

***“Indian girls are not supposed to play football”:
Gender in Gurinder Chadha’s Bend It Like Beckham¹***

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Abstract

Throughout history and all over the world, the controversial issue of gender inequality still persists in many cultures, despite enormous efforts from all sides to resolve that problem. As an inexhaustible subject and source of creativity, women in subordinated situations have been portrayed in all artistic areas, including literature, music and film, among other media. Evidently, female artists are much more susceptible and sensitive than men to gender issues, which are therefore culturally constructed and represented in media primarily by women. Among them, an important place is occupied by a British Asian woman director, journalist and scriptwriter – Gurinder Chadha. All her films quite understandably highlight the problems related to race, ethnicity, gender and hybridity – the more so as they depict the life of “women of colour” in the world in which they are marginalised and oppressed in the face of the dominant men on the one hand and of the privileged white people on the other. This paper will focus on Chadha’s most successful film, *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), in which she demonstrates how racial, cultural and gender conflicts can be peacefully resolved by cherishing family and friendship within the framework of the multicultural world.

Keywords: Gurinder Chadha, *Bend It Like Beckham*, gender issue, British Asian

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Introduction

In the postmodern era, ridden primarily with racial, ethnic and nationalistic problems worldwide, another controversial issue still exists in numerous cultures as a bone of contention, in spite of considerable efforts from all sides to close that chapter. The problem in question is, simply phrased: gender inequality, that is, the traditional gap between men and women, males and females, masculinity and femininity (as well as feminism, though in a different way). This problem is an inexhaustible source of creativity in all artistic areas, such as literature, music and film. It goes without saying that female artists are much more predisposed than men to portraying women in subordinated situations. Therefore, gender issues are culturally constructed and represented in media first and foremost by women ... and for women, above all.

Gurinder Chadha – life and work

Among these courageous women, a crucial place is occupied by the director, scriptwriter and journalist Gurinder Chadha, of Indian descent but raised in London, in Southall. Although she was brought up in the traditional way in a Punjabi family, as the second-generation immigrant, her environment was downright British. Therefore, at first she tried to reject the heritage of her culturally mixed – that is, hybrid family. Later on, however, she learned how to appreciate what is best on both sides and developed her own identity right in this cultural mixture, which has been reflected in numerous aspects of her life and behaviour, including the way she dresses. Her multicultural identity was completed when she married the Japanese American screenwriter and director Paul Mayeda Berges, with whom she has two children. In 2006, Chadha was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE), thus gaining the official recognition that she so much deserves.

Gurinder Chadha began her cinematic career by the short documentary *I'm English But...* (released in 1989), in which several young British Asians try to defy the traditional way of life in their families by listening to specific music – a mixture of Punjabi bhangra and rap (called Acid Bhangra). After that, Chadha became the first woman from the British Asian diaspora who directed a full-length feature film: *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993). This film, which was also her first feature, was nominated for the BAFTA (Best British Film) award and won the Best Newcomer to British Cinema award given by the *Evening Standard*. It introduces British Asian characters, as well – only this time it is a group of women travelling to Blackpool by bus. Although it is a feminist comedy full of humour, in the background we also watch the lives these women normally lead, apart from this trip, which are full of their personal traumas caused by racism, on the one hand, and sexism, on the other.

In fact, most of Chadha's films feature Asian protagonists and quite understandably focus on the problems inherent in the issues related to race, ethnicity, gender and hybridity – the more so as they depict the life of “women of colour” in the world in which they are marginalised and oppressed in the face not only of the dominant men but also of the privileged white people. That is why Gayatri Spivak rightly asserts that “the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (Spivak, 1988), while Ania Loomba draws attention to a “double colonization” of third world women, which mutually intensifies the problems of both race and gender (Loomba, 2005, p. 166).

Not only are these women doubly subordinated, but they are also the subject of what Angela McRobbie describes as “double entanglement”, which “comprises the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life” (McRobbie, 2004, p. 255), to include double standards comprising certain conservative attitudes, on one side, and some elements of liberalisation, on the other.

Besides *I'm English But...*, and *Bhaji on the Beach*, Gurinder Chadha has also directed, among other films: *What's Cooking?* (2000), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004), *Paris, je t'aime* (2006), *Angus, Thongs, and Perfect Snogging* (2008), and *It's a Wonderful Afterlife* (2010), until her latest release – *Viceroy's House*, which was screened for the first time at the International Film Festival in Berlin on 12 February 2017, and released in the United Kingdom on 3 March 2017. Her most successful film, both in its commercial aspect and regarding her professional reputation, is undoubtedly *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), which was a mega blockbuster not only on the national scene but also internationally. Jigna Desai refers to its box office earnings of some 26 million dollars in the U.S. alone, as well as to over 2 million pounds only during the first weekend in Britain, where it was selected as best 2002 comedy film (Desai, 2004, p. 50).

