved for male warriors and conquerors.

5.6. Personification: Sport as a Male Figure

Throughout Ode to Sport, Coubertin personifies sport as an almost divine, authoritative figure one that embodies wisdom, strength, and justice. Notably, this personification is heavily masculinised.

Table 4

Original French Line	English Translation
"Tu es l'Harmonie…"	"You are Harmony…"
"Tu es la Beauté…"	"You are Beauty…"

Despite the seemingly neutral nature of these observations, the poem's larger context implies that sport is being envisaged in connection with the masculine athlete. Coubertin's sport stays firmly within the sphere of masculinity, in contrast to other literary traditions that personify abstract notions (such justice or beauty) as female.

5.7. Hegemonic Masculinity and the Glorification of Male Athletes

Sociologist R.W. Connell coined the term "hegemonic masculinity," which describes the dominant type of masculinity that is cultivated and perpetuated by organisations such as sports. A literary example of this idea is Ode to Sport, which elevates masculine athleticism while obliterating women.

5.8. Sport as a Rite of Masculinity

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Table 5

Original French Line	English Translation
"Tu es le Progrès qui dessine…"	"You are the Progress that shapes…"

Here, sport is associated with progress, implying that athleticism is a defining feature of civilization and human progress in addition to being a test of physical prowess. But according to Coubertin's theory, women were routinely left out of early Olympic games; therefore, this advancement mostly pertains to men.

5.9. The Legacy of Hegemonic Masculinity in Olympic Ideals

The ideals promoted in Ode to Sport have had a lasting impact on sports culture and the Olympic movement. Disparities in funding, media exposure, and institutional recognition for female athletes still exist today.

5.10. Feminist Perspectives on Representation and Power in the Language of the Poem

Ode to Sport reflects the larger patriarchal systems that have traditionally controlled sports, according to feminist theory. The poem perpetuates the exclusionary attitude that influenced early Olympic policies by excluding women from its story.

Key feminist critiques include:

- The Lack of Female Representation: The poem's gender-neutral yet male-centered language contributes to the invisibility of women in sports history (Lenskyj, 1986).
- The Cultural Impact of Gendered Sports Narratives: By framing athleticism as a heroic, battle-like pursuit, Ode to Sport perpetuates the notion that women are secondary participants in the world of competitive sport (Hargreaves, 2000).

To conclude, the extent to which Coubertin's conception of athletics is infused with gendered biases is demonstrated by a feminist literary analysis of Ode to Sport. Coubertin perpetuates the exclusion of female athletes by methodically leaving them out of his poetic tale. However, we can contest these narratives and promote a more equitable view of sportsone that genuinely represents the Olympic ideals of justice and fairness for all athletesby critically re-evaluating and reinterpreting sports in an inclusive manner.

6. FEMINIST REINTERPRETATION OF ODE TO SPORT AND MODERN SPORTS MOVEMENTS

A historical view of athleticism, Pierre de Coubertin's Ode to Sport generally ignores any acknowledgement of female athletes while equating sport with stereotypically masculine concepts of power, bravery, and competitiveness. But in the last century, women have battled for and made great strides toward being allowed to participate in competitive sports, especially at the Olympic Games. This section looks at how the exclusionary ideas ingrained in Coubertin's vision have been questioned and transformed by feminist reinterpretations of Ode to Sport and larger sports movements.

We will explore three key areas:

- The evolution of women's participation in the Olympics, including milestones in gender equality and the role of feminist sports movements.
- The reclamation of athletic space by women, focusing on contemporary feminist sports figures and their contributions to reshaping the Olympic narrative.
- Alternative feminist views of sport, which frame athletics as a tool for empowerment, community-building, and social justice.

6.1. The Evolution of Women's Participation in the Olympics

The struggle for gender equality in the Olympics has been long and arduous, requiring persistent advocacy from female athletes, feminist sports organisations, and supporters of gender equity. Coubertin's Olympic vision initially excluded women on the basis that sport was a male domain. However, women gradually pushed for inclusion, leading to significant milestones in Olympic history that have redefined what it means to be an athlete.

