

EXPLORING CULTURAL TENSIONS BETWEEN ATHLETICISM AND FEMININITY: A STUDY OF *BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM*

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Abstract:

The research intends to explore cultural tensions prevalent in athleticism and femininity in female athletes by analyzing 2002 hit film Bend it like Beckham. The paper follows a cultural methodology and intends to progress as an action research. Femininity has often been contested for athletic women because of societal stereotypes and this film 'bends' those stereotypes, overlooking them and thereby encouraging the athlete's choices and framing an identity for her social roles. The paper uses nineteen articles along with primary text being the movie Bend it like Beckham itself. The research paper is an overall sum of factors affecting these athletes and the choices to divert these stereotypes for the benefit of the athlete's social role.

Keywords: *Bend, femininity, athleticism, societal stereotypes, athletes, identity.*

Introduction

Gender pertains to the state of being male or female with reference to social and cultural differences rather than that of biological differences. It widely splits into concepts of masculinity and femininity. The standard body type for females is one that is thin, yet toned and lean in order that they can portray their femininity, while males are expected to have large muscles that are toned and well defined, thus portraying masculinity. (Paloain, 2012)

“Masculine sports” or competitive sports that require power, speed, and strength performed by male athletes are idolized for their physical appearances and are representations of hegemonic masculinity. However, female athletes who do not necessarily represent the hegemonic feminine ideal, encounter more difficulties in their careers as they attempt to balance a feminine image with the masculine qualities associated with their sports. While female athletes are more likely to encounter this conflict, males who participate in more “feminine sports”, such as figure skating, dancing, and cheerleading are also subject to this dilemma.

How did the cultural tensions between athleticism and femininity arise across cultures? Why is it difficult to brush these tensions away? What the instances are from *Bend it like Beckham* that experience these cultural tensions? Does athleticism and femininity mix to become a subtype of gender or do they stand separated? This mixing is evident in only cultures that Parminder Nagra or Jess in the movie is bonded with or is it evident across all cultures?

In this paper, the emphasis is on one masculine sport-football and as is the best, an Indian culture in an American environment. Jess or the hero of the movie acted by Parminder Nagra sports athleticism all around and is a passionate football player. Cultural tensions surround Jess to create a barrier on the progress of her talent and there is a clash of competency between this athleticism and her femininity. In the end, the movie takes on a happy note and all is good but there are many talents in this world who experience a negative impact due to the clash between athleticism and femininity and who do not have a happy ending.

This paper tries to probe into the nuances, conflicts and issues in the movie where the understanding between athleticism and femininity becomes clear on the cultural front. Jess has a sister who is equally opposite to her in every way possible. Pinky, her sister is a fine depiction of femininity as a

concept that society constructs. Keira Knightley playing the role of another football enthusiast also does not like to be 'dolloed up'. She prefers to remain sporty and athletic and there are conflicting situations with Keira's mother and Nagra's mother in the movie to 'feminize' their daughters. Thus, there are contradictory characters in the movie that showcase femininity on the one side and athleticism on the other, never the binding of the two-one wholly a depiction of societal mindset, the other being a depiction of identity construct.

Review of Literature

Major studies have worked on the cultural tensions between femininity and athleticism and its impacts and results, its effects and repercussions. Focus has also been rendered on its ethics and comparisons have been drawn to arrive at results that stress on the stereotypical constraints evident in female sportspersons.

There is little or no portrayal of 'bending the stereotypical rules' which is being shown in the movie. Nagra herself comments that the title of the film is not merely an idea of 'bending or curving the football' that Beckham as a player was famous for. It was metaphorical in the sense that femininity that a society stereotypes can be bent to gel with an athletic fervor a female sportsperson is introduced to. Therefore, this paper emphasizes on the aspect of 'bending' the stereotypical notions that femininity and athleticism is surrounded with.

