Playing football or cooking Punjabi meals: How does an Indian girl negotiate her cultural identity in Britain?

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This paper explores how second generation immigrants negotiate the sometimes competing demands of their various cultural identities. In particular, using scenes from the movie Bend It Like Beckham it illustrates how Jess, a girl who grew up in the UK and who has Indian parents, stands between two cultures and has to find ways of negotiating her various cultural identities. A particular focus is on the ways in which Jess constructs her gender identity by adhering to and resisting norms of what it means to be a ‘good’ woman in these two cultures. The discussion illustrates that culture and identity are not static, and that we need to avoid stereotyping when studying cultures and identities.

1. Introduction

It is very common, nowadays, for people to move from places to places and from cultures to cultures because of migration, study and work. This may not only pose problems for the first generation of immigrants but also to the second generation, i.e. the children of those who immigrated. Often these children stand between cultures and have to find ways of negotiating their various cultural identities.
The movie *Bend It Like Beckham* directed by Gurinder Chadha is used as an example. In particular, this paper aims to illustrate how the movie’s main character, Jess, a second generation immigrant to the UK, negotiates the sometimes opposing demands of her Indian and her British cultural identities. Scenes from the movie are discussed to show how Jess tries to combine aspects of the collectivistic Indian and the more individualistic British identity in particular with respect to what it means to be a woman in these two cultures. Jess is a good example to illustrate that culture and identity are not static, and that we need to avoid stereotyping when studying cultures and identities.

2. Literature review

Many scholars, linguists and researchers have written and commented on culture and intercultural communication. I will draw on their work in order to briefly define four key concepts relevant for the subsequent discussion: culture, identity, gender and socialization.

Many scholars have different definitions of the notion of culture. Collier (1993) suggested that ‘culture is defined as a historically transmitted system of symbols, meanings and norms.’ She also notes that ‘culture is systemic, meaning it comprises many complex components that are interdependent and related’. (Collier 1993: 36-37) Jandt (2004) provided another detailed definition of culture. He suggested that culture is ‘the totality of that group’s thought, experiences and patterns of behaviour and its concepts, values and assumptions about life that guide behaviour and how those evolve with contact with other cultures.’ (Jandt 2004:7) He also pointed out that culture is ‘a process of social transmission of these thoughts and behaviours learned from birth in the family and schools over the course of generations.’ In yet another definition Scollon and Scollon (2001:125) suggested that culture is about ‘large groups of people and what they have in common, from their history and worldview to their language or languages or geographical location.’ In their work Scollon and Scollon mentioned the importance of avoiding stereotyping. They cautioned to avoid the problem of overgeneralization.’ For the sake of argument in this paper, I sum up the above definitions and form a definition of culture that I am going to use in the subsequent analysis. This definition includes three aspects: First, culture is a transmitted system of symbols, meanings and norms which are shared by groups of
people, learned from birth in the family and schools over the course of generations. Second, culture guides behaviour, which is shaped partly through contact with other cultures. Third, we need to avoid overgeneralization when we talk about culture.

The literature suggests one way of describing culture is to differentiate between individualistic and collectivistic culture. ‘Individualism-collectivism is the major dimension of cultural variability isolated by theorists across disciplines’ (Morisaki & Gudykunst 1994: 54). And Ting-Toomey (1988) stated that ‘individualism–collectivism as a way to explain cultural differences in face negotiation…’ (Morisaki & Gudykunst 1994:53), while Jandt (2004:184) noted that individualism and collectivism refer to how people define themselves and their relationships with others. Individualistic cultures refer to cultures in which individuals value individual interest on top of group interest. ‘Ties between individuals are loose. Self assertion and personal achievement are emphasized’ (Jandt 2004: 184). In collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, individuals value group interest over interest of individuals. Ties between individuals are stronger, and group harmony and self-sacrifice are emphasized. However, we need to be very careful of the problem of overgeneralization here. The distinction between individualism and collectivism is not clear-cut, and collectivistic cultures (such as Chinese) also contain individualistic (the same is true for individualistic cultures and collectivistic elements).