6.2. Milestones in Gender Equality in the Olympic Games

Table 6

Year	Milestone	Significance
1900	First Olympic Games to allow women	Women could compete in golf and tennis, but their participation was minimal (Guttmann, 2002).
1928	Women's track and field introduced	The inclusion of women in athletics was a significant step, but events were still limited (Hargreaves, 2000).
1948	First Olympic Games to include women's swimming and diving	Expanding opportunities for female athletes (Lenskyj, 1986).
1960s–70s	Feminist movements push for gender equity in sports	More women's events added to the Games (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

Year	Milestone	Significance
1984	Women's marathon added to the Olympics	Addressed previous arguments that endurance sports were too strenuous for women (Hargreaves, 2000).
2012	Every Olympic team included at least one female athlete	Landmark achievement for gender representation (IOC, 2018).
2021	Gender-equal athlete participation for the first time in Olympic history	The Games reached a 50/50 split in male and female participation (IOC, 2021)

Despite these milestones, disparities remain in media coverage, prize money, sponsorship deals, and representation in coaching and leadership roles. The historical exclusion of women, as reflected in Ode to Sport, continues to influence perceptions of female athleticism, making feminist critique and activism essential to achieving full equality.

6.3. Feminist Sports Movements and Their Impact

The feminist movement has played a pivotal role in challenging the patriarchal structures of sport and pushing for gender equality in the Olympic Games and beyond. Some of the most impactful feminist sports movements include:

6.3.1 Title IX (1972, USA)

- A landmark U.S. law that prohibits gender discrimination in federally funded education programs, including athletics (McLaren, 2009).
- Increased women's participation in sports at all levels, inspiring similar efforts globally (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- The number of female athletes in U.S. colleges skyrocketed from under 30,000 in 1972 to over 200,000 today (McLaren, 2009).

6.3.2 The Fight for Equal Pay

- Women athletes have consistently earned less than their male counterparts (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- Examples: The U.S. Women's Soccer Team's lawsuit for equal pay; Wimbledon's equal prize money policy since 2007 (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

6.3.3 Increased Media Representation

- Campaigns like #CoverTheAthlete have highlighted disparities in media coverage of male and female athletes (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- Greater visibility for women in sports challenges outdated narratives about female athleticism (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- These feminist movements have worked to dismantle the exclusionary ideals reflected in Ode to Sport, reshaping the Olympic Games into a more inclusive space for all athletes.

6.4. Reclaiming Athletic Space for Women

Although Ode to Sport portrays sport as a male-dominated realm, modern female athletes have actively reclaimed and redefined the space, proving that athletic excellence is not limited by gender. Women across various sports have demonstrated exceptional talent, resilience, and leadership, breaking barriers that once seemed insurmountable.

6.5. Contemporary Feminist Sports Heroes

Several female athletes have played crucial roles in challenging gender stereotypes and reshaping the Olympic narrative.

6.5.1 Serena Williams (Tennis)

- One of the greatest athletes of all time, with 23 Grand Slam titles (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- Advocates for gender equality, particularly in pay and media representation (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- She demonstrates that strength, power, and endurance are not exclusively male traits.

6.5.2 Simone Biles (Gymnastics)

- Four-time Olympic gold medallist and one of the most decorated gymnasts in history (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- Publicly addressed issues of mental health and athlete well-being, challenging toxic sports cultures (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- Her dominance in gymnastics proves that sport is about skill, dedication, and passion rather than gender.

6.5.3 Billie Jean King (Tennis)

- Defeated Bobby Riggs in the "Battle of the Sexes" match in 1973, proving that women could compete at the highest levels (McLaren, 2009).
- A lifelong advocate for equal pay and women's rights in sports (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- These athletes and many others have shifted the perception of women in sports, proving that the ideals celebrated in Ode to Sports trength, courage, and justice apply equally to all athletes.

6.6. The Reinterpretation of Athleticism as Inclusive and Empowering

Modern feminist perspectives challenge the notion that sport is a space for men to showcase their physical dominance. Instead, they promote an inclusive definition of athleticism, where success is determined by dedication, skill, and perseverance rather than gender.

