

Bend It Like Beckham and “Bending” the Rules

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Bend It Like Beckham is primarily a film about soccer. However, because the protagonist is part of a traditional Indian family, food plays an important role in the film. Jesminder Bhamra, nicknamed “Jess,” comes into conflict with her family, especially her mother, over her love of soccer. She meets Juliette “Jules” Paxton, who encourages her to join her team, the Hounslow Harriers. Jesminder accepts her invitation and joins the team despite the wishes of her mother. The situation with her family is further complicated because of her sister’s upcoming wedding and the stress it puts on the entire Bhamra family. Despite cultural differences, Jess and Jules both find themselves in a situation where their mothers do not approve of their dedication to playing sports. The title of the film cues the viewer in to the tension between Mrs. Bhamra and Mrs. Paxton and their daughters because of how they “bend” established cultural and gender roles. The mothers often appear with food, which becomes associated with their opposition to their daughters’ unfeminine behavior. By the end of the film, it becomes a vehicle through which they come to accept (in Jess’s case) and understand (in Jules’s case) their daughter’s choices.

The role of women is at the core of many traditional cultures and is important to their survival.^[1] According to feminist philosopher Uma Narayan, cooking is especially emblematic of Indian culture, therefore a proper Indian woman should know how to cook.^[2] Mrs. Bhamra is an excellent example of ideal Indian femininity because she is almost always shown preparing, serving, or eating food. The preparation of these meals is a symbol of continuity of culture, as are her attempts to teach her daughters.^[3] When Jess shows no interest in learning to cook, she is acting outside of proper gender roles and jeopardizing her future within the Indian community as well as bringing shame to her family within it.^[4] A scene that illustrates this is the argument between Jess and her mother after she discovers that Jess has joined a girls’ team. Jess is seated on the couch, her parents looming over her. Mrs. Bhamra expresses worry about the only future she can perceive for her daughter: “What family will want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can’t make round chapattis?” After a failed appeal to her father, Jess’s mother declares “That’s it, no more football!”^[5] Bhamra is motivated by a desire to pass on traditional Punjabi culture and sees cooking as one way to ensure a good future—i.e. marriage—for her daughter. Jess considers the cooking lessons to be yet another way for her mother to control her future and force her into a certain feminine ideal. When she brings soccer into the kitchen as an assertion of her own identity, it can be interpreted as a threat to her culture. Like many coming-of-age stories, a breakdown of communication turns a parent’s good intentions into unfair attempts to ruin his or her child’s life.

There is a similar disconnect between Jules and Mrs. Paxton. Even though Jules’s family represents the average family living in Hounslow in the early twenty-first century, there is a certain image of femininity to which Mrs. Paxton expects her daughter to conform. Like Mrs. Bhamra, Mrs. Paxton is more of a caricature than a fully fleshed character with regards to her attitude towards her daughter.^[6] Perhaps even more ridiculous, however, is her obsessive fear that playing soccer has affected her daughter’s sexuality. In one scene, Jess goes to the Paxton house to talk to Jules. Mrs. Paxton’s very first comment to Jess is in reference to food: “You know, I cooked a

lovely curry the other day.”^[7] This is one way she is made even more outrageous: she attempts to use food as a way to associate herself with what she perceives as the Indian ideal of the female cook/preserver of tradition, and to cover up the fact that she has so little in common with her daughter. In this sense, food is a way to add authenticity.^[8] As the scene continues, Jess and Jules argue about who has the right to pursue a relationship with their coach, Joe. Mrs. Paxton overhears them as she brings up a tray of tea and cheese. Having missed the beginning of the conversation, she believes that she is overhearing a lovers’ quarrel. The camera then cuts to Mrs. Paxton crying on the couch about this revelation even though untrue and based on speculation of a half-heard conversation. Tea, like any other meal, offers a chance for people to sit down, talk, and come to understand each other.^[9] In this scene, Mrs. Paxton jumps to a conclusion and is so horrified that she cannot begin to conceive talking to her daughter about it. Once again, the mother figure bearing food is unable to understand her daughter’s perspective.

