**Bend it like Beckham** is a 2002 British comedy directed by Gurinder Chadah based on the novel by Nharinder Dhami. The movie tells the story of Jesminder Bhamra, nicknamed Jess, a young British girl from a traditional Indian background whose passion is football. She joins the local girl team after meeting Juliette (nicknamed Jules), lying to her parents about it, because the latter consider it improper for a girl to play football and to “tun around in shorts”. Not only does she deceive her parents to be able to indulge in her passion, but she also falls in love with a **goreh**, that is to say, an Englishman — his being Irish, by the way, makes no difference in the parents’ eyes — who is none other than her young coach. The final of the championship taking place the same day as her sister’s marriage makes Jess face a dilemma, all the more so as an American scout is coming to watch the final with an intent to potentially offer scholarships for the girls to go and study in LA while turning professional.

### I. MAIN THEMES

**1) Gender**

The question of gender is central in the movie. It revolves around a certain number of issues.

**First, girls and football.** It is striking that girls are either criticized or mocked (or both) for playing football. In that respect, the parallel between Jess’s and Jules’ mothers is worth noting here. Both of them, despite their different social and racial backgrounds, echo each other in reproaching their daughters for playing football, for working out, for building muscle (which is, according to them, totally ugly and inappropriate for women). Then, girls are also mocked for playing soccer as recurrently occurs with Tony’s (Jess’s best friend) stupid pals!

**Secondly, the question of marriage.** However unexpected it might appear, despite their different social backgrounds, both Jess and Jules are expected, by their mothers, to do the same thing: to get married and bear children. Jules’ mother is desperate to see her daughter more interested in football than in boys. She is even more desperate when, misinterpreting some of her daughter’s attitudes, she believes her to be gay. Her growing repressed concern over it suddenly culminates into a fit of hysteria during which she embarrasses herself at Pinky’s wedding. When she eventually
finds out that her daughter is straight, she shows her daughter an article about a young professional player who is also a math teacher and mother of two!
The question of marriage is absolutely central in Jess's family. In the Indian tradition, girls are expected to make a good marriage that will make the family's pride. By playing football, Jess endangers the good reputation of the whole family, and also, momentarily threatens her sister's marriage. Pinky's fiancé's parents misinterpret her behavior with Jules, they thus believe she is flirting with a *goreh*, mistaking Jules with her short hair and muscular body, for a boy! This is a disaster for the family, as the whole purpose of the girls' upbringing is for them to make a happy fruitful marriage.

**Thirdly, the issue of female sexuality and the female body is also at the core of the movie.** In Jess's family, virginity is, of course, a major stake, which leads to a certain hypocrisy as obviously, Pinky and her fiancé have not waited to be married in order to have sex: we see them joyfully having it off in a tiny car! This hypocrisy, by the way, concerns the whole community as we see a couple making out in the restrooms during Pinky's wedding, which pretty much shocks Pinky's and Jess's mother. However, we can also remark that she does or says nothing about it. Anyway, that the girls might lose their virginity before marriage is horrendous to Jess's parents. Concerning Jules, what is horrendous to her mother, is that she might be a lesbian.

Either way, what is quite striking here is the attempt at curtailing or controlling girls' sexuality which is at stake. And what is also noteworthy in that respect is that the fathers are much more tolerant and much less hysterical about the question than the mothers. Similarly, the pressure that is exerted over women's bodies is interestingly tackled in the movie: girls are expected to dress in a certain way, to look nice, not to be too muscular, brawny and not to have flaws. Jess is, for instance, quite ashamed of her scar!

**2) Culture**

Culture and cultural differences is another major theme of the movie.

The weight of cultural prejudice and discrimination hovers over the movie, although it is not overwhelming and it is subtly dealt with. For instance, the reason why Jess's father is reluctant to let his daughter give free range to her passion, is not so much because of tradition, as because he is concerned that she might be bitterly disappointed and that she might be discriminated against, as he himself was, when he was kicked out of the cricket team for being a Sikh\(^1\). What is interesting in the movie is that discrimination goes in all directions: the young coach confesses to know a thing or two about racial slurs due to his being Irish; but Indian families are also pervaded with prejudice since it is absolutely out of the question that the girls should marry a *goreh*, or a muslim!

