

REFUGEE, MIGRATION, DIASPORA

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Lecture 49

Lecture 49: Transculturality and Culture Navigators in Gurinder Chadha's Bend It Like Beckham - II

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on Refugees, Migration, and Diaspora. So, we are discussing cinema and diaspora, and our discussion is a continuation from our previous lecture, which was a reading and an analysis of Bend It Like Beckham. So, we will continue with our discussion on Bend It Like Beckham. In our last lecture, we were talking about the protagonist Jess and her ardor, her passion for football.



So, this is something very unlikely, very unconventional for an Indian woman, going by Indian middle-class standards, where a woman is expected to read, write, get educated, get accomplished, and then get married. Whereas Jess is really passionate about football. She wants to pursue football. She is an ardent fan of David Beckham, and her dream is to play like Beckham one day. And her family disapproves of that.

They think it's a very unrealistic dream. There is always this clash between her dream world—what she aspires to be—and the kind of reality that life gives her, her immediate surroundings, her familial surroundings give her. For example, she's expected to, know a

little bit of cooking, help her sister with shopping, be involved in her sister's marriage, and so forth. We see in *Bend It Like Beckham* a celebration of a multicultural English society, where people come from multiple backgrounds, different descents.

For example, We have the character of Jules, played by Keira Knightley, who is a fellow footballer and a friend of Jess. And also the character of their coach, Joe, played by Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, who is of Irish descent. So, all these characters come from different cultural backgrounds and different countries as their homelands. They trace their roots to different descents and backgrounds, but they come together as good friends.

This actually represents the multicultural English society. So, the film is significant in portraying a crucial aspect of migration and diaspora, which is transculturality. In his review, Sharan Sandhu discusses how the film addresses key aspects of the life of South Asian women in the diaspora, especially when intergenerational and inter-ethnic conflicts in sports are at stake. So, we see two kinds of gaps emerging through this filmic narrative. At one level, we have the values changing and transitioning visibly down the generations, as Jess is not very well understood

by her parents because the intergenerational values and understanding of English society, the immediate society, are very different. The way her parents look at England, the way they look at London, is not quite the same as how Jess perceives things around her. For her, the reality is a little different; an intergenerational gap through which the story moves forward. And then we have the interethnic—it could be conflict, it could be an interface, it could be exchanges happening at the level of sports.

For example, the friendship that we see among Jess, Jules and Joe, right? And then we see that the bicultural aspects of Jess's life serve as a means of transculturality in the multi-ethnic English society. The fact that Jess, to an extent, has a bicultural aspect, she harbours bicultural values. This very aspect serve as a means of transculturality in the multi-ethnic English society, right? It enables her to kind of connect with the English society.

She goes to play in the finals for an English football club wearing a sari. It actually symbolizes, it actually in a way props up the bicultural aspects of her identity. So playing for a club, you know, football club is very spectacular in this film. At the climax, she stands up for her dream of becoming a professional football player. And we see that she's able to convince her Indian parents, who are culturally coded in such a way as to think that sport is,

Bend It like Beckham

- The **bicultural aspects of Jess' life** serve as the means of **transculturality** in the multiethnic English society: she **goes to play in the finals for an English football club wearing a Sari**, a traditional dress for Indian women; at the climax, she stands up for her dream of becoming a professional football player and **convinces her Indian parents** – who are culturally coded to think that sport is not suitable for women – **to let her go to Santa Clara, USA** to join an American club
- With the help of her friend, Jules, Jess joins the Hounslow Harriers, a football club for women, where she **interacts with other people from different cultural backgrounds**, including Mel (Shaznay Lewis), the team captain, an Afro-British woman, and Joe, the team coach, an Irish