Methodology

The paper progresses as an action research teamed with a cultural methodology to achieve its results. The paper is a depiction of the inadequacy or nil usage of Perkins and Berkowitz's Social Norms theory pertinent in Role theory from Social Psychology. The social norms theory uses misperceptions and behavioural influences as its base and the movie, contradictorily, highlights that personal desires motivate a person's actions. In the case of Jess, there are no influencing factors to contest her femininity. She would not desire to be feminine and not athletic despite all the shame in being so, that her family throws upon her.

Therefore, the paper intends to use Social Identity theory by Henri Tajfel and John Turner. It is thus a theory that encompasses a person's personality portrayal on the basis of their community engagement. Jasminder or Jess could always associate herself with the sports community, specifically with the football family. She could identify herself a sport enthusiast being a diehard fan of David Beckham, the football legend. Her growing up in a cultural construct that demands her to act feminine and stop being athletic, which is a 'masculine construct' has no effect on her. She remains to identify herself with the football community. So is the case of Keira or in the movie, Juliette.

Methods

To analyse, explore and draw into conclusions, the paper uses nineteen articles. These articles extend to issues designing the Social Identity theory that maps this paper and also emphasizes clearly the ideas of masculinity and femininity, athleticism. The primary text for the paper is the 2002 box-office hit, *Bend it like Beckham* that highlights the dilemma of gender and its competency accessing social roles. This, being portrayed by Parminder Nagra as Jasminder, Keira Knightley as Juliette in the movie also has contradictory compatriots like Pinky, Jess's 'feminine' sister and Jess, Juliette's mothers who time and again stress on the importance of girls 'dolling up' to stay feminine and not remain athletic which according to them is wholly reserved for the 'masculine' lot.

Limitations

It is hard to erase the stereotypical notions that exist in a society, at least to completely wash all of the stereotypical notions because they are rooted in a culture to psychologically be ingrained into minds. The stereotypical notions revolve around the fact that athletic bodies refer to masculinity and femininity pertains to grace and delicate movements or body language.

A limitation on the part of the movie itself is a mishap. It is misguiding to the audience as media coverage is something that can try to shape the psychological notions of people. *Bend it like Beckham* is

however criticized for neglecting minor details for a refined finish of the film. How woefully mediocre the film is, and how it never delivers any of its promises is another criticized remark for the movie. The main plot, in which Jess hides her dream from her strict parents, is incredibly hackneyed, and one could go on and on naming the other films in which this idea is evident. A saving grace on the part of the movie would be to showcase Indian culture but this idea has not been delivered as yet properly. Elaborate weddings are the only ones being shown in the film.

Findings and Analysis

Various psychological and physiological benefits are on the stride since the passage of Title IX in women's sport participation. Despite these positive strides, women still face multiple challenges on pursuing their athletic desires, which are largely due to long-standing gender norms established long ago. These gender norms relate to association of masculinity to aggression, competition and strength. Athletic women facing this dilemma, are expected to succeed in their sport while maintaining hegemonic femininity and this is a difficult balance to establish and maintain. This conflict describes what is referred to as the "female/athlete paradox" (Krane et al., 2004; Kolnes, 1995; Meân & Kassing, 2008; Ross & Shiness, 2008).

The female/athlete paradox may have the potential to facilitate changes in our society's gender stereotypes. Females' integration in sport "forces society to re-define masculinity and femininity, and this throws into turmoil beliefs regarding gender roles" (Ross & Shiness, 2008). About 30% of the sports were thought to be more masculine, including football, weightlifting, and boxing, and the fewest amount (about 10%) were considered feminine sports with examples such as dance, figure skating, and synchronized swimming. It definitely leads to a conclusion that classifying sports in this manner greatly influences males' and females' choices in regard to sport type, as well as their levels of commitment.

