

**Re-Presentation of Gender Conflicts In Indian Diasporic Cinema:
Analysis of Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend It***

Like Beckham

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ABSTRACT:

Films as a medium of visual culture act as a way to broadcast the immigrant's way of life. The shrinking of national boundaries allows Diasporic film makers to connect to a larger audience, allowing flow of commerce, ideas and culture between India and its diaspora. The present paper is intended to examine Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* and *Bend It Like Beckham* in which subaltern Indian females are presented in popular cinema as multicultural entities and explores generational differences by clarifying the divergent perspectives and understanding of race and communities. Chadha presents versions of NRI women and the fine balance they cultivate in order to negotiate between culture, gender and sexuality. The paper focuses on the depiction of gender burden that circumscribes the notions of educational attainment, arranged marriages and interracial love relationship of the South Asian women in the diaspora. Through the feminist optics, the films will highlight the gender conflicts faced by the migrant woman who inhabits a subaltern position, where she stands under a double patriarchal and racist yoke imposed both the receiving culture and the South Asian Community.

The art or literary work can be the best way to present the new voice of in-betweenness to the greatest extent. Writing not only provides diasporic writers a way to voice their uncertainty, conflict and struggle in the host country, but also makes them reflect on how to reconcile the differences between two cultures. Further visual is a site where meaning is constructed and struggles over re-presentation are staged. Cinema thus acts as a medium of transferring the narratives in the form of moving image as well as an effective tool for exploring identity. Cinema also functions as an important link in furthering the culture and ways of life.

It not only serves as a storyteller through the characters that it encapsulates but also as a mirror to the identity of the people.

Films are complex modes of communication involving the interplay of pictures, speech, music, graphics and special effects. Diasporic films as a medium of visual culture portray life stories of migrant individuals, the representation of their homeland and help to preserve and cultivate the original culture and language. 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. As suggested by Desai (2004) in the study of the South Asian Cinema—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. Cinema reaches tens, if not hundreds of millions of viewers. With mass globalization, Indian Diasporic Cinema also acts as a commodity that is consumed by people living both in India as well as other parts of the world. The shrinking of national boundaries allows Diasporic film makers to connect to a larger audience, allowing flow of commerce, ideas and culture between India and its diaspora.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak takes up the problem of "benevolent first-world appropriation and reinscription of the Third World as an Other" contending that there is no space from which the "subaltern" Third World woman could speak and be heard by the Western feminist. (*Can the Subaltern Speak*, 43) Diasporic film finds a way for the "subaltern" to speak and to shed light on the process of constructing identity. These films, also arising out of the filmmakers' experiences, aim to offer re-presentations of particular individuals in minority groups that challenge dominant representations. They also offer aspirational visions of how such individuals might find a way to construct a hybrid identity that allows them to negotiate their place within the various groups that claim them and within the broader society. The present paper focuses on how the women protagonists in diasporic films find ways to construct their identity in context and what sorts of cultural, social and institutional arrangements facilitate, on the one hand, and hinder, on the other, their capacity to do so.

Through the frames of a feature film, one can witness the lives and identities of people, as it unfolds and evolves. Diasporic films by Indian diasporic filmmakers like Deepa Mehta, Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha are termed by Hamid Naficy in his book *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001) as "Accented cinema" which emerges, as Naficy argues, not from "the accented speech of the diegetic characters" within these films but from the "displacement of the filmmakers". (4) These "accented" films negotiate the interstitial dialogues between the home and host societies of the filmmakers. Thus, these films give two sites for marginalised women—a site of resistance from the part of films' characters and other

being the site for the expression of that resistance for the filmmakers. Thus, through these films the diasporic filmmakers try to eradicate the subaltern status of women and allow them a 'space' to be heard.

The highly acclaimed film *Bhaji on the Beach* (1993) directed by Gurinder Chadha and co-written by Meera Syal is unique in many ways. In the film we come across an ensemble of Asian women, from different generational, class and religious backgrounds, united as members of Saheli Asian Women's group undertaking a journey to English working-class holiday resort of Blackpool from Birmingham. The group is led by a passionate feminist community worker Simi, seen adorning a leather jacket worn over an Asian salwar suit. At the very outset of the journey, Simi explains the rationale behind the trip. Speaking from an overt feminist perspective she states that **"it is not often that we women get away from the patriarchal demands made on us in our daily lives, struggling between the double yoke of racism and sexism!"** (*Bhaji*, 1993) Echoing the language of a professional feminist activist, she disavows patriarchy and reinforces that the trip offers the women with an opportunity to escape a servile existence and enjoy a sense of freedom and liberty for a day. Through this statement at the very beginning of the trip, Chadha makes us aware of the filmic intention of *Bhaji* – to expose the patriarchal mindset and the parochial hypocrisies of the community.