Image credit: Getty Images

in the first place is not suitable for women and of all sports definitely football is something that is conventionally associated with men. So the family do not approve of her decision at the beginning only to let her go to Santa Clara US in the end to join an American club. So with the help of her friend Jules, Jess joins the Hounslow Harriers, which is a football club for women, and here she interacts with other people who are coming from different cultural backgrounds. It includes the team captain Mel

played by Shazney Lewis, who is an Afro-British woman, as well as Joe, who is the team coach, and Irish himself, right? So we see that the football club becomes a rich ground for harbouring, for cultivating multicultural values, as well as it becomes a very rich ground for cultivating, for nurturing transculturality, where people, the different players can learn from each other's culture. They can actually benefit from each other's cultural assets. Now, like I have already mentioned before, Jess is expected to lead the traditional role of an Indian woman which is reserved for her by her parents and this implies firstly studying in order to become a solicitor and then learning to cook and however all these accomplishments would ultimately lead to getting successfully married to an Indian man,


and then be able to fulfill the traditional role of a housewife, just like her eldest sister, Pinky. So on one occasion, when her mother discovers Jess's passion for football, she says, what kind of family would want a daughter-in-law who can kick a football around all day, but cannot make round chapatis? So, what kind of a family would want a daughter-in-law who can kick a football round all day but cannot make round chapatis? So, here this is a very gendered comment. Football...

as a passion for a woman seems very unreal, very unconventional. People never, especially in the Indian reality, Indian social reality, people don't talk about this. It's something considered as very rare, and we also see that a woman's existence is always

considered in a very utilitarian term and that these statements, the statements such as the one that Jessa's mother makes, naturalizing, normalizing the fact that a woman is born in order to be used in the form of different roles, familial roles.

Bend It like Beckham

- Jess is **expected to lead the traditional role** of an Indian woman reserved for her by her parents, which implies studying to become a solicitor and learning to cook, and **then ultimately marrying an Indian man** to fulfil the traditional role of a housewife, like her elder sister, Pinky
- On one occasion, when her mother discovers Jess' passion for football, she says, '**what kind of family would want a daughter-in-law who can kick a football around all day but can't make round chapattis?**' (22:10-22:12)
- But by the end of the film, it is shown that she **goes on to pursue her career as a professional footballer** in a club in Santa Clara in the USA; and **her interaction with her football coach, Joe, results in fondness** for each other that also **defies the cultural norms**, given her Indian background.



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It could be the mother, the wife, the sister, the daughter and so forth. So she is not good enough until she becomes a good daughter-in-law. What is the use of such a daughter-in-law who can just kick a football around? So basically we are not talking about a woman's leisure time, her pleasure, her self-development. We are not talking about her own interests, regardless of how it would benefit others.

But we are thinking of how a woman's interest, talents or efficiency can be streamlined towards benefiting the familial space, towards facilitating the familial space, right? However, we see by the end of the film, it is shown that Jess does go on to pursue her career as a professional footballer in Santa Clara and her interaction with her football coach, Joe, results in some kind of fondness for each other, which also defies the cultural norms given her Indian background. So, she is able to transcend and she is able to kind of traverse these time-worn lines and boundaries.

She is able to, you know, cross the gendered line and then the ethnic cultural line also demarcated, and she finds a partner in her football coach, who is a non-Indian, who is a white man. And also the fact that she has been able to convince her family to let her play football is something remarkable. It is something in a way path-breaking because she is able to do something different from her elder sister, Pinky, who is successfully leading the life of a homemaker. So here is this short snippet we would see where Jess's elder sister, Pinky, reminds Jess of her traditional role when she asks about marrying



An English Gora, right? And the sister, as it is very obvious from the video, is not very happy with this decision. She's advising her against it, right? So we will just go back. So we see the conversation between the two sisters, right?

Pinky is not very happy with the fact that she has chosen, just has chosen a partner outside the Indian community. So let's try playing this again. So. Do you think mom and dad would still speak to me if I ever brought an example of a transcultural lifestyle? Where the parents are at the beginning shown as the proponents of monocultural values.

Once again, going back to the question of how culture can, you know, even exist without flowing. Can there really be, you know, cultures that are stable and the same across time? That's not possible because cultures flow, they mix with other cultures, there is hybridity, there are influences from different sources, and that's how cultures evolve. So, the Bhamra family were proponents of monocultural values, pretty rigid at the beginning, but we see at the same time that the second generation follows a transcultural life. However, having said that, we see that Pinky and Jess are different from each other.

