



INDIAN 'HYBRIDITY' IN BRITAIN AS REPRESENTED IN THE DIASPORIC FILM
BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM: AN ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The movie *Bend it Like Beckham* carries us into a little Indian world in London in Southall where we come across the apprehensions, fears, and anxieties a Punjabi Sikh family is subjected to while preserving and establishing its homeland's values and culture. The older generation that somehow gained ground in a foreign land is worried about the next generation that finds a lot of difference between the culture inside the house and outside the house. Thus diasporic cinema successfully exposes the complex fibre of identity that weaves an immigrant's life.

Key words: Disapora, hybridity, soccer, marriage, race, gender, culture

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I am French in Germany I am a German in
France
I am a Catholic in the Protestant world and a
Protestant in a Catholic world
I am a foreigner wherever I go
I am so willing to hug everything
But everything seems to be slipping through my
fingers.

Diasporic Cinema is a medium that encapsulates the stories of immigrant people and thus, in a way, mimics real life. The stories are made complex by the notion of transient identities and social structures. Diasporas do not emerge out of a sudden rupture, but have the qualities of dislocation and displacement. The spaces that come to be inhabited by the Diaspora are often hybrid and multicultural in nature. Hybridity, which becomes a part of the émigré, also transcends in such liminal spaces that get occupied. Hybridity is a term used by postcolonial scholars to signify the immigrant's

sense of displacement and dislocation, and fragmentation of identities, often resulting in spaces inhabited by Diasporic communities. There are recurring themes that surface in Indian Diasporic Cinema. The common themes are often woven around the issue of nostalgia towards the untainted motherland, resentment towards a lost Culture, holding on to pastiche culture, alienation and a sense of otherness in a foreign land, racial tension, generation gap, and Identity struggles. However, of all the complexities that bind the lives of Indian immigrants, there are certain elements that act as agents of reconnecting the Indian immigrant to his/her homeland. Apart from Indian ethnic food, music and the arts, Indian cinema (in national and regional languages) to a large extent helps in establishing this relationship.

The personal stories or narratives of the immigrants reflect their choices and struggles. Cinema acts as a medium of transferring these

narratives in the form of moving images. Hence, it acts as an effective tool for exploring the Indian Diasporic identity, and the role that it plays in creating a larger identity construct, that is continuously negotiating between time, space and cultures. Diasporic films portray life stories of migrant individuals, the representation of their homeland; and help to preserve and cultivate the original culture and language. Feature films, as a medium of visual culture, act as a way to broadcast the immigrant's way of life. It is argued that scenes of places in feature films woven around the Diaspora are efforts to represent the culture and Identity of its inhabitants. The importance of Indian Diasporic Cinema as a lens to look at the lives of Indian immigrants is further affirmed by the place it holds in their lives. It transcends its role of providing purely entertainment value, by functioning as a medium for immigrants to relive their lives they left behind in the homeland. Cinema provides a site of investigation in these negotiations not only because it is widely accessible, but also because of its engagements with globalization through circulation. As the Indian Diaspora evolves, Indian Diasporic Cinema also takes on various shapes and forms. Through the frames of a feature film, one can witness the lives and identities of the people, as it unfolds and evolves. The collective identity of Diaspora as represented in the Diasporic Cinema is often the subject of debate and criticism.

Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) explores the identity of the Indian migrant subject as represented in this film. The theme depicts the spatial as well as the psychological space of the individual presenting the physical as well as the metaphorical aspect of an individual's journey from his homeland to his adopted place of residence. It looks at the conflict of tradition and cultural issues faced by second generation Indians living in London. The children of this family are expected to abide by certain social norms, prescribed behaviour and follow the Indian culture in terms of clothing, food, music and language. Also, many issues pertaining to place, gender, religion and culture surface through the narrative, exposing the complex array of identity constructs that go into an immigrant life.