6.6.1 Sport as a Universal Human Right

- The Olympic Charter now explicitly promotes gender equality, a stark contrast to Coubertin's exclusionary

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ideals (IOC, 2021).

- Advocacy for equal opportunities in coaching, leadership, and administration within sports organisations (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

6.6.2 Challenging Traditional Notions of Femininity

- Historical resistance to women in sport was rooted in fears that it would make women "less feminine" (Hargreaves, 2000)
- Modern athletes reject these constraints, showing that strength and grace coexist (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

6.6.3 Recognition of Women's Athletic Achievements

- Increased funding and sponsorships for female athletes (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- Greater media attention is leading to cultural shifts in how female athletes are perceived (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- These developments reflect a reinterpretation of Ode to Sport that aligns with modern values of inclusivity and equality.

6.7. Alternative Feminist Views of Sport

Beyond individual achievements and policy reforms, feminist sports discourse offers broader perspectives on how sport can be a tool for empowerment, community building, and social justice.

6.7.1 Sport as Empowerment

Sport provides women and marginalised communities with opportunities for leadership, self-confidence, and personal growth. Organisations like Women Win and Girls on the Run use sport to foster empowerment among young girls (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

6.7.2 Sport as a Tool for Fostering Community

Women's sports foster camaraderie and a sense of community in addition to competitiveness. Sport can bring people from diverse backgrounds together, as evidenced by the growth of women-centered athletic groups, including grassroots football teams, LGBTQ+ sports leagues, and women's running clubs.

6.7.3 Sport as a Platform for Social Justice

Athletes like Naomi Osaka and Megan Rapinoe utilise their platforms to promote gender equality, LGBTQ+ rights, and racial justice. Their advocacy demonstrates how sport can help create a more equitable and inclusive world in addition to being a means of winning gold (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

In contrast to Coubertin's exclusive vision, feminist reinterpretations of Ode to Sport promote a more inclusive and fair conception of athleticism. In addition to being granted entry to the Olympic Games, women have transformed sports culture over time, upending antiquated conventions and motivating coming generations. The concepts of strength, justice, and progress once presented as distinctly masculine are now being reframed as universal attributes that belong to all athletes, regardless of gender, thanks to persistent campaigning and legislative improvements.

7. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: ODE TO SPORT AND MODERN SPORTS POETRY

For a long time, sports poetry has influenced how society views athleticism, bravery, and competition. Poetry has always been a celebration of sport and a window into the larger social and political climate, from Pindar's ancient Olympic odes to contemporary poetry that questions gender stereotypes.

The Ode to Sport is part of an ancient tradition of lyrical homages to athletic prowess. Ode to Sport, however, offers an exclusive view of athletics that prioritises men while marginalising or excluding women completely, in contrast to modern sports poetry, which frequently tackles gender inclusion and challenges strict notions of masculinity.

This section examines Ode to Sport in relation to:

1. Classical sports poetry, particularly Pindar's Olympian Odes, to explore how both poets construct athletic ideals.
2. Contemporary sports poetry, which often challenges the gendered biases present in earlier works.
3. Feminist sports literature, which provides an alternative perspective that directly contrasts Coubertin's ideals.
4. Through this comparative analysis, we will illustrate how Ode to Sport reflects and reinforces historical gender biases, while modern sports poetry actively works to dismantle these exclusions.

7.1. Ode to Sport and Pindar's Olympian Odes

The ancient Greek poet Pindar (c. 518–438 BCE) is renowned for his Olympian Odes, which paid tribute to Olympic and Panhellenic athletes who had won. His poetry, such as Coubertin's Ode to Sport, frames athletic rivalry as a measure of social prestige, moral rectitude, and physical prowess, elevating it to a stature close to divinity.

