

Analyse the representation of multicultural Britain in the films *Bend It Like Beckham*...

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In this essay I will be studying the two highly successful films East is East and Bend It Like Beckham. As the title suggests I must “analyse the representation of a Multicultural Britain”. The word “representation” within the film industry is used to describe what the film maker is trying to make the audience feel, think and see - basically what the director wanted to achieve from the outset. The two films I will be analysing both concentrate on the problems and situations which arise when two cultures, Asian and Anglo British, are thrown together.

The messages and values throughout the films reach quite a deep level although Bend It Like Beckham is a lighter film overall, a coming of age feel good film whereas East is East does not offer simple answers. However humour constantly counteracts any depressing scenes; the best example being the comedy scenes following the husband’s explosive temper and violent attack on his wife in East is East, a scene I will refer to again later.

At such an important point in the film, the filmmaker purposely decided to keep the mood very solemn before the comic relief of the next scene. As is the case in sitcoms the narrative takes the form of a starting equilibrium before coming to disequilibrium until finally returning to a calm equilibrium. What is a Multicultural Britain? To me it connotes a nation which has willingly accepted people from different countries and cultures, and which believes in a wide range of religions and beliefs.

Britain has always tried to integrate different cultures into its own society. Multicultural Britain came to prominence in the late 70’s; but has only recently been accepted and welcomed as part of our culture. The phrase

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literally means to have many cultures or ethnic groups within society. Today, people from around the world come to live here in Britain, bringing their traditions and beliefs, new, interesting ways of life and food. A good example of this would be the Indian culture, which has quickly made a big mark upon the public.

Indian food is now the favoured takeaway throughout the whole country, ironically beating the so called “ British classic” of fish and chips by a large margin. This has particular significance in *East is East* because despite his determination to head a good Pakistani family, George in *East is East* is running ‘ George’s English Chippy’ with his English second wife, Ella, which brings a chuckle and is part of the film maker’s representation of George as a hypocrite who does not lead by example. *East is East* is set in 1971 and *Bend It Like Beckham* in the early 21st Century.

The mixing of so many cultures over time has drastically improved the racist beliefs harboured by many 30 years ago; and the new generation especially, sees nothing wrong with having mixed race friends who have parents of two separate ethnic groups. I feel proud to be part of a nation branded “ multicultural” where people from different countries feel they can fit into our society whilst keeping some of their national identity. In this essay I will be studying how a Multicultural Britain is portrayed in both of these films; first by examining them separately and then by contrasting them.

Bend It Like Beckham was a surprise hit in 2002 with its tongue in cheek humour and intriguing storyline. The film was the most recent in a long line

of Anglo - Asian comedy dramas produced by Indian born director Gurinder Chadha (Bhaji on the Beach and Bride and Prejudice). The film follows the awakening of a girl named Jess from the Nagra family. Jess has wanted to played football all her life; however she has always found that her sex and her mother's strict Sikh beliefs have held her back.

These problems are evident from the opening scene. We are taken to a Champions League match between Anderlecht and Manchester United, in which Jess's idol, David Beckham, is playing. She dreams she is playing along side him as well scoring from a typical cross from the England skipper. Whilst being a funny scene, it speaks volumes towards the film's forward thinking and positive attitude to multiculturalism. As of yet there are no established Asian players, let alone Asian females within the Premiership.

This multicultural attitude is maintained after the match when famous TV pundits such as Gary Lineker and Alan Hansen comment on her great performance, not worrying about her bare legs and ethnic background. Alas, her mother still manages to get her religious and moral views across when interviewed and literally spoils Jess' dream, by typically stating: " who'd want a girl who plays football all day but can't make chapattis? " Up against such values and comparison with her older sister, Pinkie, considered a model Indian girl who is about to have a traditional wedding, Jess is confined to playing her football in the park.

Enter Jules, an English girl not into boys but football and captain of the local girls' team, Hounslow Harriers. This hobby splits her parents - whilst her dad

is overjoyed, her mother finds it extremely worrying. She works in a ladies' underwear shop and would rather Jules was more interested in boys and like her, the latest fashions. She feels left out of this father daughter and football-orientated relationship and tries to form a girly relationship with Jules. This desperation can clearly be seen when she takes her daughter to choose a bra, Jules refuses to try the provocative one and instead heads straight towards the sporty section.

Jess experiences the same problem when being fitted for a dress for her sisters wedding. The film therefore shows that these girls from different cultures have a lot in common, not least, parent issues but it clearly shows the differences between the two families because Jess, unlike Jules has no choice. The views of Jules' father about the footballing subject are expressed during an episode with her mother, " To be quite honest if she would rather play football than go after boys it's fine with me" although his wife hits back with the point that " There's a reason why Sporty Spice is the only one without a boyfriend.