In this paper, the focus is on the British and the Indian culture. Compared to the Indian culture, the British culture can be described as more individualistic. Compared to the British culture, collectivistic characteristics are more dominant in the Indian culture. ‘Individualism stands for a society in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after him/himself and her/his immediate family”. Collectivism, by contrast, describes societies in which people are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty’ (Hofstede 2001: 225). Hofstede (2001) identified several key differences between families in collectivistic and individualistic societies. For instance, marriages are often arranged in collectivist societies while marriages are supposed to be love based in individualistic societies. In traditional Indian society, marriages are arranged by parents or relatives (if the parents were not present) and the children have to obey their decision (Georgas 2006: 366). On the other hand, in Britain, there is no restriction for the choice of spouse and “the decision to marry is made by the individuals involved, with or without the consent of the parent” (Georgas 2006: 270).
Another key term that is relevant for this study is cultural identity. Cultural identity describes ‘members who consciously identify themselves with that group’. (Collier and Thomas 1988; Collier 2003: 7) Cultural identities are not static. They are ‘negotiated, co-created, reinforced, and challenged through communication’ (Collier 1993). In the case of second generation immigrants the notion of cultural identity is problematic as they have to combine their “home culture” of their parents (in this case the Indian culture) with the culture of the place where they live (in this case the British culture). As a result, a new hybrid identity emerges, which combines elements of both cultures, and which is formed through the process of negotiation. In the movie *Bend It Like Beckham*, Jess, a girl of Indian descent lives in the British society, and her British cultural identity devours part of her traditional identity. Therefore, a hybrid British Indian identity is formed.

The next concern of this paper is gender and how culture relates to gender. As suggested by Holmes (2001: 150), gender is different from sex. Sex is the biological characteristics of man and woman, while gender deals with men and women’s socio-cultural behaviour including speech and communication. Eckert (1988: 66) also pointed out that ‘gender practices differ considerably from culture to culture, from place to place, from group to group, living at the intersection of all the other aspects of social identity.’ Cultures often differ in the expectations they have of what is considered appropriate behaviour for men and women. Geeta (1989) suggested that ‘[s]ociety’s “perceptions” in other words, would lay down certain ground rules for governing women’s activities, jurisdictions and relationships’ (Geeta Somjee 1989: 2). This idea is further supported by Collier (1993: 38), who argued that ‘groups create, reinforce, and teach what is interpreted as feminine and masculine. Groups also enforce what is appropriate or inappropriate for a good husband, wife, feminist…’ This notion of culture and gender is very important in this paper since the movie *Bend It Like Beckham* illustrates that there are a lot of rules for Indian girls. For instance, they are expected to be obedient and know how to cook full Punjabi meals. They are not allowed to wear shorts and argue with their parents. And most importantly, the film shows how Jess bends those traditional culture and gender rules in her attempts to become a professional footballer.

Another key concept that is used in this paper is socialization. Culture is a transmitted system which is learned from birth in the family and schools over the course of generations. An individual learns a culture through the process of socialization. According to Lindsey (2005: 51), socialization ‘is the lifelong process by which, through social interaction, we learn our culture, develop our sense of self, and become
functioning members of society’. Socialization can be direct or indirect. Direct socialization includes teaching by parents and relatives and by teachers at school. Indirect socialization, on the other hand, includes observing and imitating. Apart from socialising a cultural identity, Lindsey (2005: 55) proposed a gender socialization: ‘[g]ender roles are learned directly, through reprimands and rewards, and indirectly, through observation and imitation.’ The analysis section below illustrates how these concepts are enacted in Bend It Like Beckham.

3. Movie extract

In this paper the movie Bend It Like Beckham (2002) is chosen to illustrate the notions of culture, gender and hybrid identity. The movie is directed by Gurinder Chadha. The movie is about Jess and her Indian British family who live in Britain. Jess’ parents want her to behave like a conventional and obedient Indian girl. However, this is not what Jess wants. Jess loves football and her idol is the famous British footballer, David Beckham. Jess secretly plays football with her male friends. And coincidently, she meets a girls’ football team player, Jules, who invites her to join her girls’ football team. After that, a series of fights and conflicts take place between Jess and her family. In the end, Jess successfully convinces her parents to allow her to play as a professional female footballer in the US.