Key themes in Pindar's Olympian Odes include:

1. Athleticism as divine favour: Victorious athletes are depicted as blessed by the gods, their success seen as a sign of divine approval (Pindar, 1972).
2. Sport as an aristocratic pursuit: Athletic success is tied to noble lineage, reinforcing class hierarchies (Pindar, 1972).
3. Glorification of male athletes: Women are largely absent from Pindar's narratives, reinforcing the historical exclusion of female competitors (Pindar, 1972).

Table 7

Pinder's Original Text	English Translation
"ἀρετὰ δὲ φωτῶν ὀλβίοισιν ἄγαλμα"	"Excellence is the ornament of blessed men."
"οὐκ ἀπάλαμνοι μάντις ἐρέω, ὅτι δαίμονες ἀνδρῶν τε τέχνας"	"I do not speak without skill, for the gods grant men their abilities."

These lines reflect the belief that athletic success is both a sign of individual virtue and divine selection, ideas that resonate with Coubertin's philosophy of sport as a moral and physical discipline.

7.2. Ode to Sport in Comparison to Olympian Odes

Coubertin's Ode to Sport shares several thematic similarities with Pindar's works:

Table 8

Theme	Pindar's Olympian Odes	Coubertin's Ode to Sport
Sport as a divine force	Athletic triumph is a sign of divine favour.	Sport is personified as a force of justice and moral purity.
Heroic masculinity	Athletes are portrayed as noble warriors of physical excellence.	Sport is glorified as a pursuit of strength and power.
Exclusion of women	Women are rarely mentioned in the Olympian Odes.	Women are entirely absent from Ode to Sport.

Despite these parallels, there is one significant distinction: Coubertin, writing in the early 20th century, openly promoted discriminatory beliefs even as female athletes fought for recognition, whereas Pindar's poetry captures the realities of his era.

Therefore, Ode to Sport is problematic when considered in the context of the female fight for inclusion, even though it is consistent with the history of praising masculine athleticism.

7.3. Contemporary Sports Poetry and Gender Inclusivity

Modern sports poetry has evolved significantly from the exclusionary frameworks seen in Coubertin's and Pindar's works. Contemporary poets frequently challenge traditional notions of masculinity, highlight the experiences of female athletes, and explore sport as a site of social justice rather than mere physical competition.

7.4. Challenging Traditional Masculinity in Sport

Unlike Ode to Sport, which reinforces a rigidly masculine vision of athleticism, many modern sports poets question the idea that strength, dominance, and conquest define athletic success.

Case Study: Yusef Komunyakaa's "Slam, Dunk, & Hook"

Komunyakaa's poem examines the culture of basketball in a way that contrasts with Coubertin's idealised portrayal of sport. Rather than glorifying victory, he focuses on the emotional and communal aspects of the game.

Table 9

Original Line from Komunyakaa	Theme
"We knew we were beautiful and dangerous."	Strength as both physical and emotional.
"Muscles were a bright motor."	Athletic power as natural and organic rather than heroic.

Komunyakaa's depiction of sport includes the realities of struggle, teamwork, and resilience qualities that extend beyond traditional masculinity.

7.5. Women's Representation in Contemporary Sports Poetry

Modern sports poetry actively includes and celebrates female athletes, directly challenging the gender exclusion seen in Ode to Sport.

Case Study: Natalie Diaz's "Top Ten Reasons Why Indians Are Good at Basketball"

- Diaz highlights basketball as a space of cultural identity and survival, focusing on indigenous experiences (Diaz, 2020).
- The poem portrays the physicality of sport while rejecting the notion that it is an exclusive domain of male power (Diaz, 2020).
- Unlike Coubertin's vision, Diaz frames sport as a space of resistance and inclusivity (Diaz, 2020).

Feminist Sports Literature: A Direct Contrast to Coubertin's Ideals

Feminist sports literature provides a sharp contrast to Ode to Sport by rejecting exclusionary narratives and advocating for gender equity in athletics.

Key Themes in Feminist Sports Literature

Feminist sports writing challenges Coubertin's ideals in several ways:

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Table 10

Theme	Feminist Sports Literature	Coubertin's Ode to Sport
Inclusion of women	Actively recognises female athletes.	Women are absent from the poem.
Critique of traditional masculinity	Questions the glorification of male dominance in sport.	Celebrates strength and conquest as exclusively masculine.
Sport as empowerment	Frames sport as a tool for gender justice and equality.	Frames sport as a test of male excellence.