Jules leads Jess to the Harriers after watching her play in the park with her Asian friends, a scene which seems to me as if she is almost the white girl looking in on a different culture. Jess tries to explain her family difficulties about girls playing football to her team mates who tell her " That's a bit backwards" but she immediately says " It's just culture, that's all. " The club is where the love interest within the film is found; Joe, the young coach.

From the beginning Jess lies to Joe stating her parents have allowed her to play, knowing that if she were to ask them they would definitely answer with a blunt 'no'. Once picked Jess constantly has to use her cover up story of a job at HMV to explain her absences from the house during matches and training (match scenes blur into a mixture of straight cuts and facial shots in order to keep the action pacey). Like Jules' dad, Jess' father is more understanding than her mother; he even goes to watch her at matches after discovering her adventures with the team around Europe from a local paper.

However his attitude is affected by his own experiences of being racially abused in the early 70's by teammates from a cricket team he joined when he arrived in England from Uganda. We get the impression he has kept to his own community since then but is prepared to accept his daughter is living in a freer society. Unfortunately his first match turns sour, due to Jess receiving a red card for dissent. She retaliates only after being called a Paki by a member of the opposing team.

This shows a more negative side to Multicultural Britain, where people react angrily towards people from different cultures, believing this country should only be for British people. Other mixed race Harriers players also retaliate, (one of whom is acted by black RnB artist, Shanzay Lewis, again reiterating the multicultural state of this country) but it is Jess who receives the harshest punishment. Later, after a rollicking from Joe, she tells him about the abuse, but he plays it down with a witty comment, summarizing the film's humour, "I should know I'm Irish".

Having had his understanding attitude pushed to the limit, Jess' dad is not happy when he sees Joe and Jess comforting each other. This worries him, as he believes she must marry an Indian boy, like her sister. Indeed this view is shared by the rest of the family. I know this because at Pinkie's engagement party, one of Jess's aunts tells her " Soon, we will have you with a nice Indian boy like your sister. " However we know Pinkie is not behaving exactly as her parents would wish because she is meeting secretly with her husband to be in his car.

Jess knows about this and Pinkie knows about the Harriers and the sisters agree not to tell on each other. The way the film represents this is as a normal situation where the parents' expatiations, especially their overpowering mother, require them to be deceitful and it is just the way they manage to live in two cultures. Tony, Jess' best friend is gay but cannot admit it within his Indian culture; he understands this approach and comments " What your parents don't know won't hurt them".

Jess is becoming less tied to her cultural roots as when the football team travels to Germany she drinks too much, something which is against her religion and starts a relationship with Joe. Another issue is raised within the film when Pinkie's wedding is called off because her boyfriend's family see Jess and Jules together mucking about and laughing following an exciting secretive trip to London to buy football boots and with Jules' hair being so short the family believe she is a white boy and refuse to let their son marry into a family with white members.

This misunderstanding is patched up and the wedding is back on but Jess's dream nearly comes to an end when her sisters' wedding is rearranged for the date of the football final in which the Harriers are playing. During the wedding itself Jess is desperate to play in the final and her dad, somewhat feeling for her, gives in and takes her. When Jess and Jules go to London the film shows us a city full of people from many different ethnic backgrounds; during the London scenes diagnostic sound is played, in the form of up beat, high tempo dance music.

When we do finally see Pinkie's wedding party in full flow a different scene once more optimizes the different values and traditions between the cultures. The camera straight cuts to a pan view showing the vibrant and typical Indian ceremonies going on within the party; however next door we see a representative English family hanging up their washing, a classic Anglo Saxon activity. At the match an American football scout picks out Jules and Jess after the two play exceedingly well.

Jess predictably smashing home a vital free kick; she watches aghast as the wall of defenders transforms into a line of sari-wearing relatives, all desperately trying to put her off! Wild celebrations follow and there are similarities between Pinkie's happiness at her wedding and Jess' happiness with her football success, showing the different values and beliefs of the two sisters. The final scene shows Jess and Jules' families at the airport saying goodbye to their daughters, giving parting gifts - again here we see the culture differences.

Jules receives an England shirt whilst Jess receives a picture of Guru Nanak, and although this scene is intended to show the contrast between both cultures it also tells of a much more important trait - that of caring and wanting the best for your child - no matter what culture or background you come from. East is East portrays a Multicultural Britain in a positive light but also shows the uglier side of Britain in the 70's, where many had yet to fully accept people from different cultures.

Both cultures are not as willing to integrate as in Bend It Like Beckham. The storyline revolves around one mixed race family living in an archetypal terraced home in the largely industrial and middle class area of Salford. The father, George, is a Pakistani who came to England 25 years before to make some money. He wants his six sons and one daughter to be good Pakistanis but the film shows how difficult this is because only one is a strict Muslim, the others enjoy the pleasures of English culture like eating bacon and having white girlfriends.