Time and again, we come across dialogues by different characters that feign criticism on athleticism for women, emphasizing the need for 'femininity'. The words of Juliette's mother Laura in the movie hits sharp and reveals the carelessness woven on the concepts of gender types-being masculine or feminine:

No boy would want to go out with a girl who has got bigger muscles than him!

Words from Jess's mother is no less sharply piercing-

I don't want you running half-naked around huh, look how dark you've become by playing in the sun.

It rightly points to the cultural atmosphere they are brought up even when a westernized setup, an American locality is brought into picture. Some of the other instances on these lines are,

What family would want a daughter-in-law who could kick football all around and cannot make round chappathis?

You must start behaving like a proper woman, okay?

We picture in here, femininity, of women resorting to cooking and acting doll-like in contrast to a sporty, athletic one. A proud talk by the designer is yet another bashful incident of showcasing the societal mentality on the concept of femininity in portraying gender-

Don't worry Sukhi-ji, in one of our designs, these mosquito-bites will look like juicy juicy mangoes! Haha!

A dialogue by Juliette in response to her mother's critical approach to athleticism:

Just because I wear trackies and play a sport, does not mean am a lesbian!

Gender, often perceived as an innate attribute and not as a social construct is also contested by Judith Butler in her work, gender as performance. This contestation is clearly evident in the lines given above as seen in the movie. Also in this respect, women with too feminine a quality are seen as homosexuals and women with too much of athleticism are perceived to be masculine. Striking a balance between the two seems a difficult choice to make for the women.

There has been objectification of female athletes by sports media to maintain cultural standards and it is seen that women's sports are completely ignored. Female athletes were not allowed to compete on the same level as men athletes on the circulating convention that sports warded women's femininity immensely. In 1984, the International Olympic committee had decided to conduct women's first marathon which was an event that was conducted for the men since 1896 Olympics. Times are indeed evolving and changing and the fact that what happened a couple of years ago has been demolished in the present is true. The mockery of gay athletes very prominent a few years back has been silenced now, indicative of gradual changes acquiring a consistent pace and this serves as the best example.

Society might accept a different perception of female athletes if more and more women choose athleticism because then it might become a norm for the society, an acceptable change. In the case of Nagra in *Bend it like Beckham*, this was the idea. Overtime, research and studies have indicated that female athletes very differently from their non-athlete counterpart perceive femininity very differently and perceive it to be separated from that of an athleticism. Also that their superior psychological maturity and adjustment allow them somehow to overcome the conflict is indicative in their study (Anthrop & Allison, 1983; Sage & Loudermilk, 1979). These results are not well supported by consistent empirical evidence but pertains to a whole lot of women in our society particularly the Indian society.

'Thus, it may well be that most female athletes in "acceptable" sports experience little or no gender role conflict because they psychologically separate supposedly incompatible roles as the multiplicity perspective suggests. Or, it may be that the two foundations of the gender role conflict-that the athletic role is not valued or respected for girls and women, and that female athletes are perceived as unfeminine, are not valid, at least for women engaged in the more "mainstream" sports commonly played in American high schools and colleges. Of course, these two propositions may not be mutually exclusive', says a report from Athletic Insight, an online sports report.

Media coverage of women's sports may play a role in increasing the status of female student athletes among their peers. Also of social significance is the finding that often spoke of non-athletes perceiving female athletes as less feminine than that of the athletes, suggesting that perhaps traditional stereotypes about female athletes are stronger in the non-athlete population. Similarly, men perceived female athletes as less feminine than did women, again suggesting that traditional stereotypes might be stronger in the "out group" than in the "in group" to whom the stereotypes are personally relevant. The ideas given above have been researched by American researchers and mostly pertains to the American culture.