Case Study: Mariah Burton Nelson's The Stronger Women Get, The More Men Love Football

- Nelson argues that male-dominated sports culture is resistant to gender equity because it threatens traditional power structures (Nelson, 1994).
- She contrasts the celebratory tone of works like Ode to Sport with the lived realities of female athletes who fight for recognition (Nelson, 1994).
- Her work emphasises that sport is not just about strength it is about access, opportunity, and equity (Nelson, 1994).

Overall, Ode to Sport reflects outmoded, discriminatory gender ideals even as it adheres to traditional customs of honouring athletics. Modern sports poetry and feminist sports writing, on the other hand, aggressively contest these ideas and promote a more inclusive definition of athletics.

- Pindar's Olympian Odes set the precedent for celebrating male athletic heroes, a tradition Coubertin continued in Ode to Sport.
- Contemporary sports poetry challenges Coubertin's framework, emphasising inclusivity, emotional depth, and social justice.
- Feminist sports literature offers an alternative narrative, focusing on gender equity, representation, and empowerment.

Finally, a comparative analysis reveals that while Ode to Sport was once a defining statement on athletic ideals, it now serves as a historical artefact a reminder of the progress still needed to achieve true gender equality in sports.

8. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Ode to Sport within a feminist framework uncovers the profoundly rooted gender biases that inspired Pierre de Coubertin's vision for the Olympic Games. Although the poem praises sports as a noble and transformative activity, its language, imagery, and rhetorical structure reinforce a rigidly masculine ideal of athletics. By consistently eliminating women from its story, Ode to Sport not only represents Coubertin's personal hindrance to female Olympic participation, but it also perpetuates a larger ideological framework that suppressed female athletes for much of the twentieth century.

The main conclusion of the study is outlined in this section, which also discusses the significance of feminist critique in re-evaluating historical texts, the ways in which Ode to Sport perpetuates gender inequality, and the ramifications of Coubertin's discriminatory viewpoints. Lastly, we look at how Olympic principles may be inclusively reimagined to truly embrace gender equality and give all athletes more power.

9. SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

How Ode to Sport Reflects and Reinforces Gender Bias

Table 11

Aspect of the Poem	Gender Bias Reflected
Use of Language	Masculine-coded terms such as "force," "combat," and "valor" frame sport as a male-dominated pursuit.
Imagery and Metaphor	Athletes are portrayed as warriors and conquerors, reinforcing the association between sport and male heroism.
Absence of Women	The total omission of female athletes from the poem erases their contributions to sports history.

These literary choices mirror the broader exclusion of women from the Olympic Games during Coubertin's era. His personal opposition to female participation based on the belief that women's involvement would undermine the aesthetic and moral purity of the Gameswas institutionalised in early Olympic policies, delaying the inclusion of women in many sports for decades (Guttmann, 2002).

By celebrating sport as an arena for men alone, Ode to Sport contributes to a cultural narrative that has historically devalued female athleticism, reinforcing barriers that have taken generations to dismantle.

The Broader Implications of Coubertin's Gendered Views on the Olympics

Coubertin's influence on the Olympic movement was profound, and his gendered ideology shaped institutional policies long after his tenure. Some of the long-term consequences of his exclusionary vision include:

- Delayed inclusion of women in the Olympics: Women were not allowed to compete in track and field until 1928, and even then, their participation was severely restricted (Hargreaves, 2000).

- Institutional resistance to gender equality: Well into the 20th century, Olympic policies reflected a belief that women were unfit for many sports. The ban on women's marathon running until 1984 is one example of this persistent discrimination (Lenskyj, 1986).
- Unequal media representation and funding: The historic emphasis on male athletes as the true representatives of Olympic ideals has contributed to disparities in media coverage, sponsorship, and funding for women's sports (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).

