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# Just Good Friends

## Queer Platonics, Pleasures and Friend-er Trouble in Gurinder Chadha's Bend It Like Beckham

**ABSTRACT**

This article re-visits Gurinder Chadha's 2002 film *Bend It Like Beckham* to ask: what if its protagonists, Jess and Jules, were not viewed as implicitly lesbian but rather as "just good friends"? By attending to platonic relationships, I argue that any sexual reading of the film is built out of other nonsexual and social bondages. Considering Sedgwick's (1992) concept of erotic triangles and Roach's (2012) theorisation of friendship, this article takes up intimacies and companionships that have not yet been afforded significant queer potential. It suggests that platonic-but-queer relations open new lines of inquiry, and alternative pleasures, that extend beyond the limits of compulsory sexuality. Using examples of friendship and sisterhood in *Bend It Like Beckham*, platonic bonds are shown to accommodate dissident politics, queer orientations and troubling pleasures, mediating diasporic becomings for the film's characters out of which affective politics of solidarity emerge. This reading petitions for a shift in gender and sexuality studies' frame of reference, such that desire, friendship, intimacy, frustration, or hope might be analysed just as much and just as queerly as sex and sexuality.

**Keywords:** film, friendship, queer, asexual, platonic, affect, Bend It Like Beckham

**DIRECTED BY GURINDER** Chadha, *Bend It Like Beckham* is a comedy film that since its 2002 release has gained a reputation as a lesbian cult classic. The film follows Jasminder Bhamra (Parminder Nagra), a second-generation immigrant teenager living with her Sikh family in the

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London borough of Hounslow, as she pursues her dream to play football internationally. Jasminder (Jess) is encouraged to play football competitively, having been scouted by Jules Paxton (Keira Knightley). The two play alongside each other in the Hounslow Harriers team, become fast friends and, in the film's uptake amongst lesbian and queer[1] audiences, chaste or invisibilised lovers.

I approach *Bend It Like Beckham* at the precise tension between the film's central narrative – a coming-of-age story about friendship in the multicultural London of the new millennium – and the film's subcultural appropriation as a story of lesbian, even proto-lesbian, desire. I observe that the reading of *Bend It* as a "lesbian text" is motivated by (queer) viewers' frustrations with the ways in which friendship is deployed as a foil to queer desire and its visibilisation onscreen. Indeed, Chadha's original screenplay manuscript featured a lesbian love plot that would later be removed (Lindner 2011; Rajendran 2012), a revelation that further stokes popular desires for a reparative lesbian reading of the film.

The trope of the "good friends" has been critiqued for its invisibilisation of historic sapphic subjectivities, identities and histories, for example in the archival record (Castle 1993). Yet, a lesbian claiming of *Bend It* that would reject the neutrality of Jess and Jules' relationship as "just" friendship equally operates as a foil to (platonic) queerness and its nonsexual modalities. Collapsing the erotics of *Bend It* neatly into the category of lesbian, albeit in service of queer representation, overlooks and too quickly resolves the "plurally platonic" queer erotics and intimacies that are worked through friendship (Kenney 2020, 7). To make this argument is not to repudiate a reading of Jess and Jules' relationship as lesbian. Rather it complements and nuances that reading such that the "lesbian look" (Lindner 2011) becomes disarticulated from lesbian identity and sexual practices, which in *Bend It* are absent(ed) from the primary storyline. Focusing on *Bend It*'s platonics accommodates a queer/lesbian consideration of affective intimacies (Kolehmainen, Lahti & Lahad 2022) and other nonsexual pleasures. As such, I explore the potential for queer desire, relations and politics to be housed in platonic and nonsexual bonds, not just the bonds that are or could be made sexual.

## *Bend It* and the desire for identity

Having been included in the UK's national curriculum for film studies and officially distributed in every country in the world, *Bend It Like Beckham* began as a surprise hit. The timing of its release, coinciding with the year David Beckham captained England's FIFA World Cup squad, saw the film surge in popularity, spending thirteen weeks at number one in the UK box office charts (Gopinath 2005). This uptick in the film's reception, Chadha suggests, might be linked to the UK's own national-affective mood in the wake of 9/11. In an interview with *gal-dem*,[2] she says "I think it [*Bend It*] came at a time in Britain, when Britain needed a new narrative, but people didn't know how to articulate that narrative." The early 2000s saw both a London mayor and a UK government embrace a New Labour vision of British multiculturalism (Back et al. 2002) whilst pursuing the war on terror at home and abroad. Amidst an increase in the visibility of racism toward brown people (*gal-dem* 2022), there was also increased discussion about the link between hooliganism and (English) nationalism in football following the 2000 European Football Championships.

