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Culture bending? – representations of young Asian women

The decision to study *Bend It Like Beckham* (UK 2002) and *Anita and Me* (2002) was made following a class discussion about immigrant communities in our part of East London. GCSE Media students were ignorant of the facts behind their own cultural inheritance. We found that students were quite confused over the terms ‘culture’, ‘religion’ and ‘traditions.’ So this is where we began the study.

Being Asian myself, I had a keen interest in studying and teaching texts which went some way towards representing (both negatively and positively) the Asian diaspora in film. Up to that point we had not studied any such texts which dealt with life as an immigrant/part of an ethnic minority in the UK and the release of these films was well timed. My final reason was the presence of a few Asian students in the class along with the school’s 40% ethnic minority mix.

Representation and mediation

I tried to clarify definitions of religious beliefs, cultural values and traditions. I also needed to explain the difference between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims as well as Indians and Pakistanis and to clear up confusion about Urdu and Punjabi as distinct languages. I think

all of these were important as background information for the 'study' of the film and not merely appreciation of its humour and/or content.

A lot of my own personal anecdotes helped to clarify issues and helped students to understand the life of Asians in British society. We also clarified stereotyping and generational issues. In the box on the opposite page are some of the support materials and assignment worksheets which give an indication of how we approached representation issues in the two films.



Mother tells daughter she must not play football in *Bend it like Beckham*.

Reflections on the work undertaken

The work was successful in generating student responses to the films and *Bend It Like Beckham* proved to be a particularly 'rich text' in this respect. What was particularly pleasing was that some of the quieter girls in the class, especially the Asian girls, felt more able to enter into discussion and to explore ideas effectively in their writing. Some quotations from student essays give an idea of how they responded to the prompt questions listed opposite.

... An example of typical Asian women is where Pinky is having a party to celebrate her engagement; during this there is a medium shot of the living room where the families are sitting. There are also women, such as Jes holding large food trays and offering them to the women (who are sitting down) and men (who are standing in the background). This shows that Jes is a typical Asian, as well as her sister and mother; the reason for this is that this shows women take responsibilities of family traditional weddings, while the men are in the background most probably talking business. This key scene also shows that Jes respects her elders and values her family, because she is passing the food around to them not the other way around. This also shows the women sitting all together on a sofa talking about children, mothering and families in

a foreground shot, therefore this shows that the women are the more dominant gender when it comes to traditional weddings.

The young women and older women are represented being quite different, as the generations pass on. Within the scene of Pinky's engagement party, it shows that Jes and other the young Asian girls are wearing salwar kameez, which have sharp colours, quite revealing and designer (very expensive), whereas the mother is wearing an old, frumpy dull coloured salwar kameez, as though they have made it. Therefore this shows that the new Asian generation have become more up to date on fashion and take notice of how good they look, mainly to attract men. The older women however still show signs of traditionally making their own clothes and feel that the new more expensive clothing is not necessary, as they never were rich when growing up, so they can appreciate small things. However the older generations are represented as 'moving with the times', as they all take out their mobile phones to answer their calls, even though they cannot properly use them.

Visual language within the film determines the genre as well as the plot. For example, the way the 'Indian Bimbos' are dressed shows a comical side as many young Asians can relate to them. This represents the film as being a comedy. One of the men at the party before the wedding is creating a heartbeat with his hand. This is funny to see therefore also shows that the film is a comedy without any jokes or lines having to be said. The fact that the father is standing in one of the family scenes shows that he has a higher importance than the rest of the family. This may be a typical role of the man in an Indian family. Semiotics also ties in with visual language. For example, a close up of the Sikh God gives the denotation that the family is religious. The connotation of this is that the family hold strong values and principles regarding religion and culture. Also, the colour red for an Indian bride is a traditional colour therefore the connotation drawn from this is that Pinky holds traditional values like the rest of her family, unlike Jess.

Verbal language helps to show the values of people and also makes an audience understand the plot. For example, by the girls saying "Sat Sri Akal" to their aunt suggests that a main value to them is respecting their elders.

Jes' parents speak Punjabi a lot in the film which suggests that they still keep the Indian culture alive in their household and family even though they are living in England. Also, when Jules says "You should come along, have a try-out", we understand that the film is about Jes playing football. Similarly, when Mrs Bhamra says "No more football" we understand that the film is about Jes clashing with her parents. Aural language is important within the film. For example, the non-diegetic background music is Indian when it shows the family or when there is a problem. This suggests that the film reflects Indian culture and their values causing problems for Jes. Also, the upbeat music played when Jes is playing football helps us to understand that she feels happier playing football. (Year 12 student)

Essays like this show real engagement with the text and suggested that this was a worthwhile exercise. However, there were other conclusions to draw as well. There was a suggestion that other students in the class, the more confident and assertive non-Asian students perhaps, were possibly producing analyses which they thought matched the 'preferred reading' of the film. In other words, they were 'going along with' what they thought were acceptable representations of Asian women as endorsed by the film, rather than critically investigating them.

Readings of *Bend It Like Beckham*

Bend It Like Beckham has been a very successful film in commercial terms and writer-director Gurinder Chadha has been widely celebrated for presenting a view of British Asian culture to mainstream audiences across the world. The students appreciated what Chadha was aiming for but some of them had reservations. They felt although it was good to see British Asians on screen, the representations themselves were still too stereotypical. Characters were still hindered by the need for humour in the film (Mrs. Bhambra's accent) and other commercial demands (let's show the audience what they expect/know/ anticipate).

Who is absent? Isn't there a new generation of British Asians who are not seen in film yet? Couldn't the range of British Asian representations be broader and take on more aspects of life as experienced in London? What could the filmmakers have made of the Asian character who was gay?

