UNDERSTANDING GENDERED SPACES IN MIRA NAIR'S THE NAMESAKE (2007) AND GURINDER CHADHA'S BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM (2001)

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Abstract: My paper will compare and analyze Gurinder Chadha's *Bend It Like Beckham* and Mira Nair's *The Namesake* to understand how both these filmic texts problematize unified conceptions of diasporic identities in the host land, by exploring the continuance of homeland values and cultures in the host land. I will go on to show that, both filmmakers primarily focus on their female characters, especially the first generation diasporic mothers, to reflect and analyze their position as bearers of culture who are constantly engaged in preserving and continuing homeland values. The filmmakers go on to show how the experience and challenges of living in a diaspora interrogate South Asian diasporic identities in diasporic homes. Moreover, in so doing, they not only carve a more liberal space for women in diaspora, they also present to the audience changing conceptions of diasporic identities and homes.

Keywords: Diaspora, Diasporic women, Homeland, South Asia.

Introduction: In her insightful, seminal discussion of South Asian diasporic cinema in *Beyond Bollywood* (2004) *D*esai claims that diasporic filmmakers like Gurinder Chadha and Mira Nair in their own unique way embody the plurality of South Asia diaspora and represent the hybridity of postcolonial dislocations that both of them have experienced. Desai highlights that particular gender conflicts represented in Chadha and Nair's diasporic cinemas are expressive of the reality of the South Asian diaspora in the UK and the US as well as the peculiarities of contemporary hybrid existences in diaspora. As a result, both the filmmakers are regarded as pioneer women filmmakers and both of their films have women protagonists whose lives and journeys are sensitively portrayed within the hybridized spaces of diasporic displacements in the host land. In this paper, I focus on two diasporic films, *Bend It Like Beckham* by Gurinder Chadha and *The Namesake* by Mira Nair. I aim to analyze both the films to unravel the role and place of women in two different generations to further understand the portrayal of South Asian diasporic women in contemporary brand of diasporic cinema.

Gurinder Chadha was born in Nairobi, Kenya in 1960, as an East African Indian descendant, and later moved to Southall, England. Nair was born in the Indian Punjab (North West of the subcontinent) but soon immigrated to the Orissa Province and then to Delhi. After completing her college studies, her family moved to Uganda and then finally settled in America. Chadha and Nair are bound by their South Asian background (both have their family background in the Punjab) and by their Indian experiences in East Africa. Their pairing is particularly useful and relevant as both filmmakers reflect their personal cartographies of diaspora juxtaposed against their different knowledge of South Asian identities in diaspora in their films. Moreover, both these filmmakers have been appreciated for their portrayal of the issues of gender and sexuality in South Asian diasporic cinema. Jigna Desai reinforces this fact: 'For over a decade a handful of South Asian diasporic female filmmakers such as...Mira Nair and Gurinder Chadha have portrayed...femininity in contemporary English language films'(Desai 1). Moreover, since their films confront the situation of women in the diaspora, interrogating both postcolonial and gender complexity within one framework, their films have gained immense popular and critical success.

The 'Reel' Diaspora: Receiving and Representing Gendered Identities in *The Namesake* and *Bend It Like Beckham (2001):* Nair's film *The Namesake* was released in 2007. *The Namesake* invokes the spatial topography of Calcutta and Boston alternatively to reiterate the diasporic displacement of a Bengali family. The outstanding cinematography of Frederick Elmes vividly conveys the chaos of the

streets of Calcutta and the backdrop of New York, where Ashok and Ashima spin out the story of their lives. Nair uses several cinematic techniques to link New York with Calcutta throughout the film. The camera techniques like medium shots, lingering imagery and still camera images depict transitions between countries as well as across time. Nair also uses 'bleached bypass on select scenes throughout the film to link together Ashok and Ashima's memories of home in India with their present experience in the United States' (Nagajyothi 550).