Viewed twenty years after its release as a nostalgic, if imperfect, breakout piece (Goswami 2006; Huffington Post 2022), *Bend It* allowed white and Asian Brits alike to reckon with a collective mood of interethnic awkwardness (see Malik 2007), with its comedic story staging and subverting multiple stereotypes, pitched toward an audience marked by its breadth. South Asian commentators[3] in the 2000s, as now, note an "authenticity" in the representation of Desi culture on screen, citing details such as the inclusion of the song *Rail Gaddi*, a familiar feature of British-Sikh celebrations (*gal-dem* 2022; MyLondon 2022). This "authenticity" was seen to balance with the "cross-over appeal" (Ebert 2003) of the storytelling, which screened "conflicts between parents and children [that] are not only limited by culture but are heavily influenced by a divergence in perspective between the two generations" (Goswami 2006, n.p.). The nostalgic and enduring appeal of *Bend It* extends beyond what the film formally represented and into what it failed to represent, namely lesbian identity. In much the same way that South Asian writers

highlight the film's success while at the same time critiquing its flaws,[4] so too have queer women writers responded to the film's ongoing uptake in queer/lesbian circles.

The film now frequently finds itself invoked in the titles of scholarly articles that do not directly engage with Chadha's film but that address a combination of themes associated with *Bend It*'s storyline, including football (Dix, Phau & Pougnet 2010; Grainey 2012), South Asian women (Ratna 2011), stereotypes (Grabow & Kühl 2019), and cultural conformity (Bisin et al. 2016). When the film is directly engaged, a significant portion of the scholarship considers the film with reference to sport (Garrett & Piper 2016; Abdel-Shehid & Kalman-Lamb 2015) or the representation of cultural processes such as hybridisation (Chacko 2010), translation (Roy 2006) and "in-betweenness" (Rings 2011). While the film engages with broader cultural problematics of inclusion, nationalism and diaspora, these writers only realise some of the film's critical potential (see also Malik 2007) and refrain from exploring the film speculatively for its perhaps more subversive, and less overtly visible, queer potential.

Other scholars have recognised *Bend It*'s queerness alongside its playful negotiation of ethno-national border (side)lines, its co-construction of racial and sexual deviance (May 2010), and its depiction of heteronormative forms of assimilatory pressure, which disproportionately affect the film's South Asian female characters (Caudwell 2009). Some also note how gender in the film contains and renders queer desire invisible (Rajendram 2012). As Gayatri Gopinath (2005, 25) argues, *Bend It* "ultimately evacuate[s] the possibility of queer female representation by splitting apart a queer project from a feminist one." Queer-feminist scholarship, then, contends that the film operates through heterosexuality in its plot, offers a limited consideration of binarised cultural differences (English–South Asian), and overcomes these challenges by cultivating Jess' culturally-hybridising gender performance, ultimately culminating in a straightened, assimilatory narrative incapable of addressing the contemporary cultural anxieties in which it is situated.

In the context of the film's impossibilisation of queer female desire (Gopinath 2005), and following Katharina Lindner's (2011) approach, I

argue that there is more to *Bend It* than meets the eye. By attending to felt but unseen aspects of the story's mediation in film, I trace how *Bend It* is suffused with queer nonsexual intimacies – queer in the sense that they institute gender trouble, challenge binary constructions of ethnic and national communities as incommensurate, are pleasurable, and afford the characters collective, albeit tentative, emancipation. This is to look for and run with the film's "lesbian potential" (Lindner 2011), a technique of analysis that aligns with Halberstam's (1998) scavenger methodology and Muñoz's (2009) cruising, where a desiring glance at the film might locate relations and affects more capacious than a formal reading of the film would account for. My glance at the film, twenty years after its initial release, also attends to contemporary asexual community formation and a growing body of asexual scholarship. I am interested in the applicability of other-than-sexual understandings of relationships that the emergence of asexuality as a term of identity enables, and how this may challenge the compulsory sexuality (Gupta 2015; Przybyło 2019) that underpins thinking gender and sex more broadly. To begin this analysis, it is necessary to first locate *Bend It*'s queer/lesbian onlookers.

A 2019 VICE article titled "'Bend It Like Beckham' is the gayest love story never told" exemplifies the endurance of a lesbian reading of *Bend It*, bolstered by its regular re-circulation in queer think-pieces and blogs.[5] The article continues: "It's often mistaken for a coming-of-age story about soccer player best friends, but many of us saw our own baby queer desires in Jess and Jules' relationship." Here, the film's content and its popular reception are made explicit in the contrasting scales by which queerness is described. The "baby-queer" desires in *Bend It* are recognised as proto-typical and immature, implicitly ascribed a gay potential. The title suggests that *Bend It* constitutes a missed opportunity for queer representation – an argument echoed in other contemporary pieces, such as Deenah al-Aqsa's lamenting of "the injustice of a canon queer relationship being waved tantalisingly in front of the audience only to be snatched away at the last second" (Dispatch 2021).

It is through the un-telling of this story that the film enjoys broad and popular uptake among queer and South Asian audiences. In the

absence of an explicit "love plot" (Berlant 2012), Jess and Jules' relationship becomes a repository for queer recognitions to accumulate, often with the benefit of hindsight. As one writer for *Junkee* (2022) reflects: "It was only really looking back on the film having realised my own queerness that I could also see the lost potential of the love story between Jess and Jules."