Having observed that “it is the focusing on issues of gender and sexuality that has produced [such] commercial successes” (Desai, 2004, p. 211), Desai adds that owing to this film Chadha was assigned “the title “queen of the multi” (which can ambiguously mean both multiplex and multiculturalism)” (Desai 2004, p. 68), and comments that, though “Bollywood and diasporic films seek to attract dominant (white) audiences in the West, transnational and multicultural filmmakers such as Mehta, Nair, and Chadha hold the distinct advantage of producing films that will be most accessible to cross-cultural viewers” (Desai, 2004, p. 212). Furthermore, Desai connects the commercial success of this film with its “political and topical engagements, namely, with the idea of feminism and sexual agency” (Desai, 2004, p. 212), and concludes that it was due to “both the visibility of Chadha as a filmmaker and the popularity of soccer and player David Beckham” (Desai, 2004, p. 50).

Nevertheless, not only did Chadha always insist that her films were British, and not multicultural, but *Bend It Like Beckham* was also explicitly advertised as a British film rather than ethnic (Asian or Asian British). It is quite true that “the regarding of the film as specifically English or British is encouraged by its occupation with football” (Korte and Sternberg, 2004, p. 170). Moreover, even though *Bend It Like Beckham* is about the protagonist's wish to play football as well as Beckham does (both football and Beckham being the synonyms of a male world and masculinity), that protagonist is not only female, but also a British Asian girl. Thus, as Desai notes, the film comprises “a political critique of the way sports participates in gendered and racialised national discourses. Sports and particularly soccer/football is a site in which the British Asian woman is interpellated into British heteronormativity.” (Desai, 2004, p. 68). The element of racist discourse is best displayed in the fact that the protagonist's father was banned from all British cricket teams because he had played that sport in Nairobi – which implies that cricket is a *(post)colonial* sport, while football is a *democratic* one.

Gender issue in *Bend It Like Beckham*

Besides ethnicity issues and gender barriers, this film has probably enjoyed such an enormous success also because it focuses on the favourite pastime of the British – football. In *Bend It Like Beckham*, gender expectations and cultural stereotypes are inextricably connected around the theme of women’s football, because the two main characters – Jesminder (Jess) Bhamra and Juliette (Jules) Paxton, girls who are at the same time talented at and dedicated to this sport, both encounter opposition from their families, though for different reasons. Thus, Chadha, who “always did things differently” (Fischer, 2003) – as she herself said in an interview, introduces football as a new element in order to highlight common stereotypes stemming from traditional discourse which shapes the female image in two separate cultures – British and Indian. Jess is of Indian origin, so her parents think she should stick to traditional family values and devote herself to studying and then finding a nice husband. They believe in the stereotype representative of Indian culture: that women are meant to stay at home, where they cook for the family and raise children, while men go to work or play sports, because it is well-known that “Indian girls are not supposed to play football” (Chadha, 2002).

Jules, on the other hand, is a British girl whose mother is afraid that by actively playing football she will become a lesbian, thus showing that she is “invested in gender normativity” (Desai, 2004, p. 215). Consequently, she wants her daughter to be more feminine, because “[N]o boy’s gonna want a girl who has bigger muscles than him” (Chadha, 2002). Similarly to Jess’s mother, she criticises Jules for being a tomboy, and pressures her to buy a push-up bra and not a sports bra, which clearly proves that “[T]he body gains meaning within discourse only in the context of power relations” (Butler, 2010, p. 117). Jules’ mother is trying to persuade her daughter to forget about football and become interested in other things in which the girls of her age are normally interested, such as boys and nice clothes.

It is obvious that both mothers have an obsession about breasts – as the symbol of a woman’s body which is very important in the colonial discourse – since Jess’s mom also makes a joke about her breasts that are the “size of mosquito bites” (Chadha, 2002) while the girl is trying a dress for her sister’s wedding. She, like Jules’s mother, urges her daughter to forget about football, too, but unlike Jules’s mother, she thinks that Jess should be more traditional and devote her life to getting married, cooking and bringing up children. The only difference between the two mothers is that for the Indian lady the daughter’s breasts denote “family, motherhood, and purity (marked as tradition), in contrast to the Western modes of romance and love (signifying modernity)” (Desai, 2004, p. 162). Discussing various theories on “the maternal body”, Judith Butler concludes that “[R]eason and mind are associated with masculinity and agency, while the body and nature are considered to be the mute facticity of the feminine” (Butler, 2010, p. 48), and Chadha has successfully proved this point.