The Namesake begins in the year 1968 and travels up to the year 2000, covering a large span of time and two generations. The film follows the Ganguly family and their cultural and geographical displacement from Calcutta to New York. The first generation diasporic parents, Ashok and Ashima, fly to New York to start a new life. In the character of Ashok Ganguly, the film depicts the journey that many Indians undertook during the late fifties and early sixties. Ashok is represented as the active agent of migration; it is due to him that Ashima also embarks upon this diasporic journey. Thereafter the film portrays her as withdrawing into a longing for home and constantly feeling spatially and emotionally dislocated from the comfortable 'home' in Calcutta.

This loneliness is further aggravated as she conceives her child on this alien soil. This scene in the movie shows a very confident Ashok trying to convince Ashima to stay in America as 'America is the land of opportunity' (Nair 00:25:52), against her desire to move back to India. Although the conflict is resolved, the scene portrays a rather sad and dejected Ashima, unable to come to terms with her diasporic life. This scene reiterates what Brah describes as the pressures of filial ties through which patriarchal power is sustained in the form of subtle victimisation of women and their marginalisation to sundry roles. In fact, Brah further argues that 'the institution of the family constitutes one of the key sites where the subordination of women is secured. Patriarchal ideology constructs "home" as the rightful place for women…' (76). Moreover, Ashima's inability to oppose her husband and sacrifice her personal needs in order to fulfil filial duties, right fully reflects the appropriation of women's caring work as 'labour of love' (ibid.) within filial frameworks.

Thereafter, Ashima decides to let go of her desire to go back 'home', and attempts to nurture her children with filial and kinship values that she has imbibed from her homeland. Anthias and Davis have argued that the centrality of women's role, inside the diaspora(and outside), relies on their role as 'transmitters and reproducers of ethnic and national ideologies', thereby reinforcing their position within the home space in which they are 'central to transmitting cultural rules' (Anthias & Davis 550). As a result, Anthias and Davis further point out, the task of cultural preservation and sustenance within filial life is exclusively marked for women in diasporic frameworks and they are, therefore, objectified through patriarchal control in terms of forbidding inter-community marriage and ascertaining limits of professional choices and social-private life expectations.

This is acutely reflected in Ashima's effort to sustain her position as the bearer of culture of the family by exclusively interacting within the Bengali diasporic community in America. The film shows that Ashima celebrates different customs and ceremonies, such as marriages, death, childbirth, festivals etc. as per Bengali customs, trying to preserves her homeland culture in a new land. The montage of these few scenes presents Bengali culture clearly through audio-visual modes and relies on 'chronotopic' (Bakhtin 84) motifs, that is, sequences of time and space in narrative pattern that unify multiple temporalities and histories. Diaspora theorists like McLeod have elaborated on how 'their [diasporic communities'] belief, tradition, customs, behaviours and values along with their "possessions and belongings" are carried by migrants with them to new places' (McLeod 211). This is deeply resonant of their desire to sustain the continuities of their homeland within diasporic homes.

In a way, Nair shows that Ashima attempts to compensate for the anxiety of loss and displacement that her emergent diasporic existence brings about by indulging in an uncritical cultural reclamation of homeland values, and by evoking certain physical and symbolic elements that can promise a certain level of existential security or affirmation of her homeland in America. In so doing, Nair highlights Ashima's conflicted association with the host country. As a consequence, Ashok and the children

become weary of her incessant need to uphold homeland values and begin to challenge their relevance to their American life.
The penultimate scene of the film shows Ashima giving a speech at her house in New York to thank her family and friends for their support. She says she is happy to know that both her children are settled and happy and she has decided to move back to India to pursue her dream of learning Indian classical music: 'I want to be free...[that's why] I have decided to sell the house. I am going to do what your father and I always planned. Six months in India and six months in the U.S. Then I can go and sing in Calcutta. That is if any guru wants a forty-five-year-old student. I want to be free' (Nair 01:53:00). The lighting and camera angles focus sharply on Ashima's beaming smile and her confident demeanor, and Ashima and Gogol's newfound intimacy. Nair chooses to use close-up shots and over the shoulder shots in this scene to emphasize Ashima's emotions and to draw the audience's attention to her reactions.