What the female athletes themselves perceive that is most crucial. However, these results also suggest that female athletes still struggle with stereotyped perceptions of them. "Femininity has nothing to do with athleticism." Expanding on this issue of separation of roles, are these statements by female athletes: "On the field I can be aggressive and tough, but when I step off the field I put on a dress. I can be athletic and feminine. These words are prevalent in *Bend it like Beckham* where there is a scene in which Jess who is normally sporting a sports outfit is seen wearing a dress for a party and everyone looks at her appreciatively. "Players are players on the field, and off the field they are different people." "On the court, field, etc. [female athletes] are aggressive. Off the court they are regular women-gentle, kind, etc." *Bend it like Beckham* centers around these ideas and thereby bends the stereotypical notions. "I make an effort to put on makeup and dress up after practice so people don't see a boy, but a girl." This idea is however contrasting but stands true to its face. In the movie, Jess does not necessarily make an effort to look like a girl but somewhere the movie attempts to show its viewers that being athletic also means that feminine dressing once in a while would also look good on them and that such female athletes can be both feminine and athletic.

Women are mostly involved in identity management behaviors and this is seen with a finding that jointly notes male and female non-athletes as perceiving female athletes to be less feminine. To the

question "Are physically strong women feminine?" a clear gender difference could emerge and be contested with far more men giving an unqualified "no." Women would more likely give either an unqualified "yes" or to state that it depends on the woman's physique. In particular, female body builders and other women with bulky muscles were mentioned by many, especially by the female athletes, as being not feminine. There is a strong perception that athleticism and femininity are separate issues and that being an athlete does not preclude a woman from also being feminine: she simply expresses her feminine side outside of her sport. Interview responses with college students in American universities suggest that it is not athletics specifically but one's physique and one's self-presentation that may affect perceptions of femininity, which is consistent with other research (Duff, Hong & Royce, 1999; Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 2001; Maguire & Mansfield, 1998; Markula, 1995). The fact that men are not just responsible for stereotyping femininity but women non-athletes too is disappointing as this negative attitude can create a societal perception very clearly. While the definition of femininity per se may not have changed substantially, it is possible for a woman to engage in highly competitive sports (as long as she is not too muscular, like a body builder) without losing the perception that she is also feminine because multiple role identities can be maintained without conflict (Deaux, 1992; Rosenberg & Gara, 1985).

As Rosenblum (1986) so cogently argues, a key feature in the American conception of gender is the care and autonomy distinction: femininity is equated with and displayed by care for others rather than self, whereas masculinity is characterized by autonomy, self-reliance, and achievement, requiring an asocial, even antisocial, stance to the world. Prevailing American values, however, stress achievement, individuality, and self-promotion. Femininity must forego these values to be true to a feminine morality with its emphasis on self-sacrifice and responsiveness to others' needs. The conflict between gender and culture exists only in the realm of femininity because masculinity is culture.

The best example can be quoted from Jess's mother in the movie *Bend it like Beckham* which has been already given earlier in this paper- What family would want a daughter-in-law who could kick football all around and cannot make round chappathis?

This shows that women are associated with care and concern, to ready themselves in order that they can fend for their future families as contradictory to men who would be independent and left with a choice to play football or pursue their dreams if they wish to do so!

There is however a significant change in the recent times where women are necessarily aiming to be fit and this is reflected in media, in magazines etc. But with fitness, there is a growing emphasis on beauty and pleasure for a woman which is not the case in men's section of magazines and in media. Men portrayal in media and the lot has been about power, aggression and competition. This is the way male and female sporting images are presented in the broader culture. The renowned researchers and authors argue that sports media are part of a network of power relations that serve mostly to reinforce the existing gender order (Connell 1987, 1995).

Starting from its roots, we could probe into the concept of 'body' itself because an identity starts with the body that is in question- the dressing sense, the garments etc. also play a key role in designing the body in tandem with the identity of the person. Here we have Jess dressed with minimal makeup, dark-skinned and sporting track pants or jerseys and such sportswear which is implicit in her identity, her bonding with the sports group. The body is a symbol of society and is categorized by it and especially the female body is also a means of preserving cultural symbols (Gasouka, 2007).

