

False love, forever  
culture: "interpreter of  
maladies," "sexy,"  
and "hell heaven"...



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Through stories of American-Bengali collision, Jhumpa Lahiri explores the nuances and complexities of cross-cultural relations and desires. In her three distinct works, "Interpreter of Maladies", "Sexy", and "Hell Heaven", Lahiri examines how one's roots can lead to resentment, as well as how people can be vehicles for cultural exploration. In each story, Lahiri tells each character's unique stories of cultural frustration and transition through the lense of lust, both sexual and platonic. Through this narrative of desire, Lahiri explains how while lust is often the manifestation of cultural transitioning and dissatisfaction, it is also only temporary.

In three distinct stories dissecting American-Bengali cross-cultural relations, Lahiri uses lust to explore the intense longings of each character to belong to a culture different than his or her own, whether it be American or Bengali. In "Interpreter of Maladies", Lahiri immediately establishes this theme when Mr. Kapasi first describes Mrs. Das, the mother of the American tourist family. In a description of intense fascination, Lahiri notes that Mr. Kapasi "observed her. She wore a red-and-white-checkered skirt that stopped above her knees, slip-on shoes with a square wooden heel, and a close-fitting blouse styled like a man's undershirt" ("Interpreter of Maladies" 2). In this description, Lahiri captures Mr. Kapasi's lust through detailed observation and fixation on the fit of Mrs. Das's blouse. Hardly describing the other characters in similar detail, Lahiri instead focuses on Mr. Kapasi's obsession for Mrs. Das to explore how his lust for Mrs. Das is also lust for America. Mr. Das's attention towards the tight fit of Mrs. Das' blouse as well as her 'red-and-white-checkered skirt' muddles the line between Mr. Kapasi's attraction to Mrs. Das and his interest in the 'Americanness' that the skirt and her

other American attire represents. Lahiri once again conveys desire for American culture as a lust for an individual person when Usha, a girl raised in a traditional Bengali household, idolizes Deborah, the white, American fiancé of her Bengali family friend.

In contrast to Usha's traditional Bengali outfits that her mother imposes on her, Deborah's attire is the archetype of American culture. Usha longs for this look and the American lifestyle it implies and notes, " I loved her serene gray eyes, the ponchos and denim wrap skirts and sandals she wore, her straight hair that she let me manipulate into all sorts of silly styles. I longed for her casual appearance" (Hell-Heaven 4). Usha's obsession not with Deborah's personality but rather with her appearance demonstrates Usha's specific infatuation with the American culture that Deborah represents. In contrast to the strict and formal lifestyle that Usha's Bengali parents impose on her, Deborah's ' casual' appearance portrays the American freedom and ease that Usha yearns for. Similarly, in " Sexy", Miranda lusts after Dev in order to achieve the romantic exoticism that she associates with his Bengali culture. Throughout the story, Miranda ties together Dev's Indian ethnicity with him being " worldly" and " mature" (" Sexy" 4), whether these conclusions are fair or not. As she sits at her cubicle, Miranda fantasizes about taking pictures with Dev at places like the Taj Majal, just as her Indian and more worldly deskmate Laxmi already has with her boyfriend: " Miranda began to wish that there were a picture of her and Dev tacked to the inside of her cubicle, like the one of Laxmi and her husband in front of the Taj Mahal" (" Sexy" 4). The image of the Taj Mahal, a symbol of worldliness and Indian culture, emphasizes Miranda's desire to associate herself with this

different culture. Miranda does not simply want to be with Dev, but wants to be with Dev at the Taj Mahal, demonstrating how her longing for Dev is not only for his love and companionship but also for the Indian culture that he represents. In all three stories, Lahiri intertwines attractive features with symbols and indications of other cultures to draw out how regardless of the characters' awareness, their lust captures both interpersonal and intercultural attraction.

Once this lust is established, Lahiri demonstrates how this desire derives from Mr. Kapasi and Usha's dissatisfaction with Bengali Culture, and Miranda's guilt she feels towards her own narrow American upbringing. In "Interpreter of Maladies", Mr. Kapasi's fantasies about Mrs. Das stem from his unhappiness with his own marriage. While his own wife represents traditional Bengali culture, Mrs. Das is the antithesis; while his wife serves her husband tea and dresses conservatively, Mrs. Das is self-centered, demanding, and her attire exposes more skin. Lahiri notes this distinction and explains "He had never seen his own wife fully naked... He had never admired the backs of his wife's legs the way he now admired those of Mrs. Das, walking as if for his benefit alone" ("Interpreter of Maladies" 9). This juxtaposition contrasts Bengali and American culture as well as highlights Mr. Kapasi's attraction to the latter. His dissatisfaction with his Bengali marriage not only fosters dissatisfaction for his culture, but also serves as a point of comparison that awakens Mr. Kapasi to this perceived 'value' of American clothing and culture. Usha similarly loves Deborah because she is the opposite as well as the enemy of her mother. While her mother represents Bengali culture through her traditional family values and reserved demeanor, Debora