This gradual acceptance of her dual life, with equal focus on her diasporic life in America and her life in Calcutta, marks a new beginning for Ashima, who relinquishes the position of keeper of culture in order to embrace a more liberal space marked by travel, music and fewer responsibilities. Ashima's speech reflects her desire to question the continuance of homeland values in her diasporic life, and also the way they should be espoused or followed in the host land. In this manner, the film not only deconstructs conceptions of gender roles that position women as 'frequently (but problematically) associated with positions within the domestic cultural economy and charged with maintaining the edifice of home life' (Anthias 552), but it also dismantles the unified and naturalized sustenance of homeland values in diasporic homes.

The film ends with a powerful image of Ashima singing and playing sitar in Calcutta, depicting the climatic moments of happiness and contentment in her life.The lighting, against the backdrop of the Howrah bridge of Calcutta, reflects Ashima's re-connection with her homeland, foregrounding Ashima's sense of liberation within an open environment and bright lighting. The camera slowly focuses out of this scene, leaving the audience with Ashima's enchanting rendition of vibrant Baul songs (folk music by roving minstrels of rural Bengali), and Rabindra Sangeet (songs by Tagore).

While Nair's film shows that a gradual move towards acceptance of diasporic life is enacted in the absence of the patriarch, Chadha's film ventures to show that this contestation of homeland values in diasporic homes is affected after the intervention of the patriarch, thereby showing that stereotypes about the role of women in diasporic families can be challenged and redefined by articulating a space for men and women to reassess their diasporic journeys and to pave the way for a more inclusive and progressive diasporic existence.

Bend It Like Beckham was one of the successes of 2002, making over $75,000,000 worldwide, striking a chord with a range of audiences globally. *Bend It Like Beckham* was presented as a 'feel good' film which appealed to audiences in its examination of culture clashes and family traditions (Hussain 5-9, Desai 53-56). Another reason for the film's widespread global appeal is the combination of the genre of coming of age and sport-oriented film that is able to impress western viewers, and the traditional setting, values and wedding narratives that appeal to South Asian diasporic audiences globally (Korte &Sternberg 174). In fact, Chadha and her co-writers, Guljit Bindra and Paul Mayeda Berges, were widely applauded for having brought diasporic cultural conflicts to the forefront. Chadha won the Special Recognition for Excellence in Filmmaking award in 2003, and Best Film in the British Comedy awards in 2002. Internationally, the film was greatly appreciated and won awards at the Locarno Film Festival, the International Film Festival of Marrakesh and the Sydney Film Festival.

Bend It Like Beckham depicts the story of Jessminder 'Jess' Bhamra, the youngest daughter of a Sikh family living in suburban London. She is shown to be an admirer of David Beckham, and plays football wherever and whenever she can. There is an establishing shot at the opening of the film, focusing on the houses in Southall, the area where the Bhamra's reside. It then cuts to focus on Mrs. Bhamra praying in front of a large framed photo of Guru Nanak. Through this establishing shot, the director shows that Mrs. Bhamra has managed to retain certain key symbolic elements of 'Indianess' in the

'household...[which] is replete with significant and essential markers of Indian cultural identity such as Indian food, Indian TV programmes, the Punjabi language ,religious icons and heated discussions regarding the code of conduct for Indian girls' (Chacko 82). This scene presents the loud and dogmatic figure of Jess's mother through her dialogue, in which she insists that she is 'too busy trying to keep the Indian values over my girls' and therefore strongly condemns Jess's decision to take up football professionally:

Jessminder, I don't want shame on my family... you have to start behaving as a proper woman, ok? I don't want you running around people half-naked in front of men, look how dark you have become playing under the sun. No family will want a daughter-in-law who plays football non-stop. You can go and play round football but you can't make round chapattis. Once your exams are over you are starting to learn how to cook a proper Punjabi dinner. (Chadha 00:20:34)

This interaction between Mrs. Bhamra and Jess highlights some defining characteristics of the position of bearer of culture of the family. First, like Ashima, the first generation diasporic mother is relentless in sustaining symbolism of 'Indianess' through a barrage of ethnic objects and ritualistic imagery within the household. Secondly, like Nair's representation of Ashima's interaction with her children that are mostly carried out in the kitchen, Chadha too positions Mrs. Bhamra within the domestic confines of the kitchen, angling the camera to capture her back and forth movement from the kitchen. She, too, is engaged in teaching and coercing her children into learning Indian values without challenging the relevance of these homeland values in their diasporic existence. This form of patriarchal and cultural pressure to sustain 'Indianess' and other 'ethnic and unassimilated traits' (Radhakrishnan 121) – of being able to 'make round chapattis' – illustrates the residual effects of homeland values within diasporic homes, further problematizing an already conflicted relationship between Mrs. Bhamra and Jess.