The women participating in the trip are mainly from three generations– the elderly 'aunties' as they are popularly called, representing an orthodox traditional mentality; a middle-aged woman visiting from India, instilling nostalgia for an idealistic India in the minds of the older generation but representing modern India in reality; and a group of young women in their teens and early twenties representing new generation Britons, ready to challenge the beliefs of their elders. The generational divide between the 'Aunties' with their conservative mentalities and traditional clothes on the one side and younger members of the group with their desire to assimilate and negotiate tension on the other, reveals a massive gulf, almost similar to the chasm separating these Asian women from traditional British women. Members of the group also reflect different registers of immigrant speech – the elderly ladies, visitor from Bombay and the younger characters all having distinctive speech indicative of their respective generations. The generational conflict plays a major role in Chadha's film and brings to light the divided loyalties of women who have immigrated to Britain, desperately attempting to clutch on to the culture, traditions and beliefs of their homeland against those who are British-born.

The cast of multi-generational women are all seemingly united by their British-Asianness and residence in Birmingham which houses the refuge centre, Saheli Women's

Centre, providing support, advice and guidance to the community. Chadha and Syal, the scriptwriters of *Bhaji*, have created this fictional centre as the focus for the welfare of women and management of women's issues, seeking to challenge male structures and dominance both in our own communities and in the wider society.

The opening scene of *Bhaji on the Beach* shows the displaying windows of a street in Southall with hybrid supermarkets (as the baskets of a grocery store exhibit coriander and mangoes from India alongside British pomegranates and French apples) and the typical South Asian video rental shop with Bollywood billboards. The camera vision enters into the shop and the action switches to display Asha's hallucination. Asha, a woman in her forties and the assistant at the video rental shop, is scolded by Rama, the Hindu god who always reminds Asha that she **“must be a proper Indian wife and follow [her] traditional education, what it is expected from [her]”** and telling her to **“know your place!”**. (*Bhaji*, 1993) These early lines frame the entire movie and are reinforced when moments after her hallucination, Asha's son, daughter, and husband demand ironed shirts and hot breakfast – telling about Asha's place within the bounds of her culture and her family. Asha has more headaches and hallucinations throughout the movie, all of which reinforce the need for duty and sacrifice.

Accounting for the commercial success of films such as *Bhaji on the Beach*, Jigna Desai has recently argued that these feminist cinematic narratives “attempt to disrupt South Asian gender normativities of heterosexuality through challenging the dominant gendered ideologies such as female chastity and virginity, multiracial romance, and arranged marriages”. (202) Asha's evolution as a character who steps outside the borders plainly shows that Chadha's film is, on the one hand, a “‘resisting’ story in depicting Indian women as strong, as survivors and as pleasure-loving”, while, on the other hand, it “reverses the gaze” by placing the story “within the Indian communities' viewpoints”. (Kaplan, 250)

The film later informs that Asha's true aspirations were not those of working at her husband's video shop but being a Bollywood actress, as Asha herself tells the English gentleman in Blackpool **“I wanted to become a Bollywood actress but, after getting married, I quitted my singing and acting”**. (*Bhaji*, 1993) When she says goodbye to the English man in Blackpool, she grumbles **“Maybe I should get back to my education and change my mind”**. (*Bhaji*, 1993)

It is at this moment that Asha comes to terms with the gender restriction that she herself, as one of the community's aunties, is also imposing on characters like Hashida, a character who faces a triple yoke. Firstly, Hashida cannot study an Arts degree because her family and her community have already decided that she must become a doctor. Secondly, she has a secret

interracial relationship with Oliver, a black man who studies Arts and that, obviously, will not be welcomed by her South Asian family. And, thirdly, she has found out that she is pregnant scarcely before starting the trip to Blackpool, something that would be discovered by the rest of the women in the trip, who later insult her with statements such as **“we thought that you could cure our community [referring to her prospects to become a doctor] but you only infect us”**. (Bhaji, 1993) At this juncture, it is proven that the choice of academic education done by the South Asian woman in the diaspora is very much dependent on her family's hopes, especially her father's.

