All that is dark can become white: the rules of the game in *Bend it Like Beckham*

Naarah Sawers

For the Shadow Sides issue of Alice's Academy, we took a somewhat untraditional approach. Naarah Sawers of Deakin University deconstructs the "light" and uplifting film, *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002), to expose its passive ideologies that equate physical darkness with regressive cultural and social outlooks and practices. While *Bend it Like Beckham* constructs itself as a modern fairy tale of a girl achieving her dream of athletic opportunity and success (with a nice side-dish of romance), Sawers demonstrates the film's privileging of whiteness as both a cultural and a gendered norm that must be desired and achieved before that dream may come true.

- Caroline Jones, editor, Alice's Academy

Interpreting what may be notionally understood as dark or light in terms of children's literature and narratives for children can be a complex business. In common understandings, dark and light stand in a hierarchical opposition where darkness is connected to the undesirable. Postcolonial studies have demonstrated the problematic cultural assumptions between light and white, and dark and black (or other-than-white) and pointed out that the binary itself is unstable. An unstable binary can be a potentially transgressive power, challenging dominant cultural mores that link darkness with the negative. Playing in the shadows between light and dark can provide exciting diffractions - a term Donna Haraway borrows from physics, because unlike reflection which produced an image of the same, diffraction is 'the record of a passage' (299). The film under analysis in this paper, Gurinder Chadha's (2000) feature film *Bend it Like Beckham*, plays with the instabilities of white and black, and the narrative records the diasporic passage of its protagonist. It has been a successful film and, I would argue, is considered 'light entertainment', and therefore non-threatening. However, in my analysis of this film I find that whiteness is still connected to the positive: to the uplifting, and to the light as it is traditionally understood.

In order to substantiate my argument, this paper traces another form of 'light entertainment': sport. Like a lot of children's and young adult fiction, particularly film, sport positions itself as apolitical and thus entertaining and non-threatening. A cursory glance at novels and films for younger readers and viewers would suggest that sport is becoming a pervasive motif for the child or teen protagonist to negotiate any number of social fields. *Bend it Like Beckham* employs sport, in this case soccer ("football"), as a metaphor for the protagonist's navigation of her culturally hybrid identity as a Indian-British girl. The film's entertaining message of cultural diversity and gender equality is to be applauded. However, as the following analysis demonstrates, the success achieved by characters who are marginalised from the dominant white society, and which the viewing audience is invited to applaud, celebrates 'whiteness' as the norm. The protagonist's success in terms of whiteness is based specifically
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*Bend it Like Beckham* is one example of many narratives for young people that employ sport as a metaphor for the workings of society. Recent work by Elizabeth Bullen (2006) in the area of sporting narratives and class politics in children’s fiction may provide some cues regarding how the metaphor of sport functions in terms of racial politics. The most important connection Bullen makes is the link between social games and sporting games. She writes that “Social fields are alternatively referred to as fields of play; that is, as games bound by rules and conventions which determine who is permitted to play and where ‘players’ are positioned” (47). Bullen articulates that how society works, who is positioned where, and the rules and regulations of a society are often metaphorically linked to the rules, positions and workings of sporting games. In texts for children and young adults then the sporting field becomes a metaphor for the social field and “the [sport] becomes the object around which a sense of identity crystallizes” (Bullen 48).

As the protagonist, Jess, is indeed successful in her sporting capacity the conclusion can be drawn that she has also successfully negotiated her sense of identity. However, a broader question needs to be asked: what determines a successful identity in such a popular film celebrating cultural pluralism? Bullen continues her analysis by arguing that “Success in sport becomes emblematic of the possibility of success in other social fields, but also distinguishes the obstacles to success” (48) and thus, the obstacles that Jess faces in the sporting field explains much about her social success.