The problem is that George left his first wife in Pakistan and the mother of his children is Ella, his English second wife. George still insists on an arranged marriage for eldest son Nazir and disowns him when Nazir refuses to go through with it. This does not stop George trying to arrange marriages for two other sons; he cannot see that his way of doing things is tearing the family apart. As I mentioned above, Ella is the victim of domestic violence, primarily deriving from the culture clash when George thinks she and one of his sons show disrespect to his Pakistani traditions.

He does this to essentially keep his place as the dominant member of the household - male dominance is not as prominent in the western world as it is in Asian cultures, so when George does take his fist to Ella, it shows the contrast between the two cultures. The opening scene of East is East is of a Christian parade with the camera panned. People of many cultures are participating, including Ella and the children, who seem to feel at home socializing amid people from diverse cultures for the reason that they have a little British blood running through them.

They have not told George as they know he would disapprove due to his Muslim beliefs. Amidst the parade a crucifix is held aloft and shown close up to signify the Christian roots. When the children hear of their father's close whereabouts, we are taken to the next scene, showing the family running towards the camera from a distance. An aerial shot subsequently illustrates the parade with the family running parallel in desperation - a stark contrast to the calm and joyous scenes unfolding next to them.

From these opening scenes we can appreciate what a large part background and the generation game plays in beliefs and the ability to accept. The new and more liberal generations such as the kids are happy to be part of the British culture and take after their mother in that respect. However George is not prepared to be as tolerant, probably because of his childhood in Pakistan where he was brought up to believe in very traditional and original beliefs and where mixing with other cultures was unheard of.

In his youth George would have been thought of as liberal, but a disgrace to his family by marrying a white girl such as Ella. His hypocrisy is shown again when he complains about his racist English neighbours but he is just as bad especially when he talks about people from India; India and Pakistan were at war at this time. George and Ella's relationship is a slightly delicate one which you feel is overshadowed by Muslim and cultural traditions. He feels history demands him to be the dominant member of the household and has been brought up believing women have a place and a use.

It is for these reasons that Ella, although understanding George's predicament in addition to wanting to be a good Muslim wife, from time to time feels she has to exert authority, in order to demonstrate to herself and her kids that she still has a certain amount of influence within the household - however up until the end of the film George's decision is final. George along with many Asian husbands in the 70's feels continuous pressure to be looked upon by the Muslim community as being a respectable husband on top of having of a patriarchal family.

This invisible rule is nearly broken when Naseer does not go ahead with his arranged marriage and Ella is distressed when he is disowned. The children lean more towards their mother's thinking primarily because George takes such a strong, unforgiving and irrational line with them, but also for disowning Naseer as they all loved him deeply, a feeling shared by their mother. Ella furthermore keeps quiet about subjects and there is a Bend It Like Beckham attitude in that what George does not know does not hurt him.

This is taken to extremes because George thinks Saleem is studying engineering, when he is actually studying art.

This is the film makers making a point that Asian families want their children to be professionals and also that British people stereotype Asians.

Relationships between the offspring are the same as that of all brothers and sisters; superficially fractious. The only real outcast is Maneer a devout Muslim who the others cruelly nickname " Gandhi". It is his strong devotion to Allah which brings him the nickname and makes him so unpopular so that his family insult him and give him the name of an Indian hero. Indeed the other children do believe in Allah but not to such a large extent, the younger children especially.

This may be because George has not bothered to interact or distill his beliefs into the younger members of the family, losing interest in children. Another reason could be to do with them mixing between other cultures; it is generally thought of as uncool to be religious. Ironically the baby of the family Saj, who has not been circumcised, gets found out outside the mosque when peeing on a wall. George displays his disgust and tells Ella that " the little bastard" (the nickname given to Saj) must have the customary operation.

Ella puts up a fight and does not think it is necessary at his age (an excuse to temporarily stop her youngest from having to go through the pain, being a non Muslim she does not value it as highly.) She gives in to George only to later share her troubles with the family friend, Annie, who makes the pointed

comment “ It’s their religion you knew that when you married him”. Straight cut to the next scene which fades in where we see Saj screaming from the circumcision! This episode is a good example of how badly the couple deal with situations – there is no communication.

From these examples you can see that there is a family divide. On one side we have Ella and the children willing to fully cooperate and become part of a multicultural environment. On the other hand we have George who would rather be living in a one race community. It is no surprise then, when, after a good deal of pressure from George the family decides to go to Bradford on holiday, an town to which many Asian people immigrated during the 50’s and 60’s. Indeed as the family approaches they see the welcome sign has been edited to read “ Bradistan” in remembrance of Pakistan.