Three scenes are selected to support the argument. Scene one is a quarrel between Jess and her parents which takes place after her parents discovered that she plays football with her male friends and that she is going to join a girls’ football team. Scene two is a conversation between Jess and her football teammates about marriage. Scene three is a very short conversation between Jess’ father and Teetu’s mother about the alleged misbehaviour of Jess on the street.

3.1 Scene one

A fight between Jess and her parents (21:03 – 23:19)

Jess’ mother has just discovered that her daughter plays football with her male friends in the garden and she is very angry. On the one hand, Jess wants to continue to play football in a girls’ team. On the other hand, her parents do not allow her to play
football as they think that this is not a sport for girls and it is not compatible with the Indian culture.

J: Jess  M: Jess’ mom  D: Jess’ dad  T: Tony (Jess’ friend)

1. M: (Indian) He was touching you all over. Putting his hands on your bare legs! You are not a young girl anymore! And you, showing the world your scar (Indian…)
2. D: Jessie, beti, now that your sister has got engaged, it’s different. You know how people talk.
3. J: She is the one getting married not me!
4. M: I was married at your age! You don’t even want to learn how to cook daal!1
5. J: Anyway… I’m not playing with boys anymore
6. M: Good. (Indian) End [of matter]
7. D: [(Indian)]
8. J: I’m joining a girls’ team
9. M: Ah?
10. J: They want me to play in proper matches. The coach said I could go far
11. M: Go far? Go far to where?
12. M: Jessie, we let you play all you wanted when you’re young. Huh? You’ve played enough
13. J: that’s not fare. He selected me
14. M: He? ++ she said it was girls’.
15. J: The coach, Joe
16. M: See how she lies. I don’t want you running around half naked in front of men, huh? Look how dark you become playing in the sun
17. J: But mum…I’m really good!
18. M: What family will want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can’t make round Chapattis2. Now exams are over, I want you to learn full Punjabi dinner meat and vegetarian
19. J: But dad!
20. D: [let’me]
21. M: [Dad (Indian)] No this is where you spoil her
22. D: What have [I done to]
23. M: [No] this is how it started with your niece. The way that girl would answer back. And then running off to become a model wearing small small skirts.

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1 This is a bean dish.
2 This is a kind of Indian pasta.
24. J: Mum, she is a fashion designer
25. M: She’s divorced that’s what she is. Cast off after three years of being married to a white boy with blue hair + Aï her poor mother. She hasn’t been able to step foot in the temple since + I don’t want the shame on my family. That’s it no more football!
26. D: Jessie, your mother is right. It’s not nice. You must start behaving like a proper woman. OK?

(In the garden)
27. J: It’s out of order! Anything I want is just not Indian enough for’em I mean I never bunked off school to go at those daytimers like Pinkie of Bubbly, I don’t wear make up or tight clothes like them, they just don’t see all those things!
28. T: Parents never see the good things
29. J: Yeah well anyone can cook aloo gobi but who can bend a ball like Beckham?

3.2 Scene two

A conversation between Jess and her teammates about marriage (28:18 – 28:53)

In this scene, Jess and her teammates are in the changing room, talking about why Jess’ parents do not allow her to play football and about marriage.