Thus, the weight of cultural tradition also hovers over the Indian girls' lives as they are not free to live the lives they want. Their future is written out for them: they are supposed to get married, 

\(^1\) "Sikh" means "disciple" or "learner". The Sikh religion finds its roots in the Punjab region in the 15\(^{th}\) century and revolves around such principles as spiritual meditation, living a householder's life, dedication to Dharam (moral duty, righteousness), helping others, equality of all human beings, and belief in God's grace. Sikhism is a monotheistic religion in which God is one, a pervading spirit. Sikhs follow the guidance of their Gurus. The most important one is Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, who travelled to spread the word of God. His words are registered in the form of 974 poetic hymns constituting the holy text of Sikhism. Sikhs do not cut their hair to honor God.
have children and behave in such a way as not to embarrass their families. They are allowed to make studies and work (Jess’s parents wish she would become a lawyer) so long as this does not hamper the previous requirements. They consequently are under the constant scrutiny of their parents, their parents’ friends or neighbors, of the whole community lest they should go astray, as everybody is under the gaze and scrutiny of Guru Nanak whose picture is the focus in the living-room.

3) Friendship.
To resist the pressure, friendship is of the essence! Friends support each other and lie for each other, when necessary. They might fall out sometimes, as Jules and Jess because they are in love with the same man, but it does not last very long. The friendship between Tony and Jess for instance gets all the stronger as they confide secrets to each other. Tony is gay and Jess is the only one to know about it. Tony plays a central part in the tale told by Gurinder Chadah: he is the helper, he is the one that makes the story go forward, he is the one who enables Jess to play the final, and he is prepared to go a long way to allow Jess to live her dream.

II. STYLE: a comedy of manners and a comedy of errors: Shakespeare and Jane Austen among the Sikh community.
1) A comedy of errors based on misinterpretation: Jane Austen.
Most of the comedy and of the comical effects in the movie spring from a series of misinterpretations, which also work as triggers for the action and the plot. Pinky’s fiancé’s family mistake Jules for a boy, which temporarily cancels Pinky’s wedding, Jules’ mother mistakes Jules’s words and attitudes which deceives her into believing that Jules is a lesbian; her mistake causes her to create a scandal which is totally misunderstood and misinterpreted by the community gathered for Pinky’s wedding. Jules does not see that Jess is in love with their coach, the latter does not see that Jules has a crush on him, which leads to the temporary brawl between Jess and Jules. Jess has never realized that Tony is gay and the latter manages to trick everyone into believing he is straight. However, this comedy of errors is not a mere game; it is a signifier for something much more profound, which is the question of sexual ambiguity.

2) Sexual ambiguity, Jules or Juliette, William Shakespeare.
It is not mere chance, obviously, if, in the movie, Juliette’s nickname is Jules, a male name. It is not mere chance, either, if Jules is mistaken for a boy, and reproached, by her mother, for having boyish attitudes. By thus stressing sexual ambiguity, Gurinder Chadah implicitly refers to strong-headed Shakespearean heroines such as Viola in Twelfth Night who dress up as men to reach their goals. It is also a way to hint at the fact that gender is a very relative notion, and that every human being has both a male and female part in them. In relation with the notions of gender and sexual ambiguity, the role played by costume is essential in the movie. Here is another Austenian and Shakespearean characteristic!
3) A colorful movie.

Costume, garments and outfits play a meaningful part in the movie. Of course, what is at stake here is female costume, the way women are dressed. The colorful garments of Indian women and girls evoke the colors of India, and the bright colors of Bollywood movies to which Gurinder Chadah plays an obvious tribute here. They stand for the traditions that must be passed on from one generation to the next. They contrast with the football equipment and paraphernalia while being also happily married with it: the scene in which all the girls of the team help Jess to wrap her sari is particularly moving; as two apparently conflicting cultures (that of the colonist and that of the colonized, the English and the Indian ones), are here happily reunited as a perfect symbol of multicultural England.

Garments are, however, also a burden on the shoulders of women, who are expected to dress or not to dress in a certain way! Try as they might, they cannot shake off a certain tradition, whether we are dealing with Jess or with Jules! Jess is required to wear the traditional Indian costume while Jess is harassed by her mother into wearing more "feminine" clothes.

All this leads to an interesting association between Bollywood and football. Gurinder Chadah shoots the football scene and the wedding scene in the same way, as a sort of choreography and ballet, emphasized by camera shots and movements, which are typical of Bollywood movies, especially the ones in which the camera is spinning around the protagonists!