

ORIENTALISM AND CULTURAL HEGEMONY IN *SEXY* BY JHUMPA LAHIRI: A POSTCOLONIALISM APPROACH

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Abstract

This paper examines the themes of orientalism and cultural hegemony in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story Sexy through the lens of postcolonial theory, particularly Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Gramsci's hegemony. The narrative explores the dynamics between Miranda, a white American woman, and Dev, a married Indian man, highlighting the fetishization of Eastern culture and the alienation faced by diasporic individuals. Lahiri portrays how the West's portrayal of the East as exotic and "other" perpetuates stereotypes, while cultural hegemony underscores the dominance of Western ideologies in shaping global standards of beauty and identity. Through Miranda's curiosity about Indian culture and her fascination with Dev's heritage, the story reveals how colonial legacies continue to influence perceptions and relationships. The paper argues that Lahiri's critique in Sexy illuminates the complexities of cultural identity and power imbalance, urging readers to reconsider entrenched biases and the lingering impacts of postcolonialism.

Keywords: Orientalism, Cultural Hegemony, Postcolonialism, Western

INTRODUCTION

Colonialism represents a significant historical phenomenon that, while not universally experienced, has profoundly shaped the political, cultural, and social landscapes of many nations across the globe. It involved the domination and exploitation of territories and peoples by foreign powers, often justified through ideologies of racial superiority, civilizing missions, and economic gain (Loomba, 2005). The legacy of colonialism continues to influence contemporary global relations, social hierarchies, and identity formations, especially in formerly colonized societies. As Said (1978) argues in *Orientalism*, colonial powers constructed knowledge systems that positioned the West as superior to the East, which still shapes how cultures are perceived and represented today. Postcolonial scholars, including Fanon (1963), have emphasized how colonial violence has lasting psychological and structural effects on the colonized, often leading to internalized oppression and cultural dislocation.

According to Lutfi (2014), postcolonialism critiques the false image of the Orient constructed by the West. This distorted representation is spread through various fields such as literature, economics, politics, and philosophy, creating a negative perception of the East, especially in