instead represents the American culture that Usha longs to be a part of. As Usha's begins to associate herself with American culture, her respect towards her mother and her Bengali lifestyle falters: " I began to pity my mother; the older I got, the more I saw what a desolate life she led" (" Hell-Heaven" 11). Usha's pity for her mother who symbolizes Bengali values not only demonstrates Usha's disdain for Bengali culture, but also her perceived superiority. Her choice of the word desolate further promotes this notion of a perceived hierarchy between the two cultures by explaining how Usha's love of America can only be so strong because she compares America with her perception of empty Bengali culture.

However, presenting a contrast to Usha and Mr. Kapasi, Miranda's lust derives not from dissatisfaction, but rather guilt. Miranda, born into American culture, feels ashamed of how this upbringing caused her to have racist misconceptions towards Bengalis. As a child, when Miranda would pass by the home of the Dixits, a Bengali family, she " held her breath until she reached the next lawn, just as she did when the school bus passed a cemetery. It shamed her now" (" Sexy" 10). In Lahiri's discussion of then vs. now, Lahiri explores how Miranda's past informs her present. In describing how Miranda's only now feels shame about her past cultural awareness, Lahiri connects Miranda's very white, American, and homogeneous childhood culture with her current obsession of experiencing Bengali culture through Dev. Like Mr. Kapasi and Usha, the root of Miranda's lust is not love but rather ulterior feelings of disgust towards her origins.

However, ultimately Lahiri concludes that this lust is only temporary when the characters' choose to return to the comfort of their original cultures. In "<https://assignbuster.com/false-love-forever-culture-interpreter-of-maladies-sexy-and-hell-heaven/>

Interpreter of Maladies", Mr. Kapasi gives up on his hopes of a relationship with Mrs. Das when cross-cultural communication and understanding proves to be too difficult. In a series of dissonant moments beginning with a divided reaction to Mrs. Das's affair, Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi's cultural disconnect culminates in the irredeemable loss of Mr. Kapasi's address: "The slip of paper with Mr. Kapasi's address on it fluttered away in the wind. No one but Mr. Kapasi noticed. He watched as it rose, carried higher and higher by the breeze" ("Interpreter of Maladies" 15). This slip of paper, created at the birth of their relationship, symbolizes Mrs. Das and Mr. Kapasi's connection, as well as Mr. Kapasi's network beyond his own Bengali culture. As it flies away forever, Mr. Kapasi's lust for Mrs. Das and his hope to expand his cultural ties similarly becomes lost and irretrievable, as he knows he will instead return to his wife and original culture. Furthermore, the way in which the wind carries the paper away as Mr. Kapasi watches passively portrays cross-cultural miscommunication as the natural way of the world and as something one has no choice but to accept.

In "Sexy", Lahiri once again notes the false and momentary nature of lust when she discusses what the word 'sexy' means to Miranda as opposed to a child who is a victim of infidelity. When Dev first calls Miranda sexy, she is blinded by lust and believes it is a sign of love, or at least real emotion. Yet after asking Rohin, the child of a cheating father, what the word 'sexy' means, he explains that "it means loving someone you don't know" ("Sexy" 13). Whereas Miranda believed Dev used the word 'sexy' because he loved her truest self, Rohin realizes that in fact he never truly knew her. Just like Miranda's infatuation with Bengali culture, Dev's love wasn't from a place of

understanding, and so their love, as well as their cross-cultural relationship, would always be too unfamiliar to last. Lahiri further enforces this point when Dev returns to his Bengali wife and Miranda finds new friends in Manhattan, demonstrating their natural tendencies to find comfort in similar people.

Finally, in "Hell-Heaven", Usha witnesses this trade of cross-cultural connections for comfort and one's cultural origins when Pranab Kaku, her Bengali family friend, leaves Deborah for a Bengali woman. Despite the seeming strength of his and Deborah's relationship at the beginning of the story, as the plot develops their lust gives way to the inevitable desire to find people who share their backgrounds: "After twenty-three years of marriage, Pranab Kaku and Deborah got divorced. It was he who had strayed, falling in love with a married Bengali woman" ("Sexy" 19). Lahiri's neutral and unsurprised tone makes clear that the Pranab and Deborah's relationship was hopeless from the start. Lahiri's impartial acceptance of their fate only undermines the couple's history of lust and stability, demonstrating the little and temporary influence of lust, and the immense authority of cultural ties.