Mrs. Bhamra's displeasure also stems from that fact that she expects the responsibility of cultural preservation to be automatically transferred to the next generation of women; she expects the daughters of the family to further a 'faithful reproduction of Indianess' (Wilson 17).Therefore she is even more displeased by Jess's disinterest in household chores, as she watches with annoyance Jess kicking a ball through the washing. Along shot focuses on Jess's kicking the ball, against the colourful sarees hanging from the washing line, symbolizing her detachment from daily household chores, family and domesticity. The camera constantly juxtaposes Mrs. Bhamra's traditional clothing against Jess's soccer clothes in order to highlight the difference in their personal lifestyle choices. This scene ends with a low angle shot of Jess demonstrating her subservience and her intimidation after she is confronted by her mother in the park.

Jess understands this power play and the constant tension between the pulls of Indianess that Mrs. Bhamra is attempting to uphold, and the desire to keep away from the confines of the home to play football. Jess is seen confessing to her coach Joe that her parents' refusal to allow her to play football stems from their desire to protect: 'they want to protect me...this is taking me away from everything they know' (Chadha 00:35:46). Jess understands that her passion for a male-dominated sport stands in opposition to the domestic space that her parents, especially her mother, are attempting to preserve, because it represents an invasion of the 'foreign'. She painfully laments: 'Anything I want is just not Indian enough for [my parents]' (Ibid.). This inherent desire to sustain and preserve the patriarchal values of the homeland in the diaspora space reflects a homing desire for the bearer of culture, as these values come to represent the mythic distant space of the homeland; a space that is unachievable in diaspora but yet fervently desired. It also redefines their own position vis-à-vis their children, whose sense of belonging to their parents' homeland is fragile and fraught. Mrs. Bhamra's position as the bearer of culture amplifies her role within the domestic sphere, thereby placing her in a position of command within the household; yet, at the same time, it distances her from the outside world, a world in which Jess privileges the neighbourhood park and football field more than the home.

Moreover, this form of lamentation by Jess reflects the tenuous cultural space she occupies and the emotional struggles that this entails. Her positionality reflects the emotional and cultural distance from

her parent's homeland space and its fading relevance in her social space. Jess's conflicted relationship with her parents compels Jess to question her parent's desperation 'to protect their 'Indianess'...the 'fossilized' values of the 1960's including commitment, duty, honour, sacrifice perpetuated over the years'(Hussain 26).Yasmin Hussain, in her discussion of the contestation of homeland values in diaspora, highlights generational conflicts as a characteristic of diasporic families, and argues that the 'differences between the generations arise from the exposure to the integrating services of the majority society from the birth...in the diaspora, the second and subsequent generation finds itself navigating within a social context which differs entirely from that which they share with their own parents'(ibid.). Hussain further argues that 'their [second generation diasporic children] hyphenated identity becomes expressive of a commonality and national loyalty that serves as a symbol of belonging' (ibid: 25).

Unlike first-generation diasporic individuals, who are very much involved in discovering, assimilating to and reinventing their space within the host country, second-generation diasporic children are emotionally and culturally distanced from their parent's native culture. These constant tensions and the tenuousness of the connection also has severe ramifications within the diasporic family, as the tensions between first generation diasporic parents and their children reflects an uneasy negotiation of homeland values and diasporic identities for all the people involved.

