

Winners and losers in the multicultural arena

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[Dave Gunning \(/staff/profiles/english/gunning-dave.aspx\)](#) explores whether talent transcends racial differences in modern Britain.

In Gurinder Chadha's hit 2002 film *Bend it Beckham*, Jess, a British Asian schoolgirl, defies her parents' strictures against playing football and ultimately succeeds in having her considerable talent rewarded by achieving a scholarship to an American college. The 'feelgood' message of the film is that the obstacles of gender and ethnicity that have traditionally curtailed the involvement in the national game need no longer do so; in modern, multicultural Britain we can celebrate a culture of inclusivity, within which anyone can participate in the dream of rising to sporting excellence.

Yet looking more closely at the film's narrative reveals a far greater degree of ambivalence about the promotion of multicultural ideals through engagement in the popularly-prized cultural field of sport. The film's byline – 'Who wants to cook aloo gobi when you can bend the ball like Beckham?' – seems to suggest a fundamental incompatibility between the two: you can't do both. In order to become a sporting star, runs the implication, the everyday activities of domestic British Asian life must be set aside. Of course, this serves to enhance the film's 'feminist' message that young girls need not be confined to the domestic sphere only, but it might also be read as testament to the difficulty of imagining a public space where sporting achievement and minority ethnic culture in Britain might easily co-exist. The fact that Jess must leave the UK to pursue her talent further suggests a problem with the idea that sport might provide a forum where ingrained senses of difference might be transcended.

The dominant narrative of race and sport in Britain over the last few decades has focused around the celebration of the achievement of black British sportspeople. From Daley Thomson and Frank Bruno to Amir Khan and Theo Walcott, black people have come to be indispensable to British sporting culture. With the possible exception of popular music, it is the area of British cultural life which sees the highest participation of non-white agents. This progress has certainly never been entirely smooth and has often been carried out in the face of virulent racism, but it is certainly impossible now to imagine Britain's Olympic squad or the England football team without black faces in it. Sport is regularly offered as a utopian space, where the sportsperson's exceptionalism paradoxically allows them access to a community of typicality – an arena where race does not matter. The model usually used to frame this increased participation is metonymic: as British sport comes to accept the flourishing of non-white Britons, so too does the nation. Yet a survey of the ways in which black British and British Asian writers, playwrights and filmmakers have engaged with stories of sport reveals a continual scepticism about this optimistic model and a recurrent questioning of whether the communities offered by sport offer any genuinely positive space for players from ethnic minorities.

In a 1976 short story called 'East End at your Feet' which seems to have foreshadowed some of the themes of *Bend it Like Beckham*, Farrukh Dhondy presents a young British Asian goalkeeper who seems able to capitalise on his talent to escape the limitations imposed upon him. But Dhondy very deliberately refuses this ending and Kashyap doesn't get to attend his trial with West Ham. The clear suggestion is that the hope offered by sport is false, and that structural inequalities cannot be conjured away by a young boy's sporting ability. Similarly, in the first novel published by a black person born in Britain, Birmingham-based Norman Smith's *Bad Friday* (1982), a narrative trajectory that continually suggests that Delroy will escape the 'pressure' of Small Heath through excelling at basketball is unexpectedly upset by his failure to be picked up by a professional club. Instead, he returns to Birmingham and joins a local all-black team.

The tensions around race and community in sport are particularly highlighted in the 1987 film *Playing Away*, which Dhondy commissioned in his role as Multicultural Editor at Channel Four. Directed by Horace Ové and with a screenplay by novelist Caryl Phillips, *Playing Away* centres around a charity match between a rural English cricket team who host a visit from an all-black 11 from Brixton. Intended as an inclusive event, the match ends as anything but that: the white team fractures decisively along class lines, with the agricultural workers storming out of the match and leaving the middle-class players to field alone. The black team, conversely, find that the match allows them to forget their difference and instead come together in a moment of racial unity based around comprehensively beating their hosts. The implication is interesting: community may be reinforced by sport, but only when it already exists. The lines drawn by sport seem firmly racially exclusive.

The summer of 2010 saw the Royal Court Theatre transformed into a boxing ring for Roy Williams's play *Sucker Punch*. Set during the mid-1980s, the play tells the story of two young black boxers, Leon and Troy. Leon fights his way to become British and then European champion, but is constantly aware that his white audiences often want to see him beaten by 'their' contenders. At the same time, he faces even greater hatred from the black community, who frequently accuse him of 'selling out' to a white establishment. Instead their investment is in Troy, who has trained in America and is seen to represent a 'real' black identity. The sucker punch of the title seems to be that while Leon believed his talent would allow him to transcend racial difference, it actually just serves to exclude him from any community at all. Yet the play's closing scenes deliver a second sucker punch as we realise that Troy's 'realness' is carefully constructed by his American management, and he is just as exploited and lost as his former friend. Williams offers a scathing indictment of the idea that sport offers any lasting escape from the often bitter terrain of race relations in Britain.

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