

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Bend It Like Beckham*]

My Big Fat Sikh Heading

By Steve Sailer

"BEND IT LIKE BECKHAM" is a well-executed, crowd-pleasing comedy that earned more money in Britain than any all-British film ever. It's the story of a teenage Indian Sikh girl who would rather head soccer balls into the goal than play a role in her big sister's marriage ceremony. Call it "My Big Fat Sikh Heading."

While Jesminder's parents plan their older daughter's elaborate wedding, they hope her test results will allow her to attend an elite college and become a doctor or solicitor. But she'd rather boot bending shots like her hero David Beckham (the soccer superstar better known in America for being Mr. Posh Spice). According to her mother, she is ruining her marriage prospects by showing her bare legs and, perhaps worse, letting them tan disgracefully dark.

American immigrant teen movies, like last year's Mexican-American "Real Women Have Curves," typically ask whether the daughter should stay close to her working class family or pursue higher education. In "Beckham," though, the class angle is reversed, which almost all U.S. critics have missed.

The American upper-middle class views soccer as a classy sport for their kids because Europeans play it and Europe is a classy place. Here, in fact, girls' soccer is even more upscale than

boys' soccer because most female athletes come from intact two-parent homes where the father pushes his daughter into sports, often because he lacks a son to live out his athletic ambitions. Ambitious American parents see organized athletics as a good way to distract their daughters from getting pregnant and marrying some loser when they should be finishing college.

In England, though, soccer traditionally has been the sport of louts, thugs, and yobbos. In Tony Blair's vulgarized Cool Britannia, everybody is supposed to love soccer. Yet, Jesminder's Mercedes-driving family, like so many of Britain's Sikhs and Hindus (but unlike its resentful and rioting Pakistani Muslim proles), is staunchly bourgeois. Jesminder's father played cricket, not soccer. To her parents, soccer is a dangerous step down the social ladder toward England's increasingly disorderly white working class.

For a low-budget foreign film with an incomprehensible title, "Bend It Like Beckham" should do particularly well in America because its basic presumption—the wonderfulness of women's soccer—is more American than European.

The film wants to launch in England one of the funnier American fads: those periodic whoop-tee-dos where we all swell up with national pride over an American women's team winning gold in some sport played by the women of practically no other county, except maybe Norway.

Think back to the ecstasy over the first Women's World Cup of soccer. We'd beaten the world! When cynics pointed out that the world didn't much care about women's soccer, well, that just made us even prouder of how liberated our women are, compared to those poor, oppressed women of Paris, Milan, and London, whose consciousnesses

haven't been raised enough to want to trade in their Gucci high heels for soccer spikes.

Unfortunately, after each frenzy of patriotic feminist chauvinism, our poor women athletes come home and set up a domestic pro league that rapidly loses the interest of most everybody except lesbians and the kind of guy fan who'll watch anything on ESPN2. That's because, to be frank, even the best women aren't anywhere near as good at sports as the best men, so what's the point in watching them unless they are kicking foreign butt?

Not surprisingly, the young English women in "Beckham" are better actresses than soccer players. Indeed, one reason Europeans don't like women's soccer is because they know what well-played soccer looks like, which we don't. Not that we should care. If humans were built like horses, soccer would be the perfect sport, but as a game for a species with opposable thumbs, it's played with the wrong set of limbs.

Another example of the film's American approach: "Beckham" assumes that because Jesminder's traditionalist mother won't let her play in the girls' league final instead of taking part in her sister's nuptials, she's justified in acting like a big drip through all the ceremony and celebration. After all, as any good modern American knows, you shouldn't suppress your emotions just because of some outdated stiff-upper-lip social convention about not ruining your sister's wedding day.

In the end—and if you haven't seen a girl-power sports movie in the last 20 years, please avert your eyes because you'll be shocked, shocked to learn this—Jesminder dashes away and scores the winning goal, which makes all the fuddy-duddies repent and the audience cheer.

Yet, if you enter the theater with such unenlightened ideas as thinking that a Sikh wedding, with its kaleidoscopic colors, would be a lot more fun to attend than the typical nil-nil soccer match, you may leave with your churlish un-American attitude intact. ■

Rated PG-13 for language and sexual content.