Conclusions

Although an admirer of Gurinder Chadha's first feature *Bhaji on the Beach* (UK 1993), I certainly felt that *Bend It Like Beckham* suffered from the imperative to make 'commercial' film comedies, following the success of *East is East* (1999). The result is a film that has been overpraised and which fails to offer anything beyond a cliched view of Asian life in contemporary Britain. There are hundreds of reviews and 'user comments' on the film on websites across the world. I've picked this one as representing how some of the students felt at the end of their work on the film:

This film tries so hard to please. That's its problem, it really never shows anything beyond the cliché. It's a film that really tries to have a heart but is too sugary and it tries to please everyone. The gay issue is dealt with poorly. It's a false victory in the end that really isn't likeable. It's just that simple. That's all this movie is. Why this got all the hoopla and praise it got is beyond me. It's yet another coming of age movie, but this time its an Indian family and soccer's involved. The movie just drags on at points . . . how many times did we need to see the main character defy her parents and sneak out to play soccer? We get the point! Grow some balls, stand up to them already and end this! The lesbian references/jokes got tired really quickly. The movie on a whole was just annoying. Bend It Like Beckham is nothing special and VERY overrated, as Big Fat Greek Wedding was. Barely tolerable. (see uk.imdb.com, 'User comments' by 'Lotus Chief', Brooklyn, NY December 2003.)

My plan for next year is to explore a comparison of representations of Asian women in a British Asian movie and a Bollywood movie. I'm interested to see which cinema has moved forward in terms of new representations.

Background reading

I found the work of Sarita Malik very helpful in presenting an analysis of what has happened to Black and British Asian filmmakers and their ideas over the last ten years or so:

Sarita Malik (2001) *Representing Black Britain: A History of Black and Asian representation on British Television*, London: Sage

Sarita Malik (2002) 'Money, Macpherson and mind-set: the competing cultural and commercial demands on Black and Asian British films in the 1990s' in *Journal of Popular British Cinema* No 5

See also:

Karen Alexander (2000) 'Black British Cinema in the '90s: Going, Going, Gone' in Robert Murphy (ed) *British Cinema of the 90s*, London: bfi

Editor's Note

See page 25 for details of *itp* Film Notes, including a set on *Bend It Like Beckham* and, coming soon, a set on *Anita and Me*.

Essay Preparation

A few key terms are explained below. You must make use of these in your essay.

Representation

There is a wide spread belief that the media in its attempts to represent social and cultural values does have an influence on social and cultural values. The media presents the world as we know it back to us. Certain ideas and values are either restricted or opened up.

Stereotype

The producers of texts reduce the characteristics of a diverse group of people to a few recognisable ideas. Think about how this is done in the films you have studied.

Questions to ask yourself

- How do the stories carry ideas, what are those ideas and what kinds of effects do they have on people's beliefs?
- How is the story presented to us? What are the range of representations?

- How open or closed is the text? How easy is it for us to read the text in a range of ways?

Coursework Task

Use the notes and answer this question, in full paragraphs and giving specific examples from the film.

“With specific reference to Meena and her mother, discuss the representation of Asian women in the film *Anita and Me*.”

or

“With specific reference to Jes, her mother and her sister discuss the representation of Asian women in the film *Bend it Like Beckham*.”

You must include

- Textual analysis of key scenes of the film (*mise en scène* esp. body language and facial expressions, camera, sound, music, locations).
- How the women are represented through dialogue (what they say!).
- Cultural values and messages represented through the film. Give specific examples of cultural issues and examples to support this. (What is important in the culture and how is this shown? What are the messages apparent here?)
- Lifestyle and how Asians and English relate to each other (incl. how the Asian women see the English and how Meena sees them. What are the differences? Give examples.)
- Your personal ideas, including what have you learned about the culture being represented?
- What have you learned about the media stereotyping certain cultures?
- Also write about the differences between reality and the re-presentation of reality by the media.
- Effect/Analysis = Does this lead to a stereotypical representation of the character? Or does it show that they are breaking away from stereotypes in some way?

	Example	Analysis
Character Role		
Actions		
Dialogue & Values		
Facial Expressions & Body Language		
Costume		
Setting		

Grid for taking notes on sequences

Using the grid, make notes on sequences from the films for your essay. Use a grid for each sequence and make this a paragraph in your essay. Here are some suggestions for sequences you might study:

Bend it Like Beckham

1. Analyse how Jes' mother is represented in the opening sequence based on shopping in Southall.
2. How does the filmmaker show that Jes' mother has strong Asian cultural values when she catches Jes playing football in the park? What are these values?
3. How does the filmmaker show that Jes has very different values compared to her mother? (Look for different scenes in the film.)
4. How does the filmmaker show Asian cultural values in the sequence showing Pinky's engagement party?

Anita and Me

1. Analyse the representations of Meena, her mum and the ex-pupil in the opening sequence when they meet coming home from school.
2. How does the filmmaker show that Meena has different values and interests to her mum and dad and that she does not fit into the stereotype of Asian girls? (Look for examples like the fish fingers request and the trip to the fair.)

Writing your essay in paragraphs

Type up the paragraphs of the coursework using the notes we made in class for each paragraph. Make sure you include a variety of examples followed by detailed analysis of representations.

Example: The setting in the scene 'Shopping' shows the mother in the kitchen. She is represented as a typical Asian mother suggesting this is her key role in the film. Her costume, which is a traditional *salwar kameez* is also used to represent stereotypical ideas of Asian women. (Explain why . . .)

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