



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Study Of Power, Hierarchy And Social Control Through Sports In Fredrik Backman's Beartown

Karan M ¹,

Dr. S. P. Sasi Rekha ²,

Full Time Ph.D Research Scholar ¹, Department of English ¹, Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Associate Professor ², Department of English ², Kongunadu Arts and Science College (Autonomous), Bharathiar University, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India.

Abstract

Sports are often seen as a source of unity, discipline and national or community pride. However, beyond their surface appeal, they can also serve as instruments of power and control within a society. Through structured hierarchies, sports assign privilege and authority to certain individuals while marginalizing others. Loyalty to teams and athletes can silence dissent and uphold dominant social norms. This paper examines how power, hierarchy and social control are constructed and maintained through sports in Fredrik Backman's novel *Beartown*. This explores how sports reinforce existing power structures and are used to maintain social order through both visible and invisible forms of control. It analyzes the town's deep emotional and cultural investment in hockey as a mechanism that establish social order, grants authority to certain individuals, and marginalizes dissenting voices. The paper critically explores the symbolic violence inflicted on subordinated women, particularly through the community's reaction to sexual assault, revealing how silence, loyalty and fear operate as tools of control. Through characters like Maya, Amat and Kira, the research investigates how social norms tied to sports culture protect privilege and suppress justice. The study draws on real incidents in the novel to show how sports become a vehicle for both unity and exclusion, ultimately questioning the ethical consequences of blind communal loyalty.

Key Words: Sports, Community Pride, Hierarchy, Social Control, Sexual Assault, Silence, Loyalty and Fear.

Fredrik Backman is a Swedish author, widely celebrated for his emotionally rich storytelling and profound exploration of human relationships, community and identity. His debut novel *A Man Called Ove* (2012), humorous portrayal of grief and unlikely friendship. His writing style blends warmth and psychological insight, often focusing on ordinary people facing extraordinary emotional journeys. Backman's most acclaimed works include the *Beartown Trilogy* - *Beartown* (2016), *Us Against You* (2017), and *The Winners* (2022), which explore the impact of sports, masculinity and loyalty in a small, hockey obsessed town. Other notable novels include *Britt-Marie Was Here*, *My Grandmother Asked Me to Tell You She's Sorry* and *Anxious People*. His novels have been translated into over 40 languages and adapted into films and television series, including the popular adaptation of *A Man Called Ove* ("A Man Called Otto" starring Tom Hanks). Backman has received numerous literary honors and widespread critical acclaim, praised for his deep empathy, character-driven plots and ability to capture the quiet power of kindness and resilience.

Fredrik Backman's novel *Beartown* (2016) set in a small town where hockey is more than just a game, it is the center of everything. The people in the town believe that the junior hockey team can save their town from decline. "Everyone is waiting. Tomorrow, the Beartown Ice Hockey Club's junior team is playing in the semifinal of the biggest youth tournament in the country." (*Beartown* 2) This sets the tone for the entire novel. It immediately creates a sense of suspense and tension, as the whole town seems to be holding its breath for a single event. The town Beartown is a small, struggling community surrounded by forests, and for many of its residents, ice hockey is more than just a sport, it's their pride, their escape and a symbol of their identity. Their hopes, dreams and perhaps even their future are pinned to the success of this junior hockey team.

The match is not just another game; it represents a chance for the town to gain recognition and respect in the outside world. As the semifinal approaches, the pressure builds not just on the young players but on the entire community, which holds to the belief that a win could change everything. They hope that a championship win will bring fame, money and pride. Because of this strong belief, hockey becomes something sacred. The people connected to the sports, players, coaches, sponsors and fans who hold all the power. The most important person is Kevin, the star player, who is seen as a hero. "firing puck after puck after puck with the weight of an entire community on his shoulders." (*Beartown* 11) People respect and protect him not because of who he is as a person because he can win games.