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BOOKS

[*Feminist Fantasies*, Phyllis Schlafly, Spence Publishing, 262 pages]

Woman's Best Friend

By Frederica Mathewes-Green

NOT EVERY FIFTY-SOMETHING mother of six decides to go to law school; not every one who does graduates near the top of her class. Not every woman juggles these high-octane pursuits with a syndicated column and an uphill battle against the Equal Rights Amendment. But then again, not every woman is Phyllis Schlafly. You can hear three decades of bruised feminists breathing "Amen."

Feminist Fantasies collects essays produced by Schlafly over the last three decades in her untiring campaign to make people attend to simple logic. The main thing that comes across in these pieces is the clarity of her mind—a force against which most feminists are defenseless. The book is arranged in five sections, focusing on the feminist cause in general, then on that cause in relation to the media, public policy, the military, and motherhood. Within each section a score of essays is arranged in chronological order.

Take, for example, the earliest essay here, "What's Wrong with Equal Rights for Women?" published in 1972. Right

from the start, from her very title, we know we are dealing with an author who sees no reason not to march up and yank the lion's beard. Perhaps you've forgotten how unstoppable the ERA appeared at that time. It had passed the Senate and the House by landslide proportions; 30 states had ratified it, and only eight more were needed. The notion of equal rights for women had laid hold of public consciousness with a quality of historic inevitability, as if we'd all been slumbering and just awakened to this broad, enlightening truth. It was unthinkable to question it.

In fact, Phyllis Schlafly got involved in the issue because a TV producer couldn't find anybody to question it. Schlafly's field was not women's issues but foreign policy, in which she had already written scholarly and best-selling books. A local TV station asked her to hold up the opposition side of a debate on the ERA, and Schlafly reluctantly agreed to read over the text of the amendment. The next sound was the screech of metal as an "unstoppable" juggernaut ground to a halt. Over the next nine years only five more states passed the ERA, despite an unprecedented deadline extension; during that same period, five states actually *rescinded* their ratification. Once Schlafly walked on the scene, victory was sure.

This earliest essay betrays the blunt forthrightness that consistently characterizes her work. Her opening lines are, "Of all the classes of people who have ever lived, the American woman is the most privileged. We have the most rights and rewards, and the fewest duties." Schlafly then explains that American women are fortunate because our culture values the family and lays responsibilities on men so that women can safely bear and care for children. It is "a fact of life—which no legislation or agitation can erase—that women have babies and men don't."

She is just six sentences into this essay, and already you can picture light bulbs going on over the feathery hairstyles of 1972 readers. Hey, this isn't what that lady was saying on Phil Donahue yesterday! But it makes sense!

Schlafly continues, "If you don't like this fundamental difference, you will have to take up your complaint with God because he created us this way. The fact that women, not men, have babies is not the fault of selfish and domineering men, or the establishment, or any clique of conspirators who want to oppress women. It's simply the way God made us."

That no-nonsense tone is emblematic of Schlafly's style. (The reference to God, on the other hand, is an anomaly; she never required readers to share her religious beliefs in order to agree with her.) Such bluntness is an unusual style for leading a revolution. A cultural turnaround is usually marked by emotive rhetoric, sometimes even dazzling oratory. Such leaders are often charismatic figures who compel by sheer force of personality. Schlafly just takes you by the shoulders and says "Look here," and you discover that you're nodding. She doesn't accomplish this by asserting her own power or genius; in fact, hers may be the most refreshingly ego-free writing coming out of Washington. She never gives the impression of condescending to lesser minds. On the contrary, it is her assumption that others are just as bright as she is that causes her to be regularly frustrated with their inability to grasp the obvious.

This frustration is a sign of the element that is consistently missing in her work, though it could hardly be called a flaw in light of that work's accomplishments. The missing note in Schlafly's writing is empathy. She honestly does not understand people whose minds are squishier than her own. Over and over she wonders why men and women would make stupid decisions and concludes that feminism has somehow infected and confused them.

She writes, "At the end of the movie [*Kramer v. Kramer*], Mr. Kramer was unhappy, Mrs. Kramer was unhappy, and the child was unhappiest of all because he was left with only one parent and he loved them both. The marriage was destroyed, and the only cause was the psychological problems caused by feminism."

Feminism did provoke psychological problems, breeding self-pity, suspicion,