Needless to say George feels right at home. The Pakistani culture can be seen from the opening shots where Muslim believers are walking down the street buying items from an open air market, full of colour reminiscent of those seen in Lahore. A stereotypical corner shop entitled ‘ Housewives, can be seen again reiterating the role women have to play in Pakistani culture. Here everything is Asian orientated even the cinema; there is a lack of willingness to integrate with white society. It is part of the pockets of “ one race societies” around Britain during the time

In Bradford, Saj overhears his parents having an argument about another arranged marriage; this time Abdul’s. It transpires that George brought the family to Bradford to agree a meeting with the “ Shahs” to talk about the

marriage. Ella is unimpressed and threatens to leave after making the snide comment “ Why don’t you go back to your wife in Pakistan”, showing that racism is still prominent even with the most liberal of people. She decides to stay – but all hell breaks loose once Saj lets slip to Abdul about the marriage.

In a moment of blind anger Abdul destroys all the preparatory clothing screaming “ I’m not going to marry a fucking paki” signifying the differences between his beliefs and his father’s, Abdul wants a consensual marriage and will not be forced into anything. On arriving home George finds a distressed Maneer trying desperately to hide the damage. When questioned about the culprit he does not answer; this shocks George, for the son who he had always thought he could rely upon to continue his way of life and keep to his values has disobeyed him.

It is for these reasons that he draws up the harshest punishment, taking him to the fish and chip shop where he savagely beats him. Ella does her best to intervene and stop the assault; she succeeds only prior to laying into him and giving him a piece of her mind saying “ I’ve given you seven kids George and you don’t care for one of them. I am a good Muslim wife. ” This outburst is too much of an embarrassment for George to bear he cannot be humiliated again, not after the Naseer fiasco and this is where he takes his fist to her in an emotionally charged scene in which humour has no place.

The camera then fades into a frightful establishing shot. Ella is displayed battered and bruised sitting alongside the kids, rigid with fear looking blankly at the TV whilst George looks on from the corner. These scenes portray

multiculturalism in an extremely negative light as they give an example of how different cultures cannot live in harmony together due to history and differences in values. Abdul feels extreme guilt and gives in to his father's wishes to at least meet the girl.

He goes out to a typically English pub and drinks beer which is forbidden within Islam. These actions show he is taking on British traditions and rebelling against his father's harsh rulings. His English friends and colleagues in the pub show their lack of understanding towards other cultures by acting with bewilderment when he explains that this is his stag night; but he has not yet met his wife. The Shah family visit is doomed from the beginning and here we see a snobbier side of Muslim society. Ella cannot handle the judgment put upon her family by Mr.

Shah's wife, who is rather intolerant. Mrs. Shah is unsure of how to deal with a family that is not completely Patriarchal and predictably loses her cool during one of the funniest moments throughout the film. Saleem's "artistic interpretation" of "female exploitation" (female pubic hair offered to him by a friend of his white girlfriend, Stella, who likes him because he is Pakistani) showing multiculturalistic views) is thrown upon her. Degrading Ella's family and inexplicably calling them "half breeds".

This shows racist views are still harboured within the black community, it is not something unique to white societies. Fortunately the Shah's are thrown out the house by an incensed Ella who has had enough of narrow minded degrading behavior. East is East poses a lot of questions but it does not

suggest there are easy answers even though the film ends on a happy note. The camera, like in the first few scenes, changes to an aerial view showing everyone socializing together, putting aside any cultural boundaries.

This gets across one final message; that being a community is more important than racial separatism. Both films depict multiculturalism within British society, using comedy to bring to light more important issues such as racism and cultural differences. Having been set in different decades it allows us to see how far we have moved on or have not as the case may be. Integration is more visible in the 21st Century and this is mirrored by the contrast seen in *East is East* and *Bend It Like Beckham*.

In this film racism is by no means such a problem as in *East is East*. It is more to do with the boundaries and clashing religious beliefs in this Western world. Too many young Sikhs, including girls, playing football bare legged is not that big problem, as long as they adhere to the rules off the pitch. Only believers from the older generations feel that the traditions must be upheld so strictly. I believe we will gradually see this strictness fade out - in order to fully integrate British society.

Bend It Like Beckham is a more feel good movie, whereas *East is East* is trying to make a statement and show the true reality of what life for a mixed race family involved during the 70's - hence the swearing, violence and 15 Certificate. Both films also show that British young people have many of the same problems as those from Asian families. Conflict with parents about wanting to push the barriers is found in every society; children everywhere

tell their parents what they want to hear. All in all I believe the films do portray Britain in a different light, but only to reflect the changing times.

East is East tries to make a political statement, asks more questions and is deeper because there is something quite nasty about George's hypocrisy and violence while Jess' dad is prepared to let her try and integrate, even though he himself gave up after the cricket team abuse. Both films use humour to get their point across and there are some stereotype events and characters in both films. Bend it like Beckham is more of a feel good movie with a nice ending while East is East does not answer the questions for those who go and see it. I would recommend both films.