Jules’s mother is the first of the two mothers to make an attempt to understand her daughter’s obsession with soccer. She does this literally through the use of food. The scene starts with Mr. and Mrs. Paxton at their patio table enjoying a glass of wine as they wait for Jules to get home for dinner. All sorts of condiment and spice bottles are arranged on the table like players on a soccer field. Jules enters and sees her father teaching her mother the rules of the game, and notices that her mother has read a stack of magazines about soccer. In Mrs. Paxton’s words, she’s “got to take an interest” or she’s going to lose Jules. In her words: “That way, we can all enjoy football [soccer] as a family.”^[10] Her ultimate goal is to keep her family together. By doing research on professional female players, Mrs. Paxton also learns that there is at least one who is married with a baby. This reveals anxiety about the continuation of her family that is similar to that in Jess’s household. This is not the scene of the film in which Mrs. Paxton comes to fully accept her daughter. By pointing out the example of the married player, she is trying to encourage Jules to pursue this type of relationship rather than her imagined relationship with Jess.^[11] If she did not have this impression of Jess and Jules’s relationship, it would be the end of this particular conflict between Mrs. Paxton and Jules. Regardless, the resolution that begins during this scene occurs because she has finally taken the time to sit down to a meal with her daughter and talk to her. Though it is only half of the actual problem, it is a good beginning to its resolution. Just as Belasco argues, the meal “enables a key conversation” and brings Mrs. Paxton back into harmony with the rest of her family.

Jesminder and her mother come to an understanding only after the stress of her sister’s wedding is over. Jess managed to leave the wedding to play a match in front of an American scout and has been offered a full scholarship to play college soccer in California. She comes clean to her parents after the stress of the wedding has passed and the family is sitting around eating leftovers and drinking coffee. The way the group (mostly women) is arranged around Jess is reminiscent of earlier party scenes.^[12] It is not especially threatening thanks to the brightly colored decor, but still represents a wall of female elders who place great importance on proper behavior and tradition. Jess suddenly has so much to lose that she explains her opportunity to her family, especially her mother. She begs them to understand that playing soccer makes her happy. Her father is the first to accept this fact. He says, “Two daughters made happy on one day—what more can a father ask for?”^[13] He recognizes that his daughter identifies with an English definition of what it means for a woman to be “happy” rather than an Indian one, and that it makes her no less Indian and no less his daughter. She has created a new identity that is an amalgam of Indian and British culture.^[14] Immediately after Mr. Bhamra speaks, Mrs. Bhamra relents: “At least I’ve taught her full Indian dinner—the rest is up to her!”^[15] She can be proud that she has taught her

daughter how to cook a “full Punjabi dinner, meat and vegetarian,”^[16] symbolizing the rest of her Indian heritage, and is slightly more comfortable in sending her out into the world. She recognizes that she must be willing to give up some of her parental control and accept her daughter as an individual. Even if she does not fully understand her daughter’s happiness, she accepts it as a reality.

By the end of *Bend It Like Beckham*, both daughters have managed to “bend” gender rules in order to pursue their dream of becoming professional soccer players. The mothers, who are usually shown cooking or otherwise working with food, come to terms with this future through food. Mrs. Bhamra is initially a roadblock to Jess’s future as a soccer player, with her feet firmly rooted in the kitchen. She finally is willing to let her daughter go after she is certain that Jess is able to continue her Indian heritage as symbolized by Indian cuisine. Mrs. Paxton is a less daunting obstacle to Jules, but her actions show how the conflict over soccer is starting to alienate her from her daughter. She bears a tray of food at the height of this alienation, then later uses food after finally making an effort to understand and support her daughter. Because this film is a comedy, the final results are happy: two content families, two best friends, and a new and multicultural definition of what it means to be a young British woman.

[1] Linda C. McClain. “Bend It like Beckham and Real Women Have Curves: Constructing Identity in Multicultural Coming-of-Age Stories.” (Depaul Law Review, 2004-2005) 701-702. ↵

[2] Quoted in McClain 712. ↵

[3] McClain 712. ↵

[4] Shoba S. Rajgopal. “The Politics of Location: Ethnic Identity and Cultural Conflict in the Cinema of the South Asian Diaspora.” (Journal of Communication Inquiry, 2003) 55, 59. ↵

[5] *Bend It Like Beckham*. Dir. Gurinder Chada. Perf. Nagra, Keira Knightley, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers, Anupam Kher, DVD, Twentieth Centruy Fox, 2002, Scene 8 “No More Football.” ↵

[6] McClain 714. ↵

[7] *Bend It Like Beckham*, Scene 19, “Betrayed.” ↵

[8] Timothy Shary and Alexandra Seibel. *Youth Culture in Global Cinema*. (Austin: University of Texas, 2007) 193. ↵

[9] Warren Belasco. *Food: The Key Concepts*. (Oxford: Berg, 2008) 37. ↵

[10] *Bend It Like Beckham*, Scene 23 “Worried About Jess.” ↵

[11] McClain 722. ↵

[12] Irene Gedalof. “Finding Home in *Bend It Like Beckham* and *Last Resort*.” (Camera Obscura: Jan 2011) 137. ↵

[13] *Bend It Like Beckham*, Scene 30 “No More Lies” ↵

[14] Rajgopal 56. ↵

[15] *Bend It Like Beckham*, Scene 30 “No More Lies.” ↵

[16] *Bend It Like Beckham*, Scene 8 “No More Football.” ↵



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