The two sisters from the same generation are not quite the same. Now, the painting of the Golden Temple of Amritsar has been very prominently placed in the Bhamra living room near Guru Nanak's portrait, and a gold model of that temple sits on the shelf close to the bar area, whereas Jess's room is occupied with jerseys and posters of English football star David Beckham. So, we see within the same house, the vibes are quite different in different places. The living room is like the metaculture of the Bhamra family, which has very strong Sikh vibes.

So, the different parts of the Bhamra household emanate different kinds of spirit or meaning. The living room almost gives very strong Indian Sikh vibes, in terms of the way

objects and materials are arranged around it. So, we have a portrait of Guru Nanak Ji. We have, you know, the painting of the Golden Temple of Amritsar.


So, this is the metaculture of the Bhamra family. In contradistinction, we have Jess's room, which is a mini-narrative within that larger narrative. And it is not about any religion. It's not about a lot of Indianness.

Rather, it is more about football. Her room is full of, you know, jerseys and posters. And all these are surrounding one iconic figure, which is the English football player David Beckham. So we have jerseys and posters of English football star David Beckham kind of occupying the whole of Jess's room.

So although Pinky and Jess wear Indian attire, they do wear a lot of salwar kameez at home. When they go out, they wear western outfits. They also use the English language while speaking to each other. This is also something remarkable.

Transculturality in the family

- The Bhamra family serves as an example of a transcultural lifestyle where the parents are, in the beginning, shown as the proponents of monocultural values, but the second generation follows the transcultural life
- The **painting of the Golden Temple of Amritsar is prominently placed in their living room** near Guru Nanak's portrait, and a gold model of that temple sits on the shelf close to the bar area, whereas **Jess' room is occupied with the jersey and posters of English football star David Beckham**
- Although Pinky and Jess wear Indian attire, salwar-kameez, at home, when they go out, they wear Western outfits. They also use the English language while speaking to each other



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Within the Punjabi household that they have in London, the two sisters—however, the two members of the second generation, these two girls, Pinky and Jess—talk to each other in English. Next, we see that food is used to show cultural interaction throughout the movie. The director herself believes that food is a great cultural codifier, and she has used the metaphor of food to show the multicultural society of England as well as the exchange of cultures. So when Jess visits Jules's home, her mother, after knowing that she is Indian, boasts about the curry she made the other night. So basically, through food, people are able to connect.


Food can also create, you know, problems between people by highlighting the differences. So basically, food can enable, you know, relationships. Food can act as a

connector. And at the same time, food can also highlight differences, the differences between two people's cultures.

So, food itself has its own spirit, its own life, its own language, and food also acquires new stories as it travels through time and space. Food has its own life and its own trajectory to follow. So, it is a great cultural codifier indeed. And, you know, when, for example, Jules's mother says that she made a great curry the other night, she says this in the presence of an Indian girl, Jess. We know that this is an attempt to connect with Jess.

Food as medium of cultural interaction

- Food is used to show the cultural interaction throughout the movie. Chadha, the director, herself believes that **food is a "great cultural codifier"**. She has used the metaphor of food to show the multicultural society of England, as well as the exchange of cultures
- When Jess visits Jules' home, **her mother, after knowing that she is an Indian, boasts about the curry that she made the other night**
- In a highly symbolic scene, Mr Paxton (Frank Harper), Jules' father, **teaches the off-side rule** to his wife Paula (Juliet Stevenson), **with the help of international food**, including Japanese teriyaki sauce and 'posh French mustard', which he moves forward and backwards on the table



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This is an attempt to recognize her Indianness, her Indian background. So, in a highly symbolic scene, Mr. Paxton, played by Frank Harper, who is Jules' father, teaches the offside rule to his wife Paula, played by Juliet Stevenson, with the help of international food, including Japanese teriyaki sauce and posh French mustard. And he moves these forward and backward on the table, right? So we see that through the symbol of international food, you know, Mr. Paxton is trying to show how a multicultural society, the multicultural society in England works, how the English multicultural society functions, and he moves them backward and forward on the table.