The way everyone is formed through the clothes, makeup and behavior constitutes the sexual identity and social position, namely the dressed bodies constitute tools of self (Craik, 1993). The type of dress is important to the interpretation of body image and of course, has further implications in responsive attitude (DeLong, Salusso-Deonier & Larntz, 1980). Garments are consumed in the functional benefits, but also as signifiers of preferences, identity and lifestyle (Davis, 1988; Solomon, & Douglas, 1989).

To contextualize, the influence of hegemonic femininity, athlete as other, and physicality are the

three dominant themes seen amongst female athletes apart from dressing sense that creates an identity for a body. Extremely evident amongst these athletes is the aspect of marginalization and perceiving these women as the 'other'. These athletes expressed that being feminine contrasted with being athletic. However, the athletes are proud of their muscular features, a toned body depicting their strength and development because it is so necessary to survive in a sports world and be competitive. There are multiple permutations of femininity; femininity is bound to historical context (i.e., it changes over time), and "acceptable" femininity maybe perceived differently on the basis of, for example, race and sexual orientation (Chow, 1999). Although there are multiple femininities in the Western world, there also is a privileged, or hegemonic, form of femininity (Choi, 2000; Krane, 2001a; Lenskyj, 1994). This hegemonic femininity is constructed within a White, heterosexual, and class-based structure, and it has strong associations with heterosexual sex and romance (Ussher, 1997).

Hegemonic femininity, therefore, has a strong emphasis on appearance with the dominant notion of an ideal feminine body as thin and toned. It is evident that the privilege, and concomitant power, afforded sportswomen who adhere to the social expectations for women (i.e., perform hegemonic femininity) eludes masculine-perceived female athletes. As female athletes who perform femininity correctly accrue power and privilege, female athletes perceived as masculine are labeled as social deviants (Blinde & Taub, 1992), and they experience discrimination (Crawley, 1998; Krane, 1997). Feminine women in sport reap benefits such as positive media attention, fan adoration, and sponsorship (Kolnes, 1995; Krane, 2001a; Pirinen, 1997). As these feminine athletes gain acclaim, they become symbols, representatives for their sport (e.g., Mia Hamm for professional soccer, Lisa Leslie for the Women's Professional Basketball League). They also garner respect for their ability to be successful athletes while remaining true to their gender. Media would then portray a social construction of these 'feminine athletes' thus bringing about an influential and a psychological turnover of the audience and viewers, the recipients.

Conclusion

Now that conclusions have been drawn regarding the various factors like dressing sense or the acting according to one's social role, Philosopher Judith Butler's statement regarding gender that gender performance is more associated with "taking on a role and/or acting in some specific way that is crucial to that specific gender framework present in our world today" (Butler, 2011) stands relevant to the context. On the other hand, gender performativity produces a series of effects that are based on the way we dress, the way we look, or the way we carry ourselves because it "consolidate an impression of being... a women" (Butler, 2011). So, it can be perceived that the two coordinate to balance an act for Jess in the movie. *Bend it like Beckham* uses songs like, 'Doing my way' to reiterate that stereotypes need to be shunned and female athletes must embrace their athleticism and femininity that is already present in them. When Jess thinks that Jules is very lucky without even knowing that Jules mother does not support her to play football, the understanding that stereotypes are not just culture-specific, it does not just pertain to the Indian culture. It shows that the American culture too has a stereotyping society. Jules' mother remarks at athletic females-Honey, there's a reason why the Sporty Spice are the only one without a fella. Then her mind could be changed with the tuning done to influence her. It is the background check that creates these psychological insights.

Stereotypes can be broken with an effort from the person's side to stick to their social roles and firmly believe that their identity is constructed from these social roles. Media as study suggests plays a major role in moulding the mindset of the society . If the society cannot accept the choices of people and their interests that help them grow, then there is a complete societal struggle inhibiting potentials that needs to be wielded out.

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