



GENDER ROLES IN JHUMPA LAHIRI'S SHORT STORY "SEXY"

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Gender roles are sets of societal norms dictating what types of behaviors are generally considered acceptable, appropriate or desirable for a person based on their actual or perceived sex. These are usually centered around opposing conceptions of femininity and masculinity, although there are myriad exceptions and variations. The specifics regarding these gendered expectations may vary substantially among cultures, while other characteristics may be common throughout a range of cultures.

There is ongoing debate as to what extent gender roles and their variations are biologically determined, and to what extent they are socially constructed. Gender roles may be a means through which one expresses their gender identity, but they may also be employed as a means of exerting social control, and individuals may experience negative social consequences for violating them.

In the short story collections *Interpreter of Maladies*, Jhumpa Lahiri populates her stories with myriad characters that resemble many an Indian born American or American of Indian descent who were infatuated by the Great American Dream which attracted one and all from across the globe with all its freedom and chance to transform oneself into wholesome human being.

Lahiri deals greatly in generalizations in *Interpreter of Maladies*; many of her characters depicted in diasporic situations hold onto role definitions that American readers find stereotypical of Indian culture. Such generalizations act as literary tools that add to her most sympathetic characters and her most poignant storylines.

Lahiri often toys with the reversal of gender roles, especially as they relate to husband-and-wife roles within marriages. Whereas in India, a strict set of guidelines dictates how husbands and wives act both publicly and privately, in America, such guidelines are not as clear-cut and, oftentimes, are thrown out altogether. Lahiri's married characters often deal with confusions of marriage roles in relation to cooking, working outside the home, and bearing children. According to Lahiri's generalizations of Indian marital culture, women are solely responsible for cooking and doing household chores, as well as becoming completely domesticated with the arrival of children. Men are, according to such guidelines, responsible for working and providing their families with a monetary income.

Many of Lahiri's characters, specifically the ones in diaspora, must cope with new and sometimes shockingly different gender stereotypes and roles in their new homelands. Generation gaps, culture shock upon moving away from the "homeland" and questions of sexuality play their roles in Lahiri's interpretations of gender and what it means to Indians in Diaspora.

The following summary of the short story "Sexy" questions seek to analyze Lahiri's motives and methods when it comes to discussing gender and sexuality in terms of diaspora.

Miranda is a young, somewhat aimless, woman who works in fundraising for a public radio station in Boston. Her coworker Laxmi, already married and settled despite being only a few years older than Miranda, alerts Miranda to a personal disaster. Her cousin's husband had a life-changing conversation on an airplane and has left his family. Laxmi doesn't blame her cousin for taking to bed, but her grief has made her unable to care for her son. Usually, Laxmi doesn't need to tell Miranda family gossip, as Miranda can hear Laxmi's phone calls through her cubicle. Today, however, Miranda is engrossed in her own phone call. She talks with her married lover Dev.

Laxmi's nephew is a genius and part Bengali, like Dev. At first Miranda thought it was a religion, but Dev pointed out the West Bengal state on a map of India. He brought the map, printed in an issue of the Economist, to show where his father had been born. When she asks about the article it appears in, he taps her playfully on the head with the magazine. He says it's nothing she'll ever need to worry about. But later, when he leaves, she pulls the article from the trash and looks for photos of where Dev was born.

They met a week before at a makeup counter in a department store in Boston. As she paused to smell a fragrance card, her eyes found Dev, an elegant man, purchasing toiletries for a woman. Miranda engages a saleswoman so she can stay near to Dev. He watches her as the woman applies cream to her face. She tries to place his accent, guessing he is Lebanese or



Spanish. They meet at the exit and Miranda inquires about the creams. They are for his wife – who will be leaving for India for a few weeks.

Those few weeks, Miranda and Dev spend nearly every night together at her apartment. Dev races back to his home in the suburbs in the early mornings for a pre-arranged daily phone call with his traveling wife. He calls frequently, leaving his voice on her answering machine. He is charmed by her tiny apartment, and her bravery in moving to a city where she knows no one, and also by her long legs. Miranda and Dev both admit to their loneliness and Miranda thinks he understands her. Dev is the first man she has dated who is thoughtful, romantic, and chivalrous. Miranda keeps Dev a secret, only occasionally wanting to tell Laxmi.

