

Marriage versus Soccer: A Study of Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham*

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Abstract: Popular Indian origin filmmaker Gurinder Chadha is known for making films on the lives of Indian immigrants living in England. Some of her popular films includes, *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993), *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) etc. In most of her works Gurinder Chadha deals with the theme of women issues in both inner and outer space. This research paper attempts to evaluate the issues that women face when they want to make a career in professional sport. Moreover, it will also highlight the conflict between the two-immigrant generations in the film *Bend it Like Beckham* and how the first-generation immigrants use culture to dominate the second-generation immigrants.

Keywords : Women, Sports, Career, Culture, Marriage, Soccer, Gender, Patriarchy.

Acclaimed filmmaker Gurinder Chadha is known for blending East and West in her diasporic films and *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) is one of them. It focuses on the life of a young girl, Jesminder Bhamra or Jess, struggling to make a career in sports. Jess is depicted as a great fan of David Beckham and like him aspires to become a soccer player but there are many obstacles that she must overcome before she can fully realize her dream. Being born and brought up in a middle-class Punjabi immigrant family in London, England during 1980s, Jess is not allowed to make her own decisions. Her parents, as other members of the Punjabi immigrant community, place loads of importance on good career given that they immigrated to the foreign land seeking better opportunities both for themselves and their future generations but sports is never viewed by them as a career choice.

Jess's deep obsession with both soccer and Beckham is manifested, in the very beginning, through her daydreaming in which she sees herself playing soccer alongside her favorite Beckham. She is more or less a misfit within her own ethnic community not only because she does not look like other girls but also because unlike them, she loves to play soccer.

Marriage and soccer are the two major themes running throughout the film. The clash between marriage and soccer parallels the clash between the two generations. Marriage is something which is viewed as highly sacred and essential part of life in Indian culture. Even for Indian immigrants, living away from their homeland, it continues to hold the same significance which often becomes a source of trouble for their children, especially when it is given more importance than career.

The clash between the two begins when, one day, Juliette Paxton nicknamed Jules, a member of the Hounslow Harriers (a local women's amateur football team), sees Jess playing in the park and is so impressed by her soccer skills that she invites her to try out for the team. Things go favorable for Jess and she joins the team along with winning the appreciation of the coach, Joe. She decides against sharing any news with her family, knowing well they will never support sports as a career. Her isolation within her family is often emphasized when we see her sharing her deepest thoughts and emotions with Beckham's poster. Later, when her mother becomes aware of her playing soccer, she becomes furious. According to her playing in childhood is okay but not in adulthood and obviously never as a career. She tells Jess bluntly – “We never stop you from playing in childhood but no more football now.” She also asks, – “What family would want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can't make round chapatis?” Here, Mrs. Bhamra is more concerned about fulfilling her daughter's would be in-laws' wishes rather than her daughter's. Her husband, Mr. Bhamra, agrees with her saying – “Your mother is right, now you should start behaving like a girl.” This overwhelms her with frustration and emotions and she begins to think that her gender is working as an obstacle between her and soccer. If only she had been born a boy, her life would have been much easier plus no household chores. She feels desperate realizing that she herself has no control over her life affairs as she must go by the rules set up by her parents and even if she gets married, it would only mean that the power to control her life would be



transferred from her parents to her husband. Likewise, in Andy Fickman's *She's the Man* Viola Hastings, the protagonist of the film, who plays soccer at her high school girls soccer team faces same difficulties and obstacles in her way to follow her passion of playing football. When her team was cut by the school authority, Viola and her teammates rushed to their coach and tried to join the boys' team but the coach refused to take them in. Moreover, he said that "girls are not as fast as boys or strong or athletic." Viola's love and passion for soccer was similar to that of Jess. The same thought that Jess had, that if she had been born a boy her life would have been much easier, comes to Viola's mind as well. Viola uses cross-dressing to transformed herself into "Sebastian" (her twin brother) to play in the boys' team.

It is not just the Indian parents but English parents too do not see sports as a good career choice for girls. Mrs. Paxton, Jules's mother, did not like her daughter to play sports. She is of the view that playing sports will turn her daughter into a man. In her book *Coming on Strong: Gender and Sexuality in Women's Sport*, Susan K. Cahn discussed the fear of people who see sports as a male realm, she said "women's assumption of "the manly role" generated deep hostility and anxiety among those who feared that women's athletic activity would damage female reproductive capacity, promote sexual licentiousness, and blur "natural" gender differences." Here, we can note that in spite of coming from entirely different cultural backgrounds the mothers of both the aspiring soccer players share the same anxiety that sport is, gradually, making them masculine. Mrs. Bhamra wants Jess to behave like a traditional Punjabi girl. Similarly, Mrs. Paxton wants her daughter to behave or act like a typical British girl. She wants to see her in girl's clothing rather than in track suites and t-shirts, and indulge in activities that occupies most of the girls of her age like shopping, dating, cooking etc. The ideology of people like Mr. and Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton unknowingly strengthens the domination of patriarchy in sports and weakens the women who want to participate in it. Their persistent emphasis on feminine attributes reveals their view on sports which contrasts highly with reality. They view sports as a masculine or manly thing where women have no role to play and if anything, women's participation in sports only takes away the feminine attributes from them, making them unsuitable as a prospective bride. American feminist Judith Butler in her popular work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) gave the theory of gender performativity. According to her, there is no relation between gender and act. In other words, being born male or female does not determine behavior. Thus, both the mothers by forcing their daughters to give up soccer, thinking it as a masculine activity, and by asking them to behave according to socially and culturally constructed gender norms seem to contradict this theory.

Women in general and mothers in particular constantly discourage their girls from participating in sports due to cultural factors. In *Heroines of Sport: The Politics of Difference and Identity*, Jennifer Hargreves states "a culture is remembered for its heroes and heroines, and sports constructs them and influences our perceptions of them continuously. In popular consciousness, heroes and heroines are men and women who are 'larger than life', 'inspirational icons', special people with extraordinary qualities that are constructed and represented in particular ways to encourage us to admire and idealize them. In other words, heroes and heroines are socially constructed through discourses and meanings and values that change over time. But heroes are more easily defined than heroines and there is greater social importance attributed to the production and celebration of male heroism." But for men, who unlike women occupy the public space, as in the case of Mr. Bhamra it is the racial factor that prevents him to encourage his daughter to participate in sports. It is his own bitter experience of discrimination in sports that causes him to not allow his daughter to play as he does not want his daughter to experience the same.

Jesminder continues to play even after her parents' denial. She knows that they will never allow her to play so she decides to lie. This earns her an opportunity to continue her training session. As Pinky's (Jess's elder sister) wedding date comes close, Jess asks for money to buy a pair of sandals. This delights her mother who thinks that finally her daughter has started taking interest in normal things. But Jess uses the money to buy herself a pair of sports shoes instead of sandals. Jess's constant lies, however unethical, apparently seems the only way to deal with her unsupportive parents until she gets a permission to play by her father.

To conclude, it can be said that the women, who occupy the domestic space, expect their daughters to follow their path by faithfully living by the socially and culturally constructed gender roles. Both Jess and Jules are not supported by their mothers but only discouraged. Even Jess's sister is unable to appreciate her soccer skills. On the other hand, the men in the film such as Mr. Bhamra, Joe, Mr. Paxton and Tony are portrayed in a more positive light by extending their support and encouragement to the girls whenever needed.

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