The failure of *Bend It* to make visible, and therefore explicitly lesbian, a relationship between its central female characters, invites audiences to undertake reparative readings (Sedgwick 1990; Wiegman 2014) of the film, in order that a commonly felt 'lost potential' might be recuperated. This communally-enacted reading practice has congealed into a "queer-lesbian reading" of *Bend It,* informed by the affective experience of "coming-of-age" – not for the film's protagonists per se, but for its (queer and/or South Asian) viewers (Lindner 2011; Chacko 2010). As Natasha Noman writes for *Juggernaut* (2022, my emphasis): "perhaps, the film's most important legacy – and why it resonated so deeply with a closeted me at 16 – was its *hidden*, queer love story about women." From "baby queer desires" to "the gayest love story," this intensification of queerness occurs not only in the filmic representation of queer-lesbian desire but also, importantly, in a more implicit register – the realisation of a potential that is only made visible onscreen in nonsexual forms.

The *VICE* (2019) article continues:

> it's no secret that the classic 2000s sports movie is Sapphic as fuck. The movie is pretty much about being gay and wearing Adidas track suits, but it's also about teamwork, friendship and how those bonds can escalate to said Adidas tracksuits rubbing against each other.

Here, the author positions "being gay" and "wearing tracksuits" as two foundational practices that together constitute the sapphistry of *Bend It*. Friendship and teamwork, meanwhile, are framed as bonds that might "escalate" elsewhere. These nonsexual bonds are not necessarily gay but become so through certain proximities, touches, and re-organisations via "rubbing." The intensification of baby queer desires suggested in

the article's title is replaced by an escalation, or going-somewhere, of (platonic) bonds. If homosexuality is originally "lost" in the film, it is the re-deployment of the film's un-homosexual, or asexual, materials by (desiring) viewers that provides the force behind this escalation.

Katharina Lindner (2011, 210) notes that the film encourages a "lesbian look" – both a method of mining the screen for queer possibility and a communal practice of discerning what "lesbian" looks like in the contemporary moment. She emphasises (2011, 204) the pleasures of "appropriative viewing," or seeing the invisible, which contribute to a broader, collective lesbian viewing culture. The paradox of Lindner's "looking," which opens an avenue for nonsexual inquiry, is precisely that looking for lesbian sexuality constitutes a lesbian non-sexual pleasure. When viewers and blog-writers "see themselves" in *Bend It*, it is their shared practices of "looking," alongside numerous imagined others, that make the experience pleasurable.

Having acknowledged the coagulation of a queer-lesbian desire for visibility around *Bend It*, it is worth restating that the film is not, in itself, a lesbian story. However, as I will argue, it may still be queer. Friendship, teamwork, athleticism, and finding a life outside of one's home are phenomena that can be orientated queerly (Ahmed 2006), become imbued with anti-normative politics (Warner 1993; Eng, Halberstam & Muñoz 2005), blur and slip past national, sexual, or gendered boundaries (Chacko 2010), and resist fixed identities. A nonsexual queerness, without the "implication" of lesbianism (Caudwell 2009), affords a "look" at the erotics and intimacies of relating, from which a politics of solidarity can emerge.

### Triangulating erotic affects in *Bend It*

Queer and feminist scholarship similarly operates not only through sexual modes of enquiry but also through erotic ones. Sedgwick (1992) uses "erotic triangles" as a form of criticism concerning homosocial desire between heterosexual men, a desire "defined by if not organised through women and men's relationship to women, whether real or imagined, rejected or pursued" (Wiegman 2015, 59). For Sedgwick, homosocial

bonds rely on the presence and objectification of women, who are pursued as *shared* objects of men's desires. The object of erotic desire functions as the hinge around which a triangular affective infrastructure is built, fostering not intimacy between men and women, but a homosocial bond between men. This bond renders an affective connection, which might otherwise have a troubling proximity to homosexuality, advantageously invisible. In triangulation, desire keeps things in place. This perspective suggests that any claim to the sexual is built out of and relies on nonsexual and social bondage, inviting a reading of *Bend It* that moves away from finding and fixing "lesbian" desire, and toward deconstructing the erotic arrangements out of which such "lesbian potential" (Lindner 2011) is felt. I turn my attention to erotic, but not necessarily sexual, triangles in *Bend It* to explore what an attunement to triangular relations can reveal about platonic bonds that hold ulterior relations to heterosexuality. Acknowledging that Sedgwick's triangle centres the desire practices of heterosexual men, this effort joins other explorations of queer friendships (for example, Maddison's (2000) discussion of "fags and hags") to sketch out the terrain of specifically lesbian-queer platonics. Triangular looking begins by thinking about platonics and pleasures as constructed and experienced in and through affective assemblages, of which the triangle is perhaps a simple(r) form.