Dev shows Miranda his favorite parts of Boston, including the Mapparium – a domed building with a room that looks like you are standing inside a globe, with glowing stained glass panels that look like the outside of a globe. Dev’s voice echoes alluringly as he shows her details of the world. The acoustics make each sound feel as if a whisper in her ear. He stands across the room from her and whispers into the corner of a wall. She feels his voice under her skin. She says

“Hi,” and he responds, “You’re sexy.”

It was the first time she’d been told she was sexy. Hearing his voice in her head, Miranda goes back to the department store and buys clothes she thinks a mistress should have – seamed stockings, black heels, a black slip, and a silver cocktail dress. She imagines wearing the ensemble at dinner with Dev. But when his wife returns, he appears at Miranda’s in gym clothes, having told his wife he was out running. The lingerie remains unworn at the back of her drawer, and the silver dress often slips off its hanger and falls to the floor of her closet.

But the affair continues. Dev shares more about his life and asks Miranda about her own. He takes naps during their trysts, accustomed to taking them during hot summers as a boy. Miranda doesn’t sleep, but studies his body during, what Dev calls, “the best twelve minutes of the week.” After waking up, he goes home to his wife.

Miranda recalls the Dixits, an Indian family who moved into her neighborhood when she was a child. Her peers would make fun of their name and frown upon their differences. Miranda went over to their house once for the daughter’s birthday and was so frightened by a painting of the fierce goddess Kali that she never returned. Now, Miranda is ashamed of her behavior. When not with Dev, she walks to an Indian restaurant and tries to remember Hindi phrases from the bottom of the menu. She even tries to learn how to write her name in Bengali.

Miranda’s boredom wanes during the week, but her guilt rears its head when Laxmi talks about her cousin. On Sundays, Dev would come. She asks him what his wife looks like and he responds that she looks like an actress, Madhuri Dixit. For a moment, Miranda’s heart stops. She knows she could not be the girl from her childhood, but it still spooks her. Miranda finds her way to an Indian grocery that rents videos, on the hunt to find out what Madhuri Dixit looks like. A Bollywood video plays in the deli, and she knows she must look like one of those women- Beautiful. Miranda notices a snack that Laxmi eats and the grocer tells her it’s too spicy for her.

Laxmi’s cousin comes to Boston to get away from her drama. Laxmi treats her to a spa day, asking Miranda to babysit the cousin’s son for the day. Rohin comes to Miranda’s apartment with a backpack full of books and a sketchpad. For a boy of 7, he looks haggard and weary. Rohin demands Miranda quiz him on world capitals, as he is having a competition with another student to memorize them all. He announces he will win. He is precocious and makes more demands of Miranda throughout the afternoon. For coffee, to watch cartoons, to look through her toiletries and to draw a picture of their day together. He says, with a precision that startles Miranda, that they will never see each other again.

Rohin drags himself to her room and starts going through her closet, finding the silver dress on the floor. Rohin asks that she put it on. Miranda knows she will never wear it on a date with Dev. Now that his wife is back in town, she is nothing but a mistress. She makes Rohin wait outside, latching the door to make sure, while she changes. His eyes open wide when he sees her. Rohin tells her she’s sexy. After her heart skips a beat, Miranda asks him what it means. The boy blushes and finally admits that it means loving someone you don’t know. His father had sat down next to someone sexy on a plane and now loves her instead of his mother. Miranda goes numb. Rohin curls up for a nap and Miranda takes the dress off. Back in her jeans, she lies down next to the boy and imagines the arguments his parents must have had. Thinking about her own situation, she begins to cry.



When she wakes up, Rohin is holding the issue of the Economist. He asks who Devjit Mitra is. Miranda doesn't know what to say. The next time Dev calls, she tells him not to come. She asks him what he said to her in the Mapparium, but he answers incorrectly. The following Sunday, it snows. The Sunday after that, Miranda makes plans with Laxmi and he doesn't ask her to cancel. The third Sunday, she walks alone to the Mapparium and studies the city.

Gender acted as an important agent in determining the hegemonic structure of the differences of Miranda and Dev. The role of the continuous manifestation of gender acted on how gender roles are present within the selection and how Miranda renders the idea about the structures of gender in the society.

In conclusion, Indian-American literature seems to address the problem of assimilation and incorporation of culture. Indian-American literature manifested by Lahiri in her work presents the issue of racial relations between an American and an Indian-American in terms of language, gender, and race. Gender relations emphasize the idea of how gender is primarily coined in the Indian aspect and how it is viewed in the western and how masculinity and femininity intersect and represent the Indian-American in literature.

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