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## Bend it Like Beckham

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# Bend it Like Beckham

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002).

*Bend It Like Beckham*, directed by Gurinder Chadha, tells the story of eighteen-year-old British-Asian Jess Bhamra (Parminder Nagra). She is a talented soccer player, and her idol is David Beckham, the star of Manchester United. One day, Jules (Keira Knightley), captain of the local women's team, comes across Jess who is playing football in the park. She introduces Jess to the club's young and charismatic coach Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers). Seeing her potential, he wants her to go to Santa Clara, California to become a professional football player. However, her traditionalist Punjabi Sikh parents have other, more conventional plans for her future.

The freshness of the film resides in the performance of the young actors, and the comedy draws on social opposites seen through the eyes of teenagers. Hence, Chadha addresses a young, broad, multi-cultural audience, familiar with and appreciative of MTV video aesthetics, pop music, slang and camp language. Although a wide range of social topics are touched upon, the discourse primarily revolves around generation, gender, and race. Religion is understood as a factor of political ethnic identity, myths are deployed in context with gender, and theological concerns are part of the film's message.

Christian as well as Hindu theology expects youngsters to respect their elders and, consequently, the conventions, traditions, and moral assumptions they stand for. Jess breaks many rules in the process of carving out her own life. She lies

to her parents, imposes on their confidence, and flouts their moral codes. Although the film encourages the audience to “to keep on pushing,” Jess decides to respect her parents' feelings, and calls her football projects off. With her act, she allows her father to show his wisdom and, ultimately, to set her free. So, the credo of the film is that a fruitful relationship between different generations presupposes the capacity of self-sacrifice, forgiveness and love.

The film displays the hero myth, which excludes the possibility of a viable heroine, to depict gender relations. Although Jess excels in a masculine territory, she is chaste, virginal, submissive, and spiritually dependent on their male patrons. Like her mother, who prays to the Hindu Guru above the piano, Jess talks to the portrait of Beckham. In due time, Beckham is replaced by Joe, who not only looks as ascetic, vulnerable and benevolent as the former, but also shows her the way to personal and professional fulfilment.

Religion is used in the film to emphasize ethnic exclusion, and gives evidence of the fact that racial divisions are still existent in Britain, despite the much-touted cultural hybridity of British society. Hence Mrs Bhamra warns Jess about being associated with Joe by pointing out the story of someone else who was expelled from the Hindu community because she had a relationship with a “gora.” And when Jess's father tells his story of being “chased off like a dog” from the cricket grounds twenty years ago, and Jess replies that things have changed and

Hussein Nasser is now the chairman of the national team, her comment is dismissed by her mother arguing that Hussein does not count since he is a Muslim.

*Bend It Like Beckham* has been a huge success in Britain, and finds its place within the current enthusiasm about Asian filmmaking in Britain. The film is also of interest for non-British audiences because it shows the hybridity of cultural life in Britain. Soccer fans may be mesmerised by spectacular bends and fine documentary inserts of football matches. Young people may enjoy the music, the action and the degree of identification. Adults are offered some insight into youth culture. And teachers may find the film useful as an introduction to a variety of social, political and cultural issues.