*Bend It*'s central narrative device is a love triangle in which both Jess and Jules are romantically orientated toward their football coach, Joe (Jonathan Rhys Meyers). Joe's failure to adequately reciprocate their desire creates a jarring relationship between Jess and Jules, positioning them as both teammates and competitors. Momentarily accepting the heteronormativity of this arrangement, their erotic triangle reveals how Jules and Jess experience their relationship with each other through their co-experience of their relationships with Joe and what he represents. Joe is not simply the object of their affection, but also the reason they are able to play and enjoy football; he is the person through whom they might be scouted for a US football scholarship, enabling them to leave their home environments; and an abstract figure representing the return of adolescent desires. I resist describing Joe as symbolic of these aspira-

tions because he functions rather as a *mediator* of Jess and Jules' desire. In much the same way as a permutation attends to the order in which things appear in sequence, the social permutation of the erotic triangle implies that Jess and Jules' affective bond would be structured differently, if at all, without Joe's role in routing this desire (Wiegman 2015).

If Joe, like the woman in Sedgwick's erotic triangle, is merely instrumentalised as an "acceptable" heteronormative focal point for desire within this social arrangement, then he becomes substitutable for Jess and Jules' other attachments, aspirations and pleasures. By co-experiencing similar desires, Jess and Jules might be said to feel the same thing as each other, or to feel together. Jess and Jules are incredibly close and often affectionate, and the fact that this homosociality runs counter to the film's heteronormative premise provides the gender trouble (Butler 1990; Lindner 2014) or "lesbian potential" (Lindner 2011) by which *Bend It* might be appropriated sapphically. Crucially, this co-experience of desire does not exclusively, or even necessarily, imply a desire *for each other*, nor a heterosexual desire, but rather a sharing of mutual desires that may be directed elsewhere entirely.

Another *Bend It* triangle involves Jess, her friend Tony (Ameet Chana), and David Beckham. In several shots, Jess looks up to Beckham – who occupies the ceiling of her bedroom – as her silent confidant, the figure of her future aspirations, and an alternative to Guru Nanak, who hangs on the wall of her family's living room (May 2010). Beckham is presented as an object of desire, though Jess does not wish to "have" him but to emulate him (Rajendran 2012). Given Beckham's status as one of England's top football players and a sex symbol for men and women alike (particularly at the time of the film's release), Jess' relation with him carries a queer charge due to its interracial and un-erotic modality. This dynamic unsettles the diasporic relations she finds herself bound to, particularly at home, where her family's expectations around kinship and marriage loom large.

Toward the end of the film, Tony comes out to Jess as gay using a form of intimation via Beckham in the line "I *really* like Beckham." This moment of recognition happens when both characters' different desiring

relations to Beckham – the instrumentalised but ultimately unengaged object of desire – are made explicit. The erotic triangulation, and the fact that both Beckham-attachments are queer (one being homosexual and the other nonsexual), reveals the affective vulnerability they mutually share. When Jess responds to Tony by saying "But you're Indian!", she verbalises her own conflict between the queerness with which she desires Beckham, Joe and Jules, effectively giving voice to her experience of a family politic that views an authentic *aloo gobi* as completely opposed to, even vulnerable to destruction by, admiration for David Beckham.

Gopinath (2005) argues that Tony's coming out shifts the focus of queerness away from the film's female protagonists, coding homosexuality as masculine and rendering queer female desire "impossible." I contend, however, that while Jess' queerness is perhaps invisibilised in the film's narrative, it remains immanently possible. Jess and Tony negotiate, and trouble, the gendered and sexual expectations imposed on them by both family and football, *feeling together* similar, though not identical, queer diasporic forms of desire.[6] This shared affect of queer diasporic vulnerability strengthens their friendship and affects a politicised solidarity between them, which is performed later in the film when Tony becomes the vehicle (or, at least, drives the car) that takes Jess from her sister's wedding to the football pitch at the film's climax.

## Affecting friendship and becoming other

I have above deployed a reading practice that is not just erotically triangular, but what Ela Przybyło (2019) calls an "intimate reading," which uses asexual identity and/or nonsexual experience to explore queerness as it relates, in intimate moments and relations, to broader systems of power, subordination, and inequality. Asexuality is often defined as a lack of sexual attraction (Scherrer 2008; Hinderliter 2009) and understood as a category of identity (Carrigan 2011), but Przybyło uses asexuality as a means of identifying erotic flows, suggesting that one look elsewhere – to softer, nonsexual ways of deriving pleasure and connecting – to expand what can be felt and read as queer:

> an emphasis on the erotic is thus only an attempt to think […] through the well-known fact that there are many ways to love and to be loved, to touch and be touched, to desire and be desired, to attract and be attracted, to arouse and be aroused that are not reducible to sex or encompassable by sexuality. (Przybyło 2019, 26)

Thus, Przybyło de-prioritises sex as the most meaningful erotic activity, following Audre Lorde (1984) in describing the erotic as a bridge between subjects, a form of relation that can be both reparative and a means of organising. Przybyło's invocation of the myriad ways one can be touched, attracted, or aroused necessitates that any erotic study consider the workings of affect. Affect theory requires thinking about "political and cultural life through the individual and collective experience of mood and feeling" (Butler, Doharty et al. 2021, n.p.). Affect scholars have already queried how our desires are routed toward particular life forms (Berlant 1998; Ahmed 2010), and how our attractions and attachments are made through particular imbrications of affect and politics (Brown 1993; Berlant 2011).