J: Jess    U: Jules    A: Teammate A (the black girl)    B: Teammate B (the white girl)

1. A: Blimey, that’s not on
2. J: Indian girls aren’t supposed to play football!
3. A: That’s very backward, isn’t it?
4. U: Yeah, but it ain’t just an Indian thing, is it? I mean how many people come out and support us?
5. U: So are you not promised to someone then?
6. J: Nah, no way. My sister is getting married soon. It’s a love match
7. A: What’s that mean?
8. J: It’s not arranged
9. B: So, if you can choose, does that mean you can marry a white boy?
10. J: White no black definitely not a Muslim?...ehh-ehh [she makes a gesture indicating to cut off her head]
11. U: I guess you should be marryin’ an Indian then
12. J: Probably
13. A: Sorry, I don’t know how you Indian girls put up with it
14. J: It’s culture + Better than sleeping around with boys you’re not going to end up marrying what’s the point in that

3.3 Scene three

A conversation between Jess’ father and Teetu’s mother about Jess’ alleged misbehaviour (39:58 – 40:17)

This is a scene where Teetu’s mother reports having seen Jess kissing “a boy” on the street. Immediately after this incident she goes to Jess’ home to cancel the wedding between Teetu and Pinkie, Jess’ sister. However, it turns out later that Jess was not kissing anybody in the streets but was just laughing intensely with her friend Jules.

D: Jess’ dad T: Teetu’s Mother

1. D: You know how hard it is for our children over here + sometimes they misjudge ++ and starting behaving like the kids here
2. T: All I know is ++ that children are a map of their parents (Indian)

4. Discussion of findings

In this section, I discuss how the three selected scenes illustrate some of the ways in which Jess is struggling to combine her various cultural and gender identities.

To begin with, it is important to examine how Jess creates her Indian cultural identity through the process of socialization. It is strongly believed that family is a crucial element in constructing cultural identity and that it plays a significant role in the process of socialization. This is especially true for immigrant families where parents often act as culture preservers who directly teach and indirectly influence the children’s cultural identity. Under the collectivistic Indian culture, Jess is linked to her family. As shown in the comment of Teetu’s mother in scene three ‘All I know is that children are a map of their parents’. Hence, the way Jess behaves is directly linked to
the collective body of her family and its members. Therefore, her parents want her to behave like a traditional Indian girl because if she does not do so, she will bring shame to her family. The second example of creating an Indian cultural identity is in scene one, when her father said that her behaviour would affect her sister’s marriage. ‘Jessie, beti, now that your sister has got engaged, it’s different. You know how people talk.’ This example again, shows how Jess is socialized into the cultural ideology of family honour, which as Bradby (1999: 53) suggested that ‘rests upon the judgements of others.’ Another example of how the family helps Jess to establish her Indian cultural identity is in scene one when Jess’ mother talks about her niece who got divorced and thereby brought shame to the family: ‘I don’t want the shame on my family.’

These examples illustrate how the family helps Jess to create her Indian cultural identity through the process of socialization, especially through reprimand. However, the role of the family is also important in creating gender identity to an individual through the process of socialization. As the scenes illustrate, for traditional Indian women, there are a lot of rules guiding the traditional ideals of femininity, for example they are supposed not to answer back when men and parents are talking to them, they are supposed to know how to cook full Punjabi meals and they are not allowed to be touched by men who are not their husbands. Jess’ mother is a role model of a traditional Indian woman who takes care of the children, cooks Punjabi meals and wears traditional Indian clothes. By observing her mother’s behaviour, Jess is socialized indirectly into behaving properly according to the Indian standard.

In addition to indirect socialization, Jess’ parents also directly tell Jess how to behave as a ‘proper’ Indian girl (e.g. in scene one). First of all, Jess’ parents do not allow her to play football as playing football is traditionally regarded as a masculine activity. Thus, when Jess insists on playing football, she does not follow the norms and it is considered inappropriate. That is the reason why her mother wants her to stop thereby emphasising and reinforcing her identity as a ‘good’ Indian girl. Jess’ mother thinks that Jess is misbehaving as seen from her scolding: ‘he was touching you all over. Putting his hands on your bare legs! You are not a young girl anymore! And you, showing the world your scar.’ Moreover, she tells Jess, she needs to learn how to cook Punjabi meals in order to be a traditional Indian girl: ‘You don’t even want to learn how to cook daal’ and ‘[w]hat family will want a daughter-in-law who can run around kicking football all day but can’t make round Chapattis. Now exams are over, I want you to learn full Punjabi dinner meat and vegetarian.’ The mother’s insistence of teaching Jess how to cook properly reflects her wish for preserving her cultural ideal
of femininity. Another piece of evidence is in lines 23 -25 when Jess’ mother uses her niece as an example to tell Jess which behaviour is unacceptable in the Indian culture, namely answering back to parents, wearing mini skirts, getting married to a white boy and having a divorce. And in line 26, Jess’ father explicitly says ‘You must start behaving like a proper woman.’ All the above examples demonstrate that family plays a very important role in socializing and constructing an individual’s gender identity, especially for second generation immigrants who are living in two cultures.