Jess’s sporting success, and thus her symbolic movement into new cultural fields can be more succinctly understood in terms of Richard Dyer’s (1988) analysis of whiteness. Analysis of ‘whiteness’ in postcolonial studies is relatively new, and can be accused of ‘reproducing the dominance of whiteness by setting aside … other discourses’[1], however the aim is to point the spotlight on the dominant culture (in a form of exposure rather than enlightenment) to analyse more specifically the nuances of racism. Without doing so, whiteness itself remains an invisible and “non-ethnic” category. Thus, Dyer analyses how white itself is understood (or not) as an ethnic category because, as he argues, minority cultures are focused upon as different to the hegemonic group, but rarely do we focus on the category of white (44). While focusing on minority cultures “the norm has carried on as if it is the natural, inevitable, ordinary way of being” (Dyer 44). Dyer uses the analogy of painting at primary school to signify how white as a cultural category functions. He tells that at school he was taught that black was a colour and that white is no colour, and in the “realm of categories … white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularising quality, because it is everything – white is no colour because it is all colours” (45). What this means is that white can then “colonise” the concept of normal; thus, it becomes nothing and everything.

I employ Dyer’s ideas here, in conjunction with Bullen’s, to analyse a film where the main agenda is to elucidate the difficulties of negotiating family and gender within the Indian diaspora. However, my concern is the underlying assumption of the desirability of whiteness (and the values it embodies) that pervades the narrative, and so many others. In an earlier edition of *Looking Glass*, Debra Dudek (2007) employs another theorist of whiteness, Ghassan Hage, in an analysis of *Veronica Mars*. Using Hage and Bourdieu, Dudek explores how “multiculturalism is a ‘field of accumulating whiteness’” and how “cultural capital … translates into symbolic capital when that person or group is recognised and validated by the dominant national culture” (58, 59). This assumption leads to a traditional form of racism underpinned by ideas of evolutionary progression: “the idea of a path of progress already followed by whites but in principle open to all human beings”(Dyer 51). I argue here that a similar gesture occurs in *Bend it Like Beckham*, and that the cultural capital gained by the protagonist, Jess, and validated by the dominant culture, occurs principally through her ability to negotiate her sexuality in accordance with Western norms. Sport is the metaphor upon which her path proceeds; the obstacles she overcomes on the sporting field symbolise her increasing cultural capital.

Jess initially plays soccer in the park with her male Asian counterparts and she is demonstrably more skilful than the boys. Significantly, this preliminary sporting field is defined by its lack of rules. It is obviously co-gendered, but in addition there are no literal boundaries or uniforms so that the teams are indistinguishable. In the park game there is in fact no referee, and thus any boundaries that are transgressed (for instance, when a foul may ‘normally’ be called) are loosely instated. This game is much more fluid and physical than the ‘professional’ field that Jess aspires to – and which determines her success. The park as a sporting field is essential to the construction of white values as normal. It is definitively linked to both Jess’ familial culture and immaturity, it lacks rules, discipline, and control, and therefore it represents the social field which Jess must depart in order to successfully navigate her identity. Significantly, it affords her no opportunities because in the game Jess plays in the park the
goals do not accumulate.

Having only ever played in the park and without rules, the first obstacle to Jess’ sporting success is her lack of knowledge about how the game is played, most specifically about her appropriate position within it. This is then the underlying narrative concern – how to position the Indian girl in a dominant white British society, if indeed she can be positioned anywhere. At her try-out for the Harriers Joe’s first question to Jess is about where she plays, and her enthusiastic response “the park” indicates her lack of knowledge about the game, which is confirmed through Joe’s response: a derisive look he shares with Jules. However, when Jess gets on the field and plays, Joe gives Jules’ a ‘thumbs up’ in reference to Jess. Although Jess may not know the rules she demonstrates a natural ability that indicates that she will instinctively learn them. Her skills at football as naturally given, rather than learnt, are confirmed again later in the narrative when Jess tells her parents that she did not ask to be good at football and that maybe she was just “blessed” with these skills.