I proceed by bringing Przybyło's asexual/intimate reading and affect theories of intimacy together. In doing so, I contribute to a shift away from thinking of asexuality as an identity category in favour of a disarticulated and mobile form of critique. "Asexual", or its broader application in the nonsexual, is an important epistemological tool for understanding the erotic affectations of relational forms such as friendship, without diminishing their queer potential. Przybyło (2019, 2) deploys asexuality as "a unique series of identifications that together constitute a distinct orientatory outlook on relating, intimacy and sociality." This outlook orients away from what Kristina Gupta (2015) terms compulsory sexuality, "the normalizing system that posits and reinforces sex within our everyday practices, relationships, and discourses" (Kenney 2020, 8; see also Chasin 2013; Bayer 2024).

Sharpening asexuality into an affectively attuned political critique enables a discussion of *Bend It* that no longer presides over what is "lesbian" in the film, but instead takes up the intimacies and companion-

ships that have not yet been afforded such queer "potential" (Lindner 2011). In other words, asexuality allows me to shift or expand the frame of reference so that one can analyse desire, friendship, intimacy, frustration, or hope just as much and just as queerly as sex. It is with an asexual critique that I return to the erotic triangulation between Jess, Tony and David Beckham for a renewed reading of queer friendship.

Tom Roach (2012) models friendship as a "shared estrangement," a mutual, if not equal, distancing of two parties from a given locus of power. If Jess and Tony in the film are positioned as friends, this implies they share affective as well as material estrangements. Indeed, their triangulation with Beckham is one form of estrangement, exemplified through their alienation from him due to the impossibility of their desires being returned or fulfilled.

Jess and Tony also share estrangement for which Beckham is merely emblematic. They are mutually, albeit differently, estranged from normative heterosexuality and, by extension, from their families' expectations of them. This estrangement is figured through football, a pursuit they also share, as an estrangement-practice that performs their diasporic positions. It is the "third space" (Bhabha 2012) that allows a kind of hybridisation to become, where British-Indian subjects jostle in public space (the park) or private space (the women's football club). Football games take place outside of the Punjabi family space and are affectively attached to the (re)performance of Englishness, yet they provide Jess and Tony with a benevolent estrangement, or queer freedom, from the expectations of both spaces – albeit only for as long as one has the ball. In this way – and precisely because their friendship becomes through David Beckham – we gain a sense of how and why this friendship is queer. It queers not only within regimes of sex and gender, but also at the intersections of such regimes with nation, ethnicity and religion. These queer intersections both exert pressure on, and yield pleasure in, intimate lives.

For Roach, friendship is not just the consequence of a shared social position but also a process in which friends help each other to "become other." If estrangement is the locative aspect of friendship, then becom-

ing other is the performative. This is seen twice in the film. First, when Tony comes out to Jess, a feeling of vulnerability or exposure is shared between them, allowing him to become "other" (gay), which is also performed in a queerly confirming way by Jess' reaction: "But you're Indian!" The quick dialogue reflects the proliferation of an otherness that coats the bodies – or imbues the desires – of both Jess and Tony. From this point, Jess and Tony are "implicated" as friends; the queerness of their friendship is unspoken, and they become entwined or folded together as complicitous, queer-diasporic subjects. This complicitous companionship is performed again toward the end of the film, when Jess decides to prioritise her football career over her obligation to stay at her sister's wedding. Tony drives to the football pitch, with Jess changing out of her sari and into her kit in the back of the car. Meanwhile, the film cuts between the Sikh wedding reception and the Hounslow Harriers on the pitch, scored by the track "Darshan" by Birmingham-based Bhangra band B21. In this becoming-other, Jess literally changes into a footballer, embracing her third-space subject position as something that exceeds her role as sister.

The scene is marked by transit as Tony drives away from the marital scene, and all it has come to represent for Jess, toward the football pitch and all it signifies for the film's plot: Jess' career, her proximity to Joe and Jules and by extension, also to whiteness, Englishness, and assimilation. This might rightly be seen as a homonationalising narrative, in which Jess, through an exceptionally homosocial, or queer, attachment to Jules, Joe and football, becomes assimilable – more English and less brown. However, I seek to stay with Tony's role in this move, without whose friendship such a transformation would be impossible. How then, is the queerness of this friendship more nuanced, or more troubling, than even the queerness between Jess and Jules?

The scene's form resists collapsing Jess and Tony's becoming-other into merely a gesture of departure and migration, as both the accompanying track (a British-South Asian output) and the rapid cuts between sites underscore a sense of hybridisation. Emphasising the lack of separation between "English" and "Punjabi" spaces for Jess and Tony,

while keeping these currents distinct through music and scene cutting (Gopinath 2005), their car ride attaches to the promises, sensations and *pleasures* of both the departed site and the destination. In one glorious moment, the viewer glimpses a kind of heterosociality between gay man and female friend (Maddison 2000), as Tony holds Jess' shoes, rendering momentarily visible the queer solidarity of this friendship in the third-space (Soja 1996) of the moving car. Indeed, this and subsequent scenes resist the binarisation of English and Punjabi. So too does the staging of the "backseat of the car" playfully a-sexualise a film trope typically deployed in teenage/coming-of-age films as a place where sex occurs and virginity is lost. Instead, *Bend It* sites the backseat of the car as the space in which gender is undone and remade.