By watching this feature film, one can estimate the complex parameters that go into the emergence of a Diaspora as well as its current relationship with the motherland. Although the personal struggles of people belonging to the Indian Diaspora may share certain commonalities, the overall characteristics of the Diaspora may vastly vary according to contingent where the Diaspora is located. For example, the Indian Diaspora in United Kingdom or its previous held colonies is very different in its history as well as development, to the one that emerged in the United States. The place of residence and emergence, thus, greatly affect the relationship between the mother country, India to its Diaspora.

Indian subjectivity

The story of *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) revolves around the lives of an Indian family living in Hounslow West, Southall, London, a neighbourhood predominantly known for its Punjabi Sikh population. Directed by Gurinder Chadha, the film deals with multicultural and multiracial subjects, trudging between characters that are struggling to create a distinct identity for themselves that appeases their Eastern world traditions while living in a Western society. The emphasis throughout the film is on being a model Indian person and what it means to be *Indian* in a Diasporic context.

During the course of the film, there is a strong emphasis on feminist issues and queer sentiments. Comparisons can also be made between the modern form of Diaspora represented by the younger generation and that occupied by the older generation. In the final scene of the film, Jessminder 'Jess', the protagonist, is about to take the penalty kick that can take her team to victory when she suddenly visualizes her family members as part of the opposing team. This is the chance for her to rise above her fears and break the wall of obsolete thinking and everything else that is holding her back.

Another issue that is highlighted in the film is the role of women in preserving and sustaining the myth of Indian culture. The film uses gender and queer issues to bring forth the sentiments of the Punjabi community. The multiple identities and gender roles taken up by the characters, in a way, support the stereotypes but also question the

obvious. The character of Jess symbolizes the struggles and tribulations of the Diaspora that has to switch between different roles, and alter it with changing times. Jess's association with soccer is looked down upon by her family. Soccer, a sport that is supposed to be masculine in nature does not complement the 'Indian woman' image that Jess's parents want her to adopt.

Using humour and comical references, Chadha presents the complexities of living in a multicultural environment. The negotiation of identities and the creation of space to support specific cultural, ethnic and religious needs are the common denominators that produce a distinct immigrant lifestyle. In this particular case, the lives of a Sikh family in an ethnic Indian neighbourhood, Southall in West London, are highlighted.

The Narrative

Taking soccer as the backdrop of the film, Chadha looks at the life of Jessmendir, 'Jess', a young British girl with a Punjabi heritage, whose passion for the sport and the romantic involvement with her white Irish coach, makes her constantly negotiate between her Punjabi and British identity. Her father, Manmohan Singh Bhamra is a stereotypical Punjabi immigrant who works at the Heathrow International Airport. The proximity to the Heathrow International Airport allows the people of Hounslow West to take up security, administrative and desk staff jobs at the airport. The mother, Sukhwinder Bhamra is a homemaker and is shown to be very traditional and conservative in her approach. Her character, another stereotype of a traditional Punjabi woman living in London, is always seen in the traditional Punjabi clothing of the *salwaar kameez* with *dupatta*. Jess's elder sister, Pinky Bhamra also works at the Heathrow International Airport. The four members of this Punjabi immigrant family represent the different identity structures that can be found in a Diasporic landscape. Soccer being viewed as a masculine sport is not encouraged for Jess, who, according to her father, must start behaving like a 'proper Indian woman'. Jess's interest in soccer gets her to become the first Indian girl to play for a local soccer club, and eventually to Santa Clara, an American University, that sponsors her education. Coming from a traditional Sikh family,

Jess is expected to follow the religious and cultural customs that her family believes in.

Nation and Diaspora gendered and racialized

Additional complexity in *Bend It like Beckham* comes from multiple themes that the film touches. Jess, is not just dealing with being an Indian woman in Britain, but is also shown trying to fit the mould of a Sikh Indian woman, which, in the film, is expected to marry a man who is also of Sikh origin (like her mother, father, relatives and friends in England). This becomes apparent at Pinky's wedding, in the way that the guest that are present gossip about Jess's future, her soccer and the kind of man she should marry.