However, there are further obstacles to Jess’ eventual social success which are symbolised through her movement from the park to membership in the Harriers. At this point, access into the Harriers is her opportunity to learn the rules of whiteness, and thus sustain whiteness as the norm. The following point by Bullen clarifies part of this argument:
It is notable that in many YA texts that revolve around sport, the games are institutionalised, that is, as school or club sports. Given that the hegemonic group controls the rules of the social game, winning is necessarily associated with the assimilation into the values of mainstream society. (Bullen 48)

The Harriers thus represent the institutionalisation of certain norms and positions which are controlled by the hegemonic group. In his analysis of the film, Michael Giardina (2003) makes a similar argument whereby Jess is initially (in the park and at the try-out) wearing a Manchester United shirt, marking her parochial position, however, when she joins the Harriers she wears a white shirt which links her with English football colours. He writes that “Any time Jess is seen as a member of her Hounslow [Harriers] team … she is hailed as English; her actions have repercussions for her future vis-à-vis England” (74). In contrast, the game at the park represents a space that is positioned in the film as regressive (parochial and lacking in opportunity) rather than progressive (national, and thus global in its scope for opportunity). The construction of the sporting fields also determines Englishness as whiteness, because as Dyer notes, whiteness “is often associated with order, rationality, rigidity, qualities brought about by the contrast with black disorder, irrationality, and looseness” (48). The park game represents the latter qualities, but it also functions to define the orderliness of the Harriers, most obviously affirmed through training where each exercise is neatly lined and cued.

Jess’ own uncertainty about her place in the game defines her next challenge. Having made the team Jess accepts the uniform, however, when changing into the Harriers’ white uniform she is uncertain and shy about ‘coming out’. The changing room scene is set up predominately to demonstrate Jess’ awkwardness with her body and her sexual inexperience. In comparison to the other half naked female bodies casually bared, Jess attempts to get dressed in her uniform without exposing any flesh; this awkwardness is assumedly linked to the regressive sexual mores that her family’s culture aspires to for women. While playing at the park, Jess has already been marked disparagingly as a ‘V’ by the overly sexualised Indian girls who perve on the boys playing soccer (whom Jess had just called “sluts”). The viewer is positioned to align with Jess, and thus admire that she withholds her sexuality. However, in the shower scene Jess’ excessive modesty does not meet with the norms of western society and it is contrasted through the body of the black captain of the Harriers, Mel. Jess, struggling self-consciously with her attempts at getting changed, is sitting opposite and in conversation with Mel. Mel is shown from the waist up, and the camera, following Jess’s own lingering gaze, focuses on her feminine white bra (as opposed to the sports bra Jules has insisted on earlier in the narrative). Mel’s skin is tattooed and she puts her hands behind her back so that the viewer is expecting her to undo her bra in both a tantalising and ‘frightening’ exposure of flesh – ‘frightening’ because the viewer is positioned as seeing through Jess, and thus Mel’s possible nakedness seems overwhelming in light of Jess’ own extreme modesty. Putting aside the embedded racism that connects Mel entirely with her sexuality[2], which is reaffirmed when the Asian boys watch the Harrier’s and comment on the captain’s “tits”, it is clear that Jess’ next obstacle is how to navigate sexuality in this serious game of accumulating the symbolic capital of whiteness. The first step, and the following scene, is to indicate privately and shyly your sexual availability to an appropriate male, to go to first base so to speak, which she subsequently does with Joe in the bleachers.

The exposure of skin is distanced in the narrative from the issues of race, but is still all about signs of difference. Jess has a burn on her leg which she is embarrassed about. The uniform reveals her skin/scar and thus her overt visible difference is her next obstacle to success in this social field. Instead of participating in the training session Jess sits in the pavilion bleachers where Joe joins her. She then exposes her scar to Joe, who consoles her by revealing his own scar to her. Thereafter, Jess joins the Harriers with confidence and the scar signifying her visible difference is an obstacle overcome. The
underlying sexualisation of the narrative in this scene is significant as it indicates how pivotal Jess’ understanding of her gendered and sexual position in white culture is to her successful admittance, or accumulated cultural capital. The viewer learns the regulations and rules about female sexuality and gender, because the way Jess plays her sexuality correctly in a field of whiteness is framed against those girls who play the gender game incorrectly.