Even today, the legacy of these biases lingers. Female athletes continue to face challenges related to visibility, pay equity, and institutional support. The values enshrined in Ode to Sport which celebrate an outdated, male-centered view of athleticism help explain why these disparities have been so difficult to overcome.

The Relevance of Feminist Criticism in Reassessing Historical Texts Like Ode to Sport

Feminist criticism plays a crucial role in deconstructing historical texts that have shaped cultural and institutional attitudes toward gender. In the case of Ode to Sport, applying a feminist lens allows us to:

- Uncover hidden biases: By analysing the poem's language and omissions, we expose the ways in which it reinforces male dominance in sport discrimination (Lanskyj, 1986).
- Challenge exclusionary narratives: Reassessing texts like Ode to Sport helps disrupt the long-standing tradition of male-centered sports history, paving the way for a more inclusive narrative (Hargreaves, 2000).
- Recognise and celebrate female athletes: Reinterpreting historical texts allows us to reclaim space for women in sports literature and history, ensuring that their contributions are not erased (Cooky & Messner, 2018).

Feminist research supports larger initiatives to change sports culture by critically analysing works such as Ode to Sport. The goal of this re-examination is to acknowledge how Coubertin's worldview perpetuated gender inequality, which has to be actively addressed, rather than to discount his contributions to the Olympic movement.

The Potential for Inclusive Re-imagining of Olympic Ideals

Since Coubertin's time, the Olympic Games have undergone tremendous change, with the aim of gender equality becoming more and more important. But attaining real justice necessitates making a deliberate attempt to reconsider and reinterpret the principles that have traditionally governed sport. A reimagined vision of the Olympics one that fully embraces inclusivity would involve:

9.1. Rewriting the Narrative of Sport

Instead of celebrating sport as an exclusive domain of male strength and conquest, a modern Ode to Sport might emphasise:

- Athleticism as a universal human experience: Strength, endurance, and perseverance are not gendered traits they are qualities that define all great athletes (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- Diversity in sporting ideals: Rather than equating athletic excellence with dominance and victory alone, an inclusive Olympic vision could celebrate teamwork, resilience, and community-building (Dworkin & Cooky, 2012).
- The contributions of female and non-binary athletes: A true celebration of sport would highlight the achievements of all competitors, ensuring that historically marginalised groups are recognised and valued (Hargreaves, 2000).

9.2. Institutional and Policy Changes

While significant progress has been made toward gender equality in the Olympics, further changes are needed to ensure full inclusivity.

- Equal representation in all sports: The elimination of gendered restrictions that limit women's participation in certain events (IOC, 2021).
- Equal pay and funding: Ensuring that female athletes receive the same financial and institutional support as their male counterparts (Cooky & Messner, 2018).
- More women in leadership roles: Increasing female representation in the International Olympic Committee (IOC) and other governing bodies (IOC, 2021).

9.3. The Role of Modern Sports Literature

Contemporary feminist sports poetry and literature have already begun to reshape the narrative of athleticism, challenging exclusionary traditions and advocating for a more inclusive vision. Works by poets such as Natalie Diaz, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Claudia Rankine offer alternative perspectives that celebrate the complexity of sport beyond Coubertin's rigid framework (Diaz, 2020; Komunyakaa, 1993; Rankine, 2014). These modern voices serve as models for how future representations of athleticism can be more inclusive and equitable.

10. FINAL THOUGHTS

The reassessment of Ode to Sport emphasises the necessity of continuously questioning and updating historical accounts that have disadvantaged women in sports. Despite having a significant impact on the Olympic Games, Coubertin's vision was ultimately exclusive and strengthened the notion that true athleticism was only for males. We can endeavour to create an Olympic movement that completely incorporates the principles of justice, equality, and fairness by critically analysing these texts and supporting structural reforms inside sports organisations.

Sport's future must be one in which all athletes regardless of gender have their successes honoured. Through continued

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feminist activism, policy reforms, and cultural shifts, we can build an Olympic legacy that is truly inclusive one that reflects the diverse and dynamic nature of athletic excellence in the modern world.

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