This could also be analogous with the football, you know, field, the football match, where we have these different forward and backward positions, right? So, this clearly reminds me of what Roland Barthes says in Mythologies. The fact that none of the mythologies, none of the society's conventions have anything natural to them.

It is the immediate society that ascribes values to certain conventions, certain sets of practices. So for a football match, if an alien came and sat, you know, as a spectator, it would know nothing about what's going on in the field unless you are, you know, part of

the in-group audience who knows the codes of any game, any convention. It could be a football match. It could be a wedding.

It could be a religious practice or a procession. Unless you are part of that in-group community, you would know nothing about it. You wouldn't know how to act in a given situation. So food in a way is very similar to these mythologies, which are, after all, naturalized because they are, you know, kind of passed down the generations, they are bequeathed to the next generations, you know, but there is nothing kind of intrinsic or natural about them, right?

And so we see that these are all different codes that belong to societies from different parts of the world. And the more we are able to, you know, refrain from adding values to them, the fewer values we ascribe to them, the more facilitated we are in a global context, in a multicultural context. So, if we are not value-judging any of these codes—these foods, clothing, or practices—we tend to be more ready for a multicultural society or a multicultural world. In this scene, we see the dining table of the Paxton household displaying the multicultural sentiments and the transcultural life of an English middle-class family.


So, they are almost playing a football match on the table itself, and almost these different sauces and spices seem to be like the different players—the teriyaki sauce, the sea salt sauce, and the mustard sauce—these are like the different players on the field, right? It's a very interesting scene. Along with the food, the music has also played a significant role in depicting transculturality in this film.

Food as medium of culture interaction

In this scene, the dining table of the Paxton household displays the multicultural sentiments and transcultural life of an English middle-class family



has to be between the teriyaki sauce and the sea salt.



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It exemplifies Homi Bhabha's concept of third-space culture, in which the hybrid use of language, a polycultural mix of music, diverse patterns of behavior, and ultimately

different identity constructs in dynamic interaction are mutually enriched and can develop further. So, whenever we are talking about a third space, we are talking about possibilities, becoming manifold, you know, through a mishmash of, you know, different pre-existing elements; new elements can further be formed. It could be in terms of language, in terms of food, as well as music, right?

Now, in the iconic wedding scene, people from all age groups are shown as enjoying and grooving in the fusion of Indian and Western music, which symbolizes the blending of cultures. So, here, Rings believes that all this is mirrored and shaped by European mass media, including migrant cinema and television, and it is particularly obvious that in this film, as film music encourages British Asian Jess to dream the dream, right? So here the fusion music, the Indo-Western music that we have is a way of further giving a kick to her dreams, kind of further inspiring Jess's dreams, right? So the film setting reflects the transcultural aspects of blending cultures.

So bending. Bending, yet not breaking. Rather than breaking off from one's culture, going on to become something completely different, the film promotes, the film advocates for blending and bending of culture. As Rings would put it, *Bend It Like Beckham* is about bending traditional norms, not breaking them, because that will likely result in a family breakup.

So that would, if Jess were to, you know, break off from her family, it would be very disappointing. It would mean that she's, you know... pursuing her dreams regardless of her parents' choices and her parents' wishes. She is able to in the end you know convince her parents that she really wants to become a football player, and she does not really defy her family values. She just kind of bends them a little and blends them with the English culture so Jess does not want to fully conform to her parents' cultural expectations. Rather, she wishes to be a part of a life in the host culture that she has accepted as a part of her own. So she plays football without letting her parents know about it,

And her sister also covers for her while she goes out to play. So she gets a little bit of disapproval and a little bit of support from her family, and that's how her dream, her aspiration to become a footballer, kind of evolves. Towards the end of the film, Jess becomes vocal about her dreams, something that her parents are extremely disapproving of, and she does not want to pursue them without her parents' permission. So this is precisely where I was trying to get at.

Blend, not break

- The film's title reflects the transcultural aspects of **blending culture, rather than breaking off from culture**. As Rings (2016) puts it, *Bend It Like Beckham* is about bending traditional norms, not breaking them, because that will likely result in a family break-up
- **Jess does not want to fully conform to her parents' cultural expectations** but rather wishes to be part of a life in the host culture that she has accepted as part of her own. She plays football without letting her parents know about it, and her sister also covers for her while she goes out to play







Image source: British Vogue





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She does not really want to pursue her dream without her parents' approval. She does not want to frustrate her previous generation's kind of expectations in a great way. She wants to become a footballer without hurting her family values, right? She does not want to create a rift, a crack between the two generations, basically.

However, after the realization by Jess's father about the importance of a football career for his daughter, we see that the father also appears to be much more considerate. Once the father realizes how football can enhance, can kickstart her career, he appears to be much more considerate. So he sends Jess to play in the finals in the middle of her sister's wedding. That's a big leap compared to how orthodox the family has been shown towards the beginning. He lets her play while her sister is getting married without letting anyone know about it because he cannot see the long face of his daughter.


And with his new personal attitude, you know, there is a change in the behavior of the entire family. So the father, in a way, heralds this change. He's the harbinger of this change in the previous generation. He realizes how important football is for Jess, and now we see that the family allows Jess to join Jules on her journey to the United States.


So here we have a snippet once again. Let's take a look. So in this climax scene of the film, Jess, in a way, is deluded by her family members who are standing in front of the goalpost. And they're apparently trying to stop her from, you know, scoring the goal...

...her goal in the larger sense. The entire family comes in the way, you know, standing in front of the goalpost, the cultures through mediating on cultural misunderstandings. She is working on these gap areas, such as cultural misunderstandings, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering intercultural relations, and in turn, Jess kind of explains her position and her bond with her Irish football coach. Right.

Jess As Culture Navigator

- The movie is also instrumental in understanding the role of cultural navigators through the protagonist, Jess. She helps in bridging the gaps between the cultures by meditating on cultural misunderstandings, promoting cultural exchange, and fostering intercultural relationship
- She is shown as interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds. She also helps her father – who, along with her mother, is socially homogenizing and culturally delimiting Jess – to bond with her Irish football coach. In the closing scene, they are shown as playing cricket together.
- Her ability to navigate between two cultures is visible when she has **two different aspirations belonging to two distinct cultures** – her ambition to become a footballer and to follow traditional cultural roles as well




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So she is able to help her father embrace her decision. The father, in fact, the entire family—both her parents—are quite orthodox. They have their own socially homogenizing ideas, culturally delimiting notions, and she is able to rework their thinking. So in the closing scene, they are shown playing cricket together, right? So they are also able to accept this Irish football coach that Jess is so fond of.

So her ability to navigate between two cultures is visible when she has two different aspirations belonging to two distinct cultures. Her ambition to become a footballer and to follow traditional cultural rules as well. She does not really abandon her Indian-ness. She just additionally wants to explore her passion for football.

So here is once again a snippet that we have. Let us take a look. So in this scene, her friendship with Jules helps bridge the gap between her Indian Sikh family and Jules's European family. So this scene is, we would say, quintessentially a quintessential Bollywood scene where everything ends well. So things end in a happy manner.

People get what they want, right? Her friendship with Jules helps bridge the gap between them, the Indian family and the European family, and the concept of transculturality, as described in the film, is an answer to rigid monocultural practices. So it follows Homi Bhabha's notion of hybridity and ambivalence.

Almost all of us are living a transcultural life in today's times, which can be observed through the rise of English as a global language, and the use of English expressions and words in everyday speech—for example, words like 'job,' 'internet,' and 'club' are used more and more. So English music being played on the radio, the rise of, you know, all these phenomena are symptomatic of the transcultural life we are living, whether

consciously or unconsciously. It also helps open new ways of life, as Jules introduces Jess to the club and the coach, inspiring her to become a professional player.

It becomes essential to embrace transculturality to avoid cultural conflicts in a multicultural society. Although it may result in the formation of a new hybrid cultural identity, and sometimes such hybrid identity could come at the cost of losing one's homogeneous cultural practices, these new hybrid formations are seen as an answer to rapidly growing multicultural societies. So with this, we come to the end of today's lecture. Let's meet in our next lecture with a new topic. Thank you.