Joe is clearly the best player in the field of masculinity provided in this film (the father rates a close second, but obviously he is sexually “off limits” or “off-side”). Joe is also “off limits” as Jules tells Jess, but he is really only off limits to Jules, not because he is their coach – this boundary is shifted when he nearly kisses Jess – but rather because Jules does not stick to the rules of the (gender) game. Jules is active: she wears a sports bra, talks back to the coach, creates the team, and pursues “new blood”. Her active pursuits are extended to the coach and, although she is not overtly aggressive, paired with her success and desire to win in sport, she is punished – the implication being that were Joe and Jules to couple gender dichotomies would be transgressed (much as they are in the park). The sign is written on her body: when the team goes out to party in Germany and Jules makes her most direct ‘aim’ for Joe, her overtly sexual backless top exposes her unfeminine sports bra tan. Jules, it seems, is not a winner when it comes to sexuality.

The threat Jules represents to masculinity, and thus to the rules governing the superiority of whiteness, is saved by the way Jess learns to play the game. Her next obstacle, played out in the game the Harriers play in Germany, is about Jess learning to repress her emotions. Having been fouled against, Jess retaliates and is called a “Paki” by the opposing player. Jess acts out physically and is suspended from the game by the umpire. She is taught her lesson doubly when Joe aggressively reprimands her in front of the team. Although she confronts him afterwards, she is also consoled and embraced by him. After this point in the game, Jess has successfully learnt the rules and regulations of whiteness, which are critically tied to doing sexuality and gender correctly: that is, navigating appropriate (subordinate) sexual availability to the deserved male. It is now only Jess’ family who represents the obstacle to her success, and thus in this scene Jess and Joe’s embrace is interrupted by her father.

Jess’ father is constructed as a compassionate man, just like Joe is shown to be, and he eventually sanctions Jess’ transition. Indeed, that this is transition is desirable is affirmed through the music score: when Jess overcomes obstacles and moves closer to her dream Western music plays (including Curtis Mayfield’s ‘Move on Up’), but when she is faced with opposition it is constructed as negative and Indian music accompanies her. Similarly, the motif of flying and freedom is used through planes. When Jess moves closer to playing soccer in professional and institutionalised forms, planes are seen flying above her, symbolising her movement towards freedom (and, arguably enlightenment). However, her parents are seen to be stuck at the airport as employees. Indeed, it is indicated that the cause of Jess’ scar is because her mother was working at the airport and was thus neglecting her maternal duties of cooking for her children. These strategies function to align the viewer to consider Jess’ passage as a positive one that will afford her infinite opportunities. However, she must “move on up towards her destination”, away from her familial entrapments, which she refuses to do until it is patriarchially sanctioned.

The viewing audience of *Bend it Like Beckham* are recruited to support Jess’ success as she overcomes her obstacles and gains cultural capital in a field of whiteness. Jess’ passage is one understood as ‘progressive’ and is symbolised through her movement from the sporting fields in the park to America, from the local to the global. Her initial uncertainty about her position on the field is, by the conclusion, stable and certain, and this is intimately linked to traditional Western gender and sexual mores. As Jess initially learns, even her visual difference is less important than playing the game correctly. To do this she must learn that relationships with men are more significant than female friendships; she must learn to repress her emotions and demonstrate control; and finally, that her movement must be patriarchially sanctioned. Against the surface narrative, I have argued here that Jess’ transition is in fact one from fluidity and potentially powerful transgressions to rigid hierarchies and control. This passage is mapped on to the sporting fields that Jess encounters. As she desires to play in institutionalised grounds, where the hegemonic group controls the rules, she must accede to these rules. The rules in this case, and for this author, are fairly black and white, any instability, any shadows between the binary, are snuffed.

1. I appreciate, and thank, the anonymous reviewer’s comments on this point.
2. Her captaincy is undermined both by the representation of her in terms of her body and sexuality, but also by the fact that Jules is given all responsibility that a captain would be attributed – Jules is the best player (with Jess), takes training when Joe can not, and was the instigator in forming the team.
3. There is too little room to explore further how the Freudian, patriarchal narrative plays out in terms of the racial politics of the film except to point here to how the father is placed between Joe and Joe’s
implied Indian competition for Jess’ affections. The choice is clear, and the father ultimately makes the choice (allowing Jess to play in the finals). The father is then rewarded by access to whiteness when he dons the cricket ‘all-whites’ and plays the ‘final’ game/scene.

4. I want to thank, Rani Singh, a student at Deakin University, for pointing this out to me in class.

Works cited:


