

Teaching Representations of Cultural Difference Through Film

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Student: But they are Indian parents who, um . . . discriminate against their daughter, what with all that arranged marriage stuff, it's just backward.

—Class discussion of the film, *Bend It Like Beckham*

Including popular media representations of minority cultures in the classroom offers both difficulties and possibilities. *Bend It Like Beckham* (*BILB*), directed by Gurinder Chadha (2002), offers complex portrayals of a community of South Asians in Britain. (South Asians in the U.K. are primarily people with roots in Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan. In this essay, I also use the term “Asian” to describe these populations.) The plot of *BILB* revolves around Jess, a feisty seventeen-year-old British Asian living in West London, who yearns to become a professional soccer player. The premise of the film is that her parents do not share this ambition and wish her to attend university, train as a medical doctor, and marry “a good Indian boy.” Much of the comedy is based on Jess deceiving her parents and continuing to play soccer in defiance of their demands. The director carefully avoids depicting a stereotypically patriarchal South Asian family. Jess’s relationship with her father is handled sensitively.

But using *BILB* in the classroom at any level can still trap educators in reductively representing diasporic South Asian culture, for example by reinforcing stereotypes about arranged marriage. Alternatively, it can open up a successful discussion about what it means to represent a minority culture at all. I argue that we need to ask students to consider how any film represents any group. In *BILB*’s case, what kinds of differences are highlighted? How does the film portray “Asianness”? Does it deal with existing stereotypes of South Asians? How does it explore social issues within Asian communities?

Antiracist educators aim to support students in learning to live with differences while pursuing social justice and equality. Multicultural teaching has typically been concerned with highlighting the plurality of cultures and their ways of life in contemporary society, encouraging students to appreciate “minority cultures.” Teaching about diverse cultures invariably involves representing them, whether through textbooks, narratives, images, or films.

These representations are never neutral, and students do not encounter them innocently for the first time in the classroom. Images are racially loaded, replete with meanings that the educator cannot fully know or manage. For example, when students watch an image of the Indian American convenience store owner Apu in the television series *The Simpsons*, popular ideologies about South Asians circulating in society influence how students interpret it, even if Apu is presented in a positive manner.

Critical multicultural teaching encounters the challenge of not *objectify-*ing groups marked as racial-ethnic minorities. (In the contemporary United States, *ethnic* identity is *racialized*: fluid ethnic characteristics such as national or regional origin, linguistic background, religious affiliation, and cultural practices are fixed and attributed to spurious “racial” origins.) Objectification reduces the diversity and complexity of a group. *Racialized* objectification typically involves depicting minority groups through stereotypes: Indian Americans are imagined as hardworking, traditional, and conniving. Students interpret even Apu’s somewhat positive portrayal through these dominant stereotypes.

Multicultural educators often claim that it is possible to counter reductive stereotypes by offering positive images and more accurate knowledge about minorities. But the representation of minority cultures is more complicated than an ongoing battle between supposedly positive and negative accounts. Educators should not assume that acquiring more accurate knowledge about minority cultures directly leads students to adopt an antiracist stance.¹ Rather, we must discuss the representations of minorities circulating in the wider media and popular culture.

Even though *BILB* presents a variety of British South Asian characters and tries to portray those characters more “accurately” and positively than many previous films, these characters for most viewers remain ethnically marked by their “Asianness,” irrespective of how differentiated the characters appear in terms of class, gender, and sexuality. By contrast, in the 1997 film *Titanic*, the characters are not racially marked by their whiteness; instead, differences of class and gender prevail.

An antiracist consideration of a text about a “minority culture” stimulates students to think critically about how minority groups are so often represented solely in racial-ethnic terms in texts, as all about being racial. An antiracist educator refuses to represent minority groups only in terms of their culture and ethnicity, a key risk in what we often call “multicultural” education. We must do more than recognize and celebrate cultural diversity, as if minorities are no more than their racial-ethnic identity.²

Looking more closely at the example of using *BILB* in the classroom enables us to tease out the challenges of racialized representation. *BILB* presents a nuanced account of family life that is sympathetic to the parents as well as celebratory of Jess’s autonomy. It depicts a young British Asian

woman who is alienated from neither her Asian roots nor British culture. The film contests the typical narrative of a “clash between cultures,” which implies that the children of immigrants are unable to negotiate between their supposedly “traditional” home environment and “modern” British—implicitly, white—ways of life. The viewer learns that Jess’s father initially refused to allow her to pursue a soccer career, not for sexist reasons, but because of his own encounters with racism in sport upon arriving in Britain, and over time he comes to accept and support Jess’s aspirations. The film explores inconsistencies in the uses of “tradition,” highlighting different kinds of femininities among Asian families. For example, after being banned from playing soccer, Jess protests that her sister and her friends openly flaunt their sexuality, yet are not admonished by their parents. She is upset by her parents’ inability to appreciate that she acts as a dutiful daughter is expected to. “It’s out of order! Anything I want is just not Indian enough for them. I mean, I never bunked-off school to go to daytimers [discos] like Pinky or Bubbly. I don’t wear makeup, or tight clothes like them! They [parents] don’t see all those things,” she says.

While the film avoids reproducing classic stereotypes of South Asians, the student comment at the beginning of this essay demonstrates that *BILB* can still be interpreted stereotypically as revealing negative aspects of South Asian culture. In spite of the film’s diverse representations of South Asian life in Britain, its depiction of so-called traditional cultural elements, such as arranged marriages, attracts the disapproving attention of some students.

Students may also treat the film as representing “truths” about South Asian culture in general, even if the film attempts to demonstrate a South Asian family’s negotiations and debates in their full complexity. Non-South Asian students may especially frame these practices in terms of the “ethnic” difference of “others” from the white British norm. Mainstream audiences are unlikely to see *BILB* as just a film about a teenager seeking her independence.

Discussions of South Asians in exclusively or predominantly white classrooms are likely to dwell upon such so-called cultural characteristics as being “traditional,” “religious,” and “patriarchal.” These characteristics are not unique to what is labeled South Asian culture. Religion plays a significant role in the lives of some white North Americans, but religiosity is not deemed an ethnic characteristic of this group. In contrast, religion is constructed as a core trait defining South Asian identity. This representation ignores the reality that many South Asians are either not religious or practice religion in other ways. Because whites are the dominant racial-ethnic group, their practices escape being ethnically and racially marked.

The fundamental pedagogical problem lies with constructing any group’s culture as a static set of practices that can be enumerated: “this is how Muslims pray”; “Hindus are vegetarians”; “Tattooing is a traditional art form of the Maoris.” These “facts” about other cultures end up acting as cultural “truths”

rather than social issues and concerns to be debated.³ Group practices come to seem static, rather than constantly remade.

Ultimately, the portrayal of “others” in multicultural texts delimits the real complexities of their differences.⁴ The experiences and perspectives of minority groups can never be fully represented or completely grasped, whether in a film or in our teaching activities. Multicultural teaching should resist presenting “facts” about the cultures of minorities and instead spark conversation about how minorities get represented.

In a conversation regarding *BILB* about how minorities get represented reductively, students would be asked to consider, for example, whether and why they are marking Jess’s father’s practices of restricting her autonomy as culturally “South Asian.” Students could discuss how struggles to restrict children’s autonomy or over children’s marriages are not specific to South Asian culture. The teacher could explore with students how parent-child relations are being contested in many communities. They could explore how Jess’s British Asian identity makes it impossible for us to talk about either “British” or “Asian” culture, as if they were distinct and opposite. The contradictions within so-called Asian tradition visible in the film could be highlighted in order to explore how all cultures abound with differences and conflicts. There is always a struggle within cultures to define and represent themselves.

Finally, the question of arranged marriages in *BILB* can be used to open up not just a question about “what do South Asians do?” but a larger question of how young women negotiate the impending expectations and demands of adulthood. Such a discussion would not deny Jess’s “Asianness,” but it would not trap her identity in “Asianness.” For example, Jess’s resistance to arranged marriage illustrates the choices countless young women make against parental demands, rather than simply a rejection of “backward” South Asian culture. It demonstrates that marriage traditions in any community are resisted, ignored, and adapted.

Multicultural teaching involves taking risks with our students,⁵ because representing other cultures runs the danger of fixing their differences and reducing the real complexities of minority group identity. Teaching about difference is difficult. Throughout use of any media text that represents “groups,” teachers should induce students to question their assumptions about those cultures, and ask them to consider how media reinforces those assumptions. Used this way, *BILB* would provide a means for deconstructing the production of ideas about other cultures, rather than a source for learning what minority cultures are supposedly really like.

RESOURCES

Darkmatter Journal: <http://www.darkmatter101.org>.

Hanif Kureshi. 1990. *The Buddha of Suburbia*. London: Faber & Faber.

Sarfraz Manzoor. 2006. *Why do Asian Writers Have to be "Authentic" to Succeed?* observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,1764420,00.html.
Meera Syal. 1999. *Anita and Me*. New York: The New Press.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. **Principle:** Sharma argues that even the most complex texts we use in class can prompt reductive conversations about cultural groups. Have you seen this occur? What happened, and how did you handle it?
2. **Strategy:** Consider a film or other text you use in class to teach about "groups." What would you now say about how that text represents the group?
3. **Try tomorrow:** What sorts of preparatory or follow-up questions could you ask the next time you use this text in class, to get students thinking about how groups get represented?

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