Hashida who had been lauded and much admired for being a 'model' of 'family values' and discipline through academic achievement is suddenly transformed into an object of derision once her relationship and pregnancy are exposed. She is denounced for such a shameful act, betraying Asian honour codes. Pushpa, a spirited elderly 'aunty', calls Hashida a 'whore' and comments in one of the scenes that **“this country has cost us our children”**. (Bhaji, 1993) The new culture is blamed which Hashida seems to have embraced in her efforts to assimilate. It is at this moment that Gurinder Chadha explores the double subaltern position occupied by Hashida who, on the one hand, is dominated by the British society that spit and insult the Saheli bus at the gas-station and, on the other, by the South Asian community that imposes her with an education and a possibility of future only within the South Asian community.

The character of Ginder also experiences a tension similar to Hashida as to maintain her image of being a 'good' wife as well as escaping the stranglehold of a violent husband who regularly subjects her to physical abuse. She is in a dichotomy due to the repressive pressures of the community enticing her to return to her marital home and husband on the one hand and her own notions of love, marriage and family on the other. Women feel oppressed not only by white racist society but also by the position and status they hold within their own home and community where they are easily relegated to the subordinate position of a wife and mother. Ironically, the male dominated system is whole-heartedly supported and preserved by the elder female members of the community.

In the film, the 'aunties' in the group validate this notion by making no attempts to hide their disgust at Ginder's decision to leave her husband and taking shelter in an Asian women's hostel along with her son Amrik. In fact, they ostracise her for having left home and persuade her to return to her marital family. Their collective response is the disparaging remark, **“These modern girls can't adapt, and those with jobs are worst. She must have done something!”**

(Bhaji, 1993) The myopic perceptions of the roots of oppression are thus challenged in the course of the film.

Escaping her stifled existence for a day out in Blackpool, Ginder is eager to experience freedom from the traditionally imposed roles and enjoy the day with her son and members of the Saheli group. Unfortunately, her husband finds out about the trip and follows in pursuit of her to Blackpool in an attempt to persuade his wife to return to her servile and abused position within his family. Soliciting help from Asha, an aunty in the group, he manages to find her. The scene in the 'Manhattan' bar is crucial: providing an illustration of a potential ethnic conflict, leading to a transformation of attitude towards Ginder and revelation of the truth of the situation. A performance by a troupe of male strippers, Liberty and Sons, at the location of their final entertainment, accidentally exposes Ginder's bruised arms and alarms the spectators, especially the 'aunties' who had been so disapproving of her. Asha and the other 'elders' are forced to reconsider their views on Ginder and attempt to redress the situation by warning Ginder of her husband Ranjit's presence. Her bruised body is the signifier of the oppression that women have to endure both within their own homes and outside their own community.

In the following climactic scene, Ginder clarifies her intention that she is ready to return with him but not to his family. She elucidates her choice of the individual and not the family, who have shown reluctance in accepting her and been the major source of oppression. An angry outburst "**enough's enough!**" followed by physical violence confirms suspicion about his intent and nature, making Asha intervene and slap Ranjit, Ginder's husband. After this climax and with a feeling of triumph, all the women on the trip get on the bus to see Diwali lightings along Blackpool's main street. And at this point, the South Asian women on the trip have constructed a parallel mutual alliance against patriarchal and social limitations. They all have definitely performed the recognition of their subaltern position and the possibility of interweaving a new collaborative space for women from where to promote their final empowerment as equal participants of the world. Through this scene, Chadha challenges the dominant notions of patriarchy and demonstrates resistance by the new generation of women.

Gurinder Chadha's *Bend it like Beckham* (2002) also looks at the conflict of tradition and cultural issues faced by second generation Indians living in London. The storyline deals with an Indian family from Kenya who has migrated to England. 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. 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. The story revolves around the lives of an Indian family

living in Hounslow West, Southall, London, a neighbourhood predominantly known for its Punjabi Sikh population. 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 film opens with the credits overlaid on a fantasy scene of Jess playing soccer with David Beckham, and three famous British sports commentators, Gary Linkeker, Alan Hansen, and John Barnes, claiming that Jess is the player to help England **“relive their World Cup glory from ‘66”** and that she is the **“missing piece to the jigsaw”**. (Bend, 2002) However the fantasy is broken apart when Jess’s mother is brought on-set for a commentary. She stereotypically claims **“[Jessminder] shouldn’t be running around with all these men, showing her bare legs to 70,000 people. She’s bringing shame on the family, and you three shouldn’t encourage her!”** (Bend, 2002) The mother is dressed in sari and speaks with a Punjabi accent. The fantasy sequence is broken when the mother addresses Jess directly from the set of the sports commentary, demanding her daughter to **“get back home now!”** (Bend, 2002) In seamless transition to real-time, the mother opens the bedroom door, breaks up the dream, and tells her daughter to stop staring at the **“skin-head boy”** that is Beckham.