By mutually becoming-other via friendship, it is the platonic, not romantic or sexual, relationship between Jess and Tony that adopts a queer orientation. For Roach (2012, 23), friendship offers an "atypically perverse storytelling of a typically perverse situation." Insofar as *Bend It Like Beckham* constitutes a coming-of-age story centred on a heterosexual love plot, the insistence from sub-/fan-cultures that the film is "Sapphic as fuck" works as a reparatively perverse storytelling practice. Yet, to asexualise *Bend It* allows not just Jess and Jules' proto-lesbian relationship, but also Jess' other platonic relationships (as friend or teammate), to be read intimately (Przybyło 2019) for their queer potential. This friendly lens illuminates what is atypically perverse about sticking with the trope of female "good friends." Hence, good friendship is a nonsexuality that retains a queer feel but has an unsettling relation to normativity precisely because of its vague, nonsexual quality.

## Friend-er trouble

Platonic-but-queer relations open new lines of inquiry and support lived solidarities that go beyond the limits of compulsory sexuality. It is because of the operation of compulsory sexuality, for example, that Jess and Jules' relationship is repeatedly mis/recognised as a romantic or sexual one. Jules is, due to her short hair, mistaken for a boy, with whom Jess is accused of conducting a secret relationship, thereby deceiving her

parents. Jess and Jules' families' inability to see them as friends is not only symptomatic of compulsory sexuality, which suffuses relationships (here, mistakenly cross-gender) with sexual possibility and encouragement (Kim 2010), but is also tragically consequential, resulting in Jess' sister's wedding being called off in response to "shame" arising from the confusion.

The same gender panic later causes Jess' family to ban her from playing football, worrying that it will prevent her from becoming a "proper Indian woman" and performing properly as a wife. It is not so much any particular sexual activity that provokes the Bhamras to "ground" Jess. Rather, it is her participation in the homo*social* football team that evokes in her parents an associated fear of racial and gender transgression (May 2010; Rajendran 2012). Similarly, it is the suspicion of lesbianism in Jess and Jules' friendship that leads Jules' mother (Juliet Stevenson) to an outburst of emotion toward the end of the film. For both girls, their friendship provokes more familiar panics for both sets of parents, which is to say, it is seen for what it might become rather than for what it is. The platonic bond implicates other affects, such as diasporic anxieties and homophobia, and it imbricates other troubles.

The uneasiness with which the film's characters handle Jess and Jules' friendship appears in Foucault's (2000, 136) interview "Friendship as a Way of Life," where he figures friendship, or the gay "mode of life," as amounting to something greater and broader than just the sex act that once defined it. What he (2000, 136) defines as "disturbing" is the formless quality of friendship; that friendship's queerness inheres in the inventing – or becoming-other – of a bespoke relationship. Friendship disturbs because it is formless, and it disturbs Jules' mother in particular. She becomes laughably irate when, realising Jules has lent her mother's shoes to Jess for the wedding, she shouts, "Get your lesbian feet out of my shoes!" Jess and Jules have not been remotely sexual or even sensual together, but their friendship has taken on qualities associated with a queer mode of life – a certain quality of closeness that overrides the heretofore primacy of familial relations and that has become troubling. Comedy offsets this tragic encounter, which

resembles an "outing" narrative, with Jess' family members muttering "Lesbian? I thought she was a Pisces" and "She's not Lebanese, she's Punjabi." It is the unintelligibility, formlessness or informality, of Jess and Jules' queer friendship that causes "trouble" in the film: the fact that it cannot be clearly seen or consistently apprehended by either Jess' family or Jules'.

When confronted shortly afterward by her sister, Pinki (Archie Panjabi), who asks "Don't you want all of this?" gesturing to her wedding festivities, Jess replies, "I want more than this. They've offered me and Jules a scholarship to go to America." In this exchange, Jess does not just trouble but takes issue with getting married as "The best day of your life, innit?" Her articulation of non-desire for marriage is just as much an articulation of excessive desire, of wanting-more. This wanting is not simply oppositional. Jess is not positioned against marriage *per se* but is instead shown in the film to repeatedly seek to remove herself from its shadow. As Przybyło (2019) writes on asexual and non-sexual bodies, Jess' placement in a scheme of excess is one working of compulsory sexuality; her wanting-more is problematic because it undermines sexual and romantic norms. By wanting-more, Jess rejects the terms of engagement that would culminate in her getting married to the detriment of her other life goals and friendships. She petitions not for abolition but for disengagement, a dis-identificatory (Muñoz 1999) move that holds in tension the fact that Pinki and Jess also share estrangement and practice friendship in their sisterhood. Each sister takes actions to defend the autonomy of the other in the face of familial scrutiny. Jess keeps quiet about Pinki's extramarital sex and Pinki voluntarily lies to their mother to cover Jess' absence due to football practice. Between Jess and Pinki is a sisterhood that is not simply arranged binarily through their different views on marriage, but that accommodates other anti-normative solidarities. While both sisters witness and facilitate the other's participation in gender-troubling activities, it is their mutual investment in the other's becoming-other that might go beyond a solely gendered analytic and into the realm of "friend-er trouble."