The similarity of situations in which the two girls strive for the fulfilment of their goal is further highlighted by the fact that they are both in love with their team’s coach Joe, who is of Irish origin, which means that he is also “the other” to British cultural milieu. Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* therefore evidently reflects certain “complex

intersections of race, class and gender” (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, 2001, p. 169), and especially the complex gender relations within the respective cultures – the so-called gender culture. Gender culture is defined as a set of values and norms which construct femininity both socially and culturally, referring “to the desirable, ‘normal’ form of gender relations and of the division of labour between women and men. Cultural models of motherhood form a central element of gender cultural models – that is, cultural ideals about gender, the family, and motherhood.” (Crompton, 2003, pp. 61-62).

Nonetheless, while previously the gender relations in Asian immigrant families of the first generation belonged to *the male-breadwinner/female-home-carer model*, the second-generation girls are being prepared to become breadwinners as well, by graduating and finding a good job, thus switching to *the dual-breadwinner/dual-carer model*. The former model is described as the one which

conforms to the idea of the basic differentiation of society into public and private spheres. Women and men are seen to be complementarily competent for one of these spheres: men are regarded as breadwinners who earn the income for the family in the public sphere with waged work, whereas women are primarily regarded as being responsible for the work in the private household including child-care. (Crompton, 2003, p. 63).

Contrary to this, Jess and her older sister Pinky are not just groomed to find a future husband, plan the wedding, and obey the in-laws – they are prepared to become waged labourers, too. This is the latter model, which “reflects the notion of a symmetrical and equitable integration of both sexes into society. [...] the family economy consists of an equal distribution of domestic – meaning, in particular, childminding – and waged labour between a female and a male head-of-household.” (Crompton, 2003, p. 63). The shift in the model is evident when their mother tells Jess: “I was married at your age. You don’t even want to learn how to cook daal!” (Chadha, 2002). However, the authors of an in-depth study about education and employment of contemporary young women in Britain claim that most Black British and British Asian middle-class girls, even when they are clever and highly ambitious, often merely have “aspirations towards gendered and sometimes poorly paid careers” (Walkerdine, Lucey, and Melody, 2001, p. 149).

In a research of the phenomenon of “occupational feminization” – or, in other words: “the influx of women into the most prestigious positions on the occupational hierarchy”, it has been noticed that the masculinity/femininity divide is so strong and “so deeply entrenched in our mental vision of the world that it cannot even begin to be questioned as what it is – that is, an *arbitrary* social construction” (Crompton, 2003, pp. 155-156, our italics). Nevertheless, gender is, even in the twenty-first century, closely linked with “professional exclusion” and “discriminatory practices” within certain occupations, since it is well-known that women have been “excluded from most professions at their emergence.” (Crompton, 2003, p. 181). That is why the fact that in *Bend It Like Beckham* the basic plot revolves around football being played by girls is extremely important, with parallels being drawn between the two main protagonists from different cultures, but with rather similar gender-related problems within their families and wider environment. This is one of several South Asian

diasporic films in Britain – together with Deepa Mehta’s *Bollywood/Hollywood* and Mira Nair’s *Monsoon Wedding* – which, as Desai observes, “endeavour to contest the construction of South Asian and diasporic women as passive victims of heteropatriarchy. Each of the films stresses some challenge to the construction of Third World women as without sexual and social agency.” (Desai, 2004, p. 211). If we link such behaviour towards women with the theory on gender culture, we can agree that the professional development history can be seen “as an important element in securing the masculine dominance of the modern occupational structure associated with the male-breadwinner model, in which women were, initially, systematically denied access to occupations which would have enabled them to live independently” (Crompton, 2003, p. 181).

Conclusion

Chadha’s *Bend It Like Beckham* ends by both Jess and Jules being invited to America to join a women’s soccer team and to receive full scholarship. Having realised that his daughter can only be happy if she reaches her goal, Jess’s father lets her go, and the two girls are thus starting their successful football-player careers in America. During the final scene, Joe offers Jess a long distance emotional relationship and seals that with a kiss. This double happy-ending includes the success of a hybrid (multiracial) friendship between the two girls, as well as of a hybrid heterosexual romantic affair between Jess and Joe. By this film, Gurinder Chadha demonstrates how racial, cultural and gender conflicts can be peacefully resolved by cherishing family and friendship within the framework of the multicultural world.

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