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 home maker 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 traditional Punjabi clothing of *salwaar kameez* with a *dupatta* (scarf like garment). Jess’s older 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’.

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 colour 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. Jess always refuses to prepare Punjabi food and this seems to stand in for her refusal of a future position as the wife of an Indian man throughout the film. Her mother asks Jess rhetorically **“What kind of family would want a daughter-in-law who can kick a football around but can't make round chapatis?”** (Bend, 2002)

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. Jess knows that nobody in her family will be able to understand and appreciate her talent and sooner or later she will have to give up on her dream; for playing soccer is more like a dream and in real life girls are supposed to cook dinners and take up a respectable job, in other words—things that her family considers to be respectable. While talking with David Beckham's poster Jess says, **“I nearly scored from 25 yards today; bent it and everything. I could've carried on playing all night. It's not fair that the boys never have to come back home and help. I wonder if I had an arranged marriage, would I get someone who would let me play soccer as much as I wanted”**. (Bend, 2002) This dialogue says a lot about the turmoil in Jess's mind. For her, being a successful grown up woman is dependent on being able to find a suitable life partner. The term, 'Suitable', equates to a Punjabi Sikh man from a reputed family chosen by the parents.

On the other hand, her fellow teammate Juliette 'Jules' Paxton 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. Paula 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. She even retorts, **“No boy's gonna want to go out with a girl who has bigger muscles than him. Honey all I am sayin' is there is a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one of them without a fella”**. (Bend, 2002) This remark clearly suggests the way some women perceive other women in sports. Being athletic is often considered to be defying the traditional gender roles assigned to a woman. By crossing the boundary of traditional gender roles, women are subjected to criticism, and a fear of being ostracized by society. Also, Jess's own friends, who are mainly English boys of Indian origin, ridicule her for being interested in sports and are

shown always make fun of her. One of the boys pokes fun at her and says, **“Who does she think she is? Beckham or what?”** (Bend, 2002) The discrimination is also highlighted when Jules complains of inadequate opportunities in the field of soccer for women to play professionally in England. For Jules, soccer has been predominantly understood as a male bastion and women are yet to be considered serious contenders for such a sport, leave aside taking it as a career option for young ladies. This issue which Jess also had to confront is shown to be universal in the movie, and not something that is specific to Jess being of Punjabi-Indian origin.

Jess bristles at the idea of keeping her pursuit of a soccer career secret from her parents and eventually reveals her activities to them. Explaining that she was happy when she didn't have to sneak away to practices and lie about her whereabouts, she tells them, **“I really want to play, and if I can't tell you what I want now, then I'll never be happy, whatever I do”**. (Bend, 2002)

In this sense, although both Jess and Jules face gender discrimination, it appears Jess's family takes it one step further because they perceive that their daughter's actions might bring shame to the whole family, and that no mother-in-law would want a daughter-in-law who runs around half-naked with boys. Here, it is not only the company that is being prescribed, but also the distinct dressing code that a woman must observe. Even the film's title *Bend It Like Beckham* speaks not just to Beckham's ability to bend the ball on the soccer pitch, but also opens up the concept of bending gender identities in this film about women in the traditionally male space of soccer, the introduction of a gay Indian character, Tony, and the parody of an unreasonable fear of lesbianism.

Thus the main focus seems to be in both films set on values and responsibilities regarding the family, such as duty, honour and sacrifice in Indian culture. Through the images of families, Chadha makes an attempt to bring the viewer closer to understanding of the aspects of belonging to an ethnic minority on the British territory the in course of twentieth century. The struggles faced by diasporic youth to make changes that are real transgressions across cultural boundaries are not always incendiary topics such as abusive husbands, interracial relationships, and clandestine affairs, as in *Bhaji on the Beach* but they are also unconventional career ambitions such as Jess' love of soccer, propelled by her very real abilities to succeed in the sport as in *Bend it like Beckham*.

South Asian diasporic films not only offers a complex interrogation of how British Asian women are positioned by racial, sexual, and gender oppressions but it also poses alternative modes of understanding phenomena associated with migration that differ from

dominant Bollywood cinema. These films challenge the global patriarchal systems of domination and denounce the inequality by offering the representation of the South Asian woman in the diaspora not as a mere victim but as the promoter of social transformation and consciousness-raising about the unequal access to academic education and the lack of freedom imposed by the migrant community in love relationships. Furthermore, the delocalized nature and the multicultural experiences of filmmakers offer new perspectives on identity issues that highlight the possibility of individuals to freely choose their own identities in a plural world.

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