## Nonsexual pleasures

For all the trouble brought about by queer friendship, it is nonetheless a relationship arrangement marked by the experience of pleasure. In contrast to the confirming sense of "canonisation" glimpsed in the lesbian reclamation of the film's narrative, the formlessness of friendship allows pleasure and joyousness to be experienced outside the domains of identity and representation. To assert the platonicism of Jess' friendships in the film is to bring this reading again into conversation with asexuality studies. KJ Cerankowski makes the case for thinking asexuality as

> an organization of pleasures that are particularly made apparent when sexual pleasure is foregone, or […] that blurs the lines between the sexual and the nonsexual, allowing us to sit with both sensual and sexual pleasures without demanding they reach a genital climax. (2021, 135)

*Bend It* features no scenes of sexual closeness, but it nonetheless boils over with queer platonic pleasures. Like other films concerning sport, the film is peppered with montage, depicting Jess, Jules and the Hounslow Harriers playing football. These montages contain moments of celebration, frustration, achievement, exhaustion, and exertion, cut together in quick succession. Football, then, as a game played under specific parameters and in specific spatial arrangements, can be understood as one such "organisation of pleasure." The filmic registers in which football arises in *Bend It*, as well as the narratological association in the film's plot with football and freedom, necessitate that even this nonsexual pursuit be understood as constituted by multiple sensations, desiring bodies, and affective relations.

In one montage, Jules is carried, gaily screaming, by her teammates into a sprinkler fountain. The closeness of these bodies, their feeling-together of tiredness and jubilation, as well as their co-experience of wetness on the pitch, could all be said to signify erotically. Scenes such as these, however short, are part of the repertoires of sexual assumption by which Jules' mother so readily associates lesbianism with women's football in the film, and *Bend It* is appropriated with such ease as a lesbian text beyond it (Lindner 2011). Yet, in the intimate reading of the

film, "when sexual pleasure is foregone" as an anchor for understanding *Bend It*'s queerness, the football pitch is instead appreciated as a space for all sorts of "plurally platonic" (Kenney 2020, 7) pleasures to be apprehended by friends, for friendship, "pleasures that don't demand to be classified as sexual or not, normal or not" (Cerankowski 2020, 135).

Lindner (2011, 210) emphasises that athleticism and sporting scenes in the film make visible "opportunities for uninterrupted female bonding [and] notions of cooperation and mutuality." *Bend It* and its depiction of women's football, then, stage safe(r) spaces for women to come together and enjoy the pleasures of athleticism. For Jess and Jules, it is significant that this space is separate from their homes, even while that separation magnifies the gender trouble *vis-à-vis* those familial domains that circulate around their friendship. I build on Lindner to apply a nonsexual theory of pleasure to the athletic-lesbian potential she identifies in the film. More directly, I pose that football *is* the primary pleasure in *Bend It Like Beckham*. Both Jess and Jules engage in the pursuit of football for no reason other than the pleasure of playing it. This develops a queer charge because of the affective intensity of the pursuit, verbalised in the excess of Jess' admission, "I want more than this." The prioritisation of football over familial expectations related to gender and sexuality is what tends Jess and Jules' friendship toward friend-er trouble.

The excess of desire in wanting-more correlates with how Foucault (2000, 136) describes the "homosexual mode of life" as one of many pleasures. He highlights the uneasiness and desire bound up in practices as mundane as sharing time, meals, space, leisure, grief, knowledge, and confidences, all of which might still come to signify a relation as "gay" while bearing little to no relation to *sexual* pleasure. Under friendship, or perhaps because of it, pleasure acquires an ever-presence and is implicated in disturbance when it appears queer. In friend-er trouble, this "disturbing" pleasure appears to emanate out of a queering of otherwise predictable forms of friendly bondage. To suggest that such queer friendship could yield excessive pleasure is to destabilise the presumed stability of its subject parties, bringing them intimately together in ways that trouble heterosexual convention and inter-ethnic conduct and closeness,

as well as undermining the fixity of their would-be subject positions. Friend-er trouble prompts a rethinking of relational subjectivity through the multiple affective ties between friends. In the same way that gender trouble introduces challenges to systems of (gender and sexual) oppression, alternatives to repertoires by which gender is experienced and performed, and syntheses of intersectional understandings of subjectivity and relationality (Butler 1990), I offer friend-er trouble as a rubric for thinking about and challenging the (platonic) relational situations we find ourselves in and resultantly practice. Indeed, *Bend It Like Beckham* depicts moments wherein designation as "friend" comes to trouble other designations, such as "daughter", "Punjabi", and, regarding the film's appropriative viewing practices that opened this article, "lesbian". That football is both the film's primary depicted pleasure and the location of Lindner's lesbian potential reveals that its attendant dissidence, solidarities, and pleasurable queernesses only become possible through the mutual – and perversely platonic – conduct of teammates, or friends.