In addition, when Jess is on the soccer field, her female friends that go to watch her are not really interested in seeing her play soccer. She is merely a pretext for them to see the boys who are playing with her. The three girls seated on a bench, are almost dressed alike in pink blouses, typical of how little girls are dressed. They gossip about the boys on the field that, to Jess are just her soccer teammates. In this scenario, Jess is shown struggling between her interest in playing soccer, and acting more like young women her own age, that are shown to have more of an interest in chasing boys than playing sports like soccer.

As the film unfolds, the viewer is transported to Southall where the Indian community is visibly portrayed. The street scene in this area is full of color and the predominant people one sees on the street seem to be of Indian origin. While Jess goes from one street corner to another with her sister, they run into shoppers viewing *sarees* on hangers, gowns and women's clothing made from beautiful and delicate laces, etc. Even in that setting, Jess is presented as the outcast because she wears an athlete's jersey that is devoid of any colours. Besides being uninterested, the friends she encounters with her sister while walking on the street in Southall are cast in female roles that she is shown removed from.

As Pinky's wedding scene unfolds, the father, Manmohan Singh Bhamra, who is an employee at Heathrow Airport, can be seen as a stereotypical representation of an Indian man; dressed in his uniform, he still wears his turban and

keeps his beard, part of a distinguishing characteristic among men of Sikh origin. Even when they are in India, the Sikh insists on being culturally distinct from the rest of the Indians by the manner they dress, and the turban and the beards are a must for them to keep regardless of the social responsibility they may hold. The individual immediately assumes a dual cultural identity by that mode of dressing and by profession; this dual identity is personified in Manmohan Singh Bhamra's character; and its portrayal in the film. There is gender, space of women, and a culture clash between what the mother supposedly believes should be the role of women in society, and what her daughter actually wants to do professionally.

The dominance of men in the field of sports, especially soccer, is highlighted through various situations created by the filmmaker. Jess, being a young girl from a traditional Punjabi-Indian family has to face many obstacles in order to work towards her dream of playing soccer professionally. Her dream, though restricted by her family's worldview is shown to be very naïve and innocent, since she just wants to play soccer and not be called back home to help with the house chores.

On the other hand, her fellow team mate Juliette 'Jules' who is a white British girl faces little criticism for her interest in sports. Unlike Jess, Jules's father, Alan Paxton, is a big supporter of the game and encourages her in every way, despite continued resistance from the mother, Paula Paxton. She is concerned about her daughter's lack of interest in boys and anything feminine, and tries often futile ways of convincing Jules to act more like a girl.

The whole concept of arranged marriage is highlighted throughout the film, its popularity amongst the Indian Diaspora and the pursuit of negotiating an Indian Identity based on obsolete traditions. In this sense, regardless of being a Sikh Indian woman, Jess faces the same social discriminations as her English counterpart, Jules. Thus, gender and place in the society always seem to go hand in hand and women seem to suffer both sides of discrimination.

Insideness and Outsideness: Home Away from Home in the form of 'Little India'

People are their place and a place is its people. The identity of places cannot be understood in terms of patterns of physical and observable features, nor as a product of attitudes but as a combination of all. The identity of a place comprises of three interrelated components, namely—physical features or appearances, observable activities and functions, and meanings or symbols. Hence, with a continuous exchange of experiences and characteristics, each place develops a unique set of Identity constructs that responds to the spirit of the place.

Identity is neither an easily reduced nor a separable quality of places—it is neither constant nor absolute, nor is it constantly changing and variable. The Identity of place takes several forms, but it is the very basis of our experience of this place as compared to any other.

The concept of Insideness and Outsideness can be seen in the scene where a ritual prior to Pinky's wedding is taking place. The Bhamra residence is filled with friends and relatives who are shown to be Indians; not a single non-Indian is part of this celebration.