This creates a system where power is based on athletic skills, not on character or fairness. Kevin's position in the team gives him special treatment. After the team wins the semifinal, a party is held to celebrate the victory. It is there that Kevin sexually assaults Maya. This horrific incident becomes the pivotal turning point in the novel. When Maya confides in her parents, Peter and Kira, they choose to report the assault, initiating a legal and social storm that divides the town. The community, desperate to cling to its dreams of hockey glory, reacts with disbelief, denial and even hostility toward Maya and her family. But People don't want to believe it. They choose to protect him instead of the victim. The town becomes divided. Instead of asking for justice, people attack Maya and her family for speaking out. This shows how power works in the

town. It is not shared equally. Those at the top like Kevin, are protected, while those who speak against them are silenced or pushed away. "Pride in a team can come from a variety of causes. Pride in a place, or a community, or just a single person." (Beartown 142) The sentence reflects how pride in a team goes beyond just winning, it comes from deeper emotional ties. In the novel, hockey symbolizes more than sport; it represents the town's identity, struggles and hope. People feel pride not just in the game but in what the team stands for a shared place, a tight-knit community or even one person who inspires them. For a town like Beartown, this pride offers a sense of belonging and purpose in a world that often overlooks them.

Hockey also creates a social order in the town. The players are treated as more valuable than others. They are given attention, respect and chances. Other people, especially those not involved in hockey, are seen as less important. This includes Maya, her friend Ana and even Amat, who is a good player but comes from a poor family and immigrant background. People like Amat must work much harder to be noticed and accepted. This kind of system makes it clear who belongs and who doesn't.

The town uses hockey to control people's actions and thoughts. Everyone is expected to support the team and stay silent about anything that might harm it. If someone speaks out, they are treated like an enemy. After Maya tells the truth about the assault, people avoid her, blame her and even threaten her. Her family is also targeted. "All she knows is the older girls in the kitchen laughed at her... (Beartown 207) This shows that the community cares more about the team's success than about justice. They would rather keep the problem quiet than risk losing a game or their good name.

Some characters try to fight against this unfair system. Amat chooses to tell the truth about what he saw, even though he is afraid. His choice takes courage and it costs him friendships and support. Benji is Kevin's best friend, struggles with his own secrets. He doesn't feel free to show his real self because the world of hockey does not accept difference or weakness. Peter Andersson, Maya's father, faces pressure from both the team and the town. He has to choose between being a manager and being a father. Kira, Maya's mother, stands firm. She supports her daughter and refuses to be silent, even when the whole town turns against them.

It shows how sports, when they become too important, can be used to control people and protect the powerful. The community uses hockey as a way to teach values like loyalty, strength and success but it often forgets about fairness, kindness and truth. Those who follow the rules of the game are rewarded and those who question it are punished. People are expected to fit in, stay quiet and not challenge the system. The research article titled "*Symbolic Violence against Subordinated Women in Fredrick Backman's Beartown*" by Hotman Nasutiona and Emil Eka Putrab, Universitas Putera Batam, Batam were explore the symbolic violence in an incredible way. In *Beartown* novel, symbolic violence against subordinated women is shown through the social systems that silence, shame, and exclude them without physical force. When Maya is sexually assaulted by a star hockey player, the town's reaction reveals this hidden violence. Instead of supporting her, many blame her or ignore her pain to protect the team's reputation. Women like Kira (Maya's mother) also face subtle pressures to stay silent or prioritize the community over justice. This reflects how

power operates through norms, loyalty and fear. It also forcing women into silence and obedience, even when they are victims.

Backman's novels explore, readers to think about what happens when a sport becomes more important than people's safety and dignity. It shows how a town can lose its sense of right and wrong when it focuses too much on winning. In *Beartown* novel, power is not only about who leads but also about who is believed, who is protected and who is pushed aside. The novel powerfully reveals how sports, especially when idolized by a community, can become a tool for maintaining power, reinforcing social order and controlling individual behavior. Through the story of a town obsessed with hockey, Fredrik Backman shows how blind loyalty to a team or tradition can silence victims, protect wrongdoers and punish those who speak the truth. The novel highlights the dangers of placing success above justice and how easily moral values can be lost in the name of pride and unity. At the same time, it also shows that true courage lies in those who dare to break the silence, question the system and stand for what is right. It reminds us that real strength is not in scoring goals but in standing up for what is right, even when you stand alone. The novel is a strong reminder that while sports can bring people together, they must never come at the cost of humanity, fairness and truth.

Works Cited

Backman, Fredrik. *Beartown: A Novel*. Simon and Schuster, 2017.

Nasution, Hotman, et al. "Symbolic Violence against Subordinated Women in Fredrick Backman's *Beartown*." *SNISTEK*, vol. 4, journal-article, 14 Jan. 2022.

Watch a Man Called Otto | Netflix. www.netflix.com/in/title/81616256?source=35&fromWatch=true.