This form of awareness of self and deeper understanding of the fraught filial space is particularly helpful as it enables Jess to confidently rebel against overbearing traditional values and assert her professional choices. Jess's honest speech about her love for football and her success in the game changes Mrs. Bhamra's attitude towards Jess and her own position within the family. She comes to realize that however unconventional Jess's aspirations might be, they are crucial for her professional growth and personal happiness. During this scene, the camera sharply focuses on Jess's confident face as she stands in front of her relatives and her family, courageously voicing her love for football, and the scene ends with a close up of Jess and her father, who is amicably understanding of Jess's choice of career and passion. The end of the movie, in which Jess is given permission to pursue a career in football, represents a positive acknowledgement and reinforcement from Mrs. Bhamra and the larger diasporic community. It symbolizes Jess's attempt to 'bend' the patriarchal rules and dictates, in order to carve a more liberal space for South Asian women in diaspora. In an interview, Chadha mentions that the title of the movie, *Bend It Like Beckham*, which is a reference to David Beckham's skill of bending the ball and then scoring a goal, plays with the boundaries of hegemonic patriarchal norms and of the necessity for women to 'bend' societal rules in order to follow their dreams (Chadha qtd. in Morales, 2003, np).

Although, most critics have celebrated the climax of the film as empowering and liberating for Jess, as it 'endeavours to contest the construction of South Asian and diasporic women as passive victims of heteropatriarchy' (Desai 215), I would like to highlight how Chadha's film is able to affect this redefinition of gender identities and to resolve filial conflicts through the intervention of Mr. Bhamra. In other words, unlike Nair's film, in which the absence of Ashok heralds the transformative process for Ashima, Chadha shows that one cannot ignore the position of the patriarch in the traditional Asian diasporic household, whose intervention is crucial for the conflicts to be resolved and for there to be a powerful change in family dynamics as well.

The end of the film presents a breakthrough moment, as Mr. Bhamra decides to re-think his reservations, and realizes that his personal tragedies cannot and should not define his daughter's ambitions. He decides to forgo his initial resentment and also to ignore the disapproval of the diasporic Indian community, and let his daughter undertake the journey. In so doing, Chadha not only signals a movement towards acceptance and assimilation on behalf of Mr. Bhamra, but also that a comprehensive change in traditional patterns of filial ties and gender roles can be brought about by complete participation of the woman in diasporic homes and the patriarch of the family. In fact, this conventional climax, along with Jess's speech, re-affirm the fact that Chadha is interested in preserving some of the Indian cultural ethos of obedience towards parents and filial ties, while at the same time allowing Jess to question and deconstruct certain gender stereotypes intrinsic to Asian homes.

The film ends with a scene at the airport, where Jess and Jules' parents come to bid goodbye to their daughters as they leave for their football training camp in America. Therefore, in agreement with Desai's hypothesis, I would also emphasize that *Bend It Like Beckham* is 'liberal but not too radical' in its treatment of gender issues (214), as parental consent vis-à-vis career choices and inter-ethnic love equations is depicted as crucial within South Asian diasporic homes, so that gender roles and filial frameworks can be amicably (with some resistance) renegotiated.

Conclusion: Both the films in this paper identify and foreground the complexity of the positionality of women as diasporic subjects, which is constructed through multiple factors in terms of migrant hood, generational conflict and gender. Both films reflect upon diasporic frameworks that 'maintain and consolidate connections and imaginings of the homeland by performing national identities through gender' (Desai 30), but purposefully question normative gender identities to represent the changing identities of diasporic homes and the place of women within them. In analyzing both films, I have shown that they reinforce the position of the first generation diasporic mother as culturally burdened. Moreover, in *The Namesake*, the first generation diasporic mother, Ashima, is presented in conflict with other family members, whereas in *Bend It Like Beckham*, the conflict is between Mrs. Bhamra and Jess. I have been able to show that the films present these conflicts as integral, as they redefine the inter-generational conflict within a South Asian diasporic household. Furthermore, though in different ways, both films present these conflicts without ignoring the importance of the patriarchal presence. *The Namesake* shows Ashima's growth and emancipation in the absence of Ashok, whereas Jess' dream to play professional football is achieved only after she obtains her father's approval. In so doing, the films do not completely sideline the figure of the patriarch, but present him as a catalyst whose intervention (even through absence) can significantly contribute towards reshaping filial connections and identities for women in the South Asian diaspora.

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