Also, the next door neighbour seems to be oblivious of this huge celebration. The neighbour, who for a brief moment is captured by the camera, is a white woman who chooses to dry her laundry while her Indian neighbours are having a wedding ritual. The contrast in the two spaces is highlighted by the hedge that separates the two households, also, this hedge symbolizing the spatial as well as a cultural divide brings to notice the way an Indian immigrant family chooses to conduct itself in this environment. It is a completely different world that has been borrowed from India and replanted in a small borough of London. The rituals, language, food, dance, music, all signify the culture and ethnicity that the migrants have tried to preserve; for these things define who they are. These linkages to their motherland define their Identity.

Diasporic filmmakers tend to portray spaces that are familiar and comforting. Often times, belonging to the first, sometimes second-generation immigrant families, they attempt to portray the kind of complex cultural lifestyle they saw and experienced in their childhood. This

experience thus brings more authenticity to the characters and narratives in their films. In *Bend it like Beckham*, Chadha too attempts to provide an insider's view of the narrative, providing a glimpse of an authentic Diasporic way of life to the viewers.

The character of the Indian business district located in west London is well captured in *Bend it Like Beckham*. A few stills from the busy street of Southall, known for its Punjabi Indian population, gives a glimpse of the cultural lifestyle of the Indian migrant. For instance, 'Jalebi Junction', a very popular Indian sweet shop, is also emphasized by the filmmaker in this scene. The presence of fresh *Jalebis* (fried and sweet dough strings) in a busy commercial London street show the comfortable niche formed by Indian culture in this western city. Even though the camera frames only show bits of the shopping scene in Southall, the viewer is brought from a cosy middle class Indian home in west London to the hustle bustle of commercial activity. The boundaries of inside and outside are evident in this scenario, as not a single white English person can be seen on these streets; even though Southall is very much a part of London as is any other commercial street like the Piccadilly Circus or Oxford Street.

Conclusion

Globalization is a continuing phenomenon that continues to reshape the Indian Diaspora around the world. With the rise of transnationalism, it is much easier for people to traverse between different boundaries; making it possible for people to stay connected to the homeland, even after migrating to different parts of the world. The Government of India, through its efforts of reaching out to the Diaspora, continues to nurture links of the Diasporic people with the homeland; through programs such as *Pravasi Bharatiya Divas*, Overseas Citizen Initiatives and the like. Consequently, the Diaspora is closer to the homeland more so now than it was before. As is evidenced by the study of the Indian subjectivity in *Bend it like Beckham*, the location and time of creation of the Diaspora determine to a great extent the constructed Diasporic identity. Formed much prior to the Indian Diaspora in the United States; the British Indian Diaspora exhibits starkly different characteristics

than its American counterpart. United Kingdom has third and fourth generation Indian immigrants, who may not have any political ties with India (and might have never even visited India) yet they sustain the Indian Identity through traditions passed on through the generations. Regionalism is more prevalent than nationalism in such older Diasporas. Homeland might be viewed as an untainted and uncorrupted utopia, which is diametrically opposite to the modern life.

From this film, it is also seen that Indian Diasporic culture in the United Kingdom still resists going beyond heteronormative ideas about gender and class. Being queer is considered a non-Indian value rather than an acceptable gender. It is perhaps seen as a way to amuse the viewer, but by raising such issues in the film, Diasporic filmmakers are in a way challenging and critiquing the existing norms.

The concept of generation gap seems to be prevalent in the modern day Indian Diaspora. The first and second generation immigrants have different modes of identity construction. The first generation, although living away from the homeland, still maintained cultural and social ties with the homeland. This can be seen as a way to preserve and hold on to the culture that is familiar. For second generation immigrants, the familiarity with the original homeland exists only through the medium of their family elders. Identity fragmentation often results, as the second generation immigrant has to live and adapt to cultures from the East as well as the West. Indian Diasporic identity, thus, is not a reflection of the Indian national identity, but it emerges from the immigrant's choices and struggles; and is fuelled by the exchange of culture between the homeland and the adopted land.

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