In this chapter we will cover:

- the themes and issues raised in *Bend It Like Beckham*
- the ways in which people, places and events are represented
- the style and genre of the film
- possible creative responses.
Synopsis

Jess Bhamra (Parminder Nagra) lives in a London suburb, not far from Heathrow Airport. She is the youngest of two daughters in a Punjabi family. All Jess wants to do is play football. Her parents want her and her sister Pinky to be good Indian daughters. Pinky’s wedding is approaching and this puts more pressure on Jess. Her life changes when she meets Jules (Keira Knightley) and is encouraged to join the local ladies’ football team, Hounslow Harriers. Jess is finally doing what she loves to do but has to lie to her parents. The team go to Hamburg to play, where her relationship with Joe, the team’s coach, becomes much closer. Jess and Jules argue over Joe. Jess’s parents find out that she has been lying and she is banned from playing. The pressure on Jess is intensified as an American football scout is due to watch an important cup match on the day of Pinky’s wedding, when all of these conflicts come to a head and are satisfactorily resolved.

Introduction

*Bend It Like Beckham* is a British film co-funded with Germany. It was released in the UK in 2002 and in the United States in March 2003. It turned out to be one of the surprise hits of 2002, making over £11 million at the UK box office, while also proving popular with American and European audiences. It was directed by Gurinder Chadha who also wrote the screenplay with Paul Berges and Guljit Bindra.

Filming took place on location in west London, specifically Hounslow (where the main characters live), central London and Hamburg, Germany.

The film is a comedy which follows in the tradition of other recent British Asian films which focus on family, generational and culture clashes, such as *East is East* (1999), *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) and *Anita and Me* (2002).
Themes and issues

_Bend It Like Beckham_ deals with a variety of different themes and issues through the story of Jess and her desperation to play football rather than conform to the traditional female role expected of her. The ways in which Jess deals with the competing demands of British Asian culture drive the narrative. In the Hounslow Harriers changing rooms she tells her team mates, ‘Indian girls aren’t supposed to play football’. When one remarks, ‘That’s a bit backwards,’ she replies, ‘It’s just culture that’s all’.

The film’s title obviously refers to the skill used by David Beckham when taking free kicks. However, it could also be seen as a metaphor for the fact that Jess has to bend and adapt traditional rules and values in order to get what she wants. Issues about gender, particularly about what girls should or should not do, run through the film. Both Jess and Jules have mothers who disapprove of them participating in what they see as a man’s game.

Although the desire to play football is foregrounded throughout the film, it is the ability to make decisions for themselves, to be independent and take control of their own lives that is most important for both girls. They do not wish to rebel; they have loving families and they are searching for ways in which their needs and the needs of their parents can be accommodated. If we consider the relationship between Pinky and Jess this accommodation is again highlighted. Pinky has been having secret ‘meetings’ in her boyfriend’s car for months. The sisters do not tell on each other and neither do they spend much time talking about their secrets. They simply do what they have to do in order to survive in a world where expectations and desires often conflict. They have grown up negotiating between cultures on a daily basis.

Genre and style

_Bend It Like Beckham_ has been described as a ‘vibrant and colourful British comedy’ which deals with issues centred on ‘coming of age’ and ‘coming to terms’ with the bringing together of traditional Asian values and the modern Asian experience in contemporary Britain.

Much of the humour within the film is derived from watching Jess and Jules’ parents. There is a gentle teasing of the Indian culture without mocking it and even this is counter-balanced by the ways in which we are encouraged to laugh at the prejudices of Jules’ mother (Juliet Stevenson).

This is a comedy of manners, a film which has the ‘feel good’ factor. Much of its success derives from its accessibility to people who aren’t familiar with the Asian culture as well as those who are. It clearly owes a lot to the much harder edged

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**Activity 1**

**AO3 – Demonstrate planning, research and presentational skills**

- Is football a ‘man’s game’?
- Are there times when you ‘bend’ the truth in order to get what you want without upsetting your parents too much?
East is East and the television comedy Goodness Gracious Me, where humour is derived from the ways in which cultural borders are crossed on a daily basis and racism is mocked through a variety of characters of all ages and cultures.

Jess’s mother may raise a laugh with her insistence that her daughter learns to cook a meal with chapattis and at least two dishes (‘meat and vegetables’) but Jules’ parents are equally funny and the generation/culture gap is equally evidenced in her relationship with them. Her mother is always walking in at the wrong moment, misinterpreting every conversation between Jules and Jess and this creates a running joke throughout the film.