Football is, however, in and of itself "just" a platonic pursuit – albeit one inflected with pleasure, closeness, companionship, and bodily sensation. It is worth plainly stating this simplicity. The juxtaposition of the everydayness of football-playing with its queer platonic pleasures, which seem altogether disruptive and troubling, embodies exactly the scholarly move I wish to make through reading *Bend It*. Namely, that "asexual" can be deployed as a disarticulated mode of critique to reveal the queer erotics of intimacy and companionship without resolving or removing the platonicism of any close bond or practice. As I have shown, it is often the platonic in any relation that is integral to its queerness, pleasure, and/or trouble.

## Conclusion

Through depicted relationships in *Bend It Like Beckham*, I have offered a queer-feminist reading of "just good friendship." I hope to have recouped a queerness and a politic within good friendship, showing that it need not (only) operate as a foil, or explaining away, of queer desire. Instead, good friendship offers another affective infrastructure in which queer-

ness might take form. Furthermore, I have elaborated on the justness of good friendship, whereby "just" does not necessarily imply a diminution of the friendship form relative to, say, the couple norm (cf. Roseneil et al. 2020). Good friendship, through an intimate reading, acquires a "a distinct orientatory outlook on relating" (Przybyło 2019, 2), an orientation that is socially and politically proximate to justice, to spatial, political and affective border transgression, and to the mutual becoming of otherness between friends: "just good friends" not as "not-lesbians", but as queer comrades.

*Bend It*'s friendships illustrate how the intimate, the domestic, the interpersonal, and the national are all bound together in affective assemblage, such that the queerness of one intimacy or companionship comes to "trouble" multiple affective realms. Such assemblages of feeling are composed partly, and importantly, by nonsexual relations and bonds, not just between two parties/friends but also to phenomena such as the nation, or conventions such as the hetero-family. Queering the nonsexual affords a critique of banal or overlooked bonds, which are formed by or as the operation of our desires, and which are experienced through both troubles and pleasures. It is in the negotiation of these troubles and pleasures that nonsexualities – queer platonic intimacies – also acquire political charges because of their orientations toward or away from norms.

This intervention is significant for thinking queerly because it concerns adequately apprehending unique, different, and multifaceted affective intimacies while resisting the dominance of certain relational (couple) norms. Attending to how friendship leads friends to co-experience their erotic and platonic relations – how we feel together in friendship – is crucial to resisting the tendency to think of desire either as individually experienced by a subject or as subjectificating of/for an individual. Instead, just good friendship allows for a co-experience with (a) difference that is simultaneously pleasing and troubling. Despite this, friendship is just one nonsexual form in which queerness might arise. I call for a broadening and sensitising of our understanding of queer politics in order to better attend to the sharing of joys and struggles beyond, beneath or quite apart from sex and sexuality.

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## NOTES

1. For the purposes of this article, I use "lesbian" to refer to cultures and relations between women and non-binary people that are performed in service of "lesbian" identity and community construction. These orient around a commonly understood, rehearsed and experienced sapphic desire, and narrative tropes that represent (certain forms and framings of) sapphic desire (Rupp, 2009). I use "queer" as a broader term, indicating a dissident relation to socio-cultural norms pertaining not just to gender and sexuality, but also social propriety, political conduct and affective life (cf. Warner 1993; Berlant 2011; Ahmed 2010). I acknowledge that "lesbian" itself carries a queer political charge and circulates in unpredictable ways across queer bodies, practices, communities and spaces. Within this (my) framework,

lesbian and queer are used interchangeably in some senses, and viewed as importantly distinct in others.

2. An award-winning, British online and print magazine, which ceased operations in March 2023.
3. See, for example, *The Quint* (2022), *gal-dem* (2022), *Bustle* (2022), *Huffington Post* (2022), as well as an earlier review from Goswami (2006).
4. For criticism of the film's "not quite-ness," see *Bustle* (2022), *The Quint* (2022) and Goswami (2006).
5. At the time of writing, two additional blog pieces have been published (see *Juggernaut* 2022, *Junkee* 2022). For other retrospective queer writing on the film, see: *Michigan Daily* (2022), *Dispatch* (2021), and ESPN (2018). Notably absent are responses to *Bend It* that explore its bisexual possibility (Caudwell 2009; *Dispatch* 2021). Such a reading would resolve the gap between the film's overt heterosexual love-plot and implicitly lesbian visual cues. I note the film's subcultural reputation as "lesbian" to draw out the film's queer platonics, or asexual potential. Because of this, I do not presently explore bisexuality in *Bend It*.
6. The "diasporic forms of desire" I reference here relate to Manalansan's (2003) ethnographic work on the gay Filipino diaspora. Manalansan highlights the ways in which queer diasporic subjects perform their desires in contradictory and multi-sited ways. Such plural and oxymoronic performances of desire are also screened in *Bend It*.