Jess consciously knows that she has an Indian identity. This is reflected in scene two when her teammates comment that the Indian culture is backward. When Jess says her parents do not allow her to play football, her teammates think the Indian culture is old-fashioned (line 3) and when Jess says she will probably have to marry an Indian guy, her teammate says ‘Sorry, I don’t know how you Indian girls put up with it’ (line 13). And Jess responds by saying that ‘it’s culture’, which reflects that she consciously knows that she has an Indian cultural identity. It is, however, very difficult to create a pure Indian cultural identity when Jess is placed in a British cultural environment. In order to fit into the new living environment, it is inevitable for Jess to be socialized into a new cultural identity, which replaces parts of her Indian identity. As Gurinder Chadha, the director of Bend It Like Beckham, said ‘people are trying to hold on protect elements that they think are good in terms of their traditions, but also elements that are good in terms of the world that they’re living in.’ (Fischer, 2003) As a result, when both cultures are simultaneously affecting somebody he or she creates a hybrid cultural identity. In Jess’ case, her identity comprises elements of both an Indian cultural identity as well as a British Indian identity.

From the way Jess speaks to her parents and her friends, we can see that she has been influenced by the British individualistic culture. In scene one, when her father says her behaviour will affect her sister’s wedding, she responds by saying that ‘She is the one getting married not me!’ (line 3). Jess says this because she thinks marriage is her sister’s own business and should not be linked to her and to the family. Her thought is in contrast with the traditional Indian collectivistic belief. Another example in scene one is that Jess values her individual achievement over her family’s interests. When her parents stop her playing football, she says ‘they want me to play in proper matches. The coach said I could go far’ (line 10), ‘that’s not fair. He selected me’ (line 13) and ‘But mum…I’m really good!’ (line 17). These are examples were she puts her individual interests above the family’s interests. In the movie, there are indices showing that Jess and Pinkie (Jess’ sister) adapt the British culture. The most explicit examples are their language and clothing. For language, unlike their parents and
relatives from the previous generation who frequently code-mix and code-switch both Jess and Pinkie speak English with a local British accent. Moreover, Jess and Pinkie wear western clothing, such as sportswear and tight clothes. There are just two scenes in the whole movie in which Jess and Pinkie wear traditional Indian clothing, namely on Pinkie’s engagement party and her wedding. However, the old generation still keeps the tradition of wearing Indian clothing, such as Jess’ mother and Teetu’s mother. Also, Jess’ father and Teetu’s father put on turbans, but Jess’ friend, Tony, does not. Therefore, language and clothing clearly show that the younger Punjabi generation has been affected by the British culture and that their cultural values are different from the previous generation.

5. Conclusion

Many scholars suggested that cultural identity is not static and it changes continuously through the process of socialization. In this paper, Jess, an Indian girl, is used as an example to illustrate how an individual cultural identity, i.e. Indian identity, changes to a hybrid cultural identity, i.e. British Indian identity for second generation immigrants. Family plays an important role in constructing cultural and gender identity of an individual through both direct and indirect socialization. To cope with the host culture, one has to be socialized into the host culture which has some impact on one’s identity performance.

Nowadays, in this globalized world, the mobility of people is higher than ever. Therefore, it is common to find people with hybrid or multi-cultural identities. However, in addition to the process of socialization, other factors, like the living environment, the media, education, and family background, as well as personal acceptance of the new culture may cause one’s cultural identity to change continuously.

References