The director, Gurinder Chadha, takes time to invest care and thought into the characters and their stories and although there are stereotypical elements in some of the secondary characters, they do have individual personalities. There are a series of ‘running gags’ (jokes that are extended and returned to); for example, the shoes that Jess borrows from Jules’ house. However, these jokes manage to stay fresh without becoming annoying. This attention to detail makes the film more enjoyable and less hard edged. Ironically, it is the way in which difficult issues are so easily resolved that has caused some criticism.

Read through the following extracts from two imaginary film critics.

Gurinder Chadha (Bhaji on the Beach and What’s Cooking) makes feel-good films which deal with the difficult issues of the British Asian experience in a simplistic, condescending manner. Uncomfortable, questions about race relations, or tradition and social change, are left unanswered. Stale jokes about ethnicity or gender ‘dumb down’ the complexities of accommodating cultural change…

Gurinder Chadha is a director who has already established a reputation for making films which are filled with humour, joy and inspiration. The Sikh traditions portrayed in Bend It Like Beckham are clearly respected. The concerns of parents about their children are also shown as understandable. Parminder Nagra makes an excellent debut as Jess, delivering a likeable performance that is emotionally honest – great footballing skills too! Yes, this film is entertaining and enlightening, the sort of film that we need to see during difficult times.

Activity 2

AO3 – Demonstrate planning, research and presentational skills
AO4 – Use creative and technical skills to construct film products

- What are the main criticisms of Bend It Like Beckham in the first review?
- What did the second critic enjoy about the film?
- It is clear that we may all have different responses to the same film. Write your own review of Bend It Like Beckham for your school magazine. You can talk about the themes and issues raised in performances, what made you laugh, which scenes you enjoyed and how you think the film might be improved.
Representation

A good way of examining representation issues within the film is by considering the ways in which pairs of characters interrelate.

Jules and Jess have lots in common:

- They are the same age.
- They both share the same dream – to play professional football.
- They are both attracted to the same man.
- They both come into conflict with their mothers because they are not ‘feminine’ – they don’t want to cook, wear make-up or frilly underwear.

Although they come from very different cultures, it is the similarities between them, and their experience of growing up, that are highlighted by the film’s language.

Activity 3

AO1 – Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of how films communicate

Watch the sequence which involves Jess being spotted by her mother as she plays football with the boys in the park.

- What objections does her mother have to Jess playing football?
- Which of her comments make us laugh? Why?
- Listen to what Jess’s father says to her and watch his body language carefully. Are his attitudes different from his wife’s? Why do you think this might be?
Throughout the film Jess's father, who is well-intentioned and generous, is left to bridge the gap between his daughters and their more traditionally minded mother. He particularly relates to Jess and her love of sport because when he first arrived in Britain he was a keen, talented cricketer. Some of his concerns for her reflect his own experience of racism and rejection when he tried to join a white cricket team. However, times have changed and although he has kept to his own community he appreciates his daughter's next generational sense of rights and freedom.

If we consider Jess's mother alongside Jules' mother it is easy to see the similarities in terms of the ways they are represented. Ironically, it is the two older women who find it hardest to change their attitudes and acknowledge that women's roles are changing and that the culture their daughters live in is very different from the one they grew up in. Jules' mother doesn't think it is proper for a girl to play football.

Now think about the similarities between the two fathers. Both of them:

- love sport
- are far more tolerant than their wives
- have good relationships with their daughters
- try very hard to 'keep the peace' in their respective families by balancing opposite points of view.

Costume is also very important in the film in terms of balancing the traditional with the modern. Look carefully at the still below. How are the differences and similarities between Jess and the rest of the team highlighted within the mise-en-scène?
AO2 – Explore, respond to and reflect on a range of films and topics

Look carefully at the two stills. The left-hand still shows Jess in her back garden. What is she wearing? What is hanging on the washing line? What do you think is being suggested here about Jess? Now look at the right-hand still. It shows Jess telling Joe that she is leaving him and going to America. What do the changes in costume tell us about the changes in Jess as we come to the end of the film?

Additional resources

- Film Education Study Guide: Bend It like Beckham
- Go to the homepage of www.imdb.com and type in Bend it Like Beckham – there is a selection of interesting external reviews and viewer comments.
- Watch Bhaji on the Beach (UK, 1993, director Gurinder Chadra) and/or East is East (UK, 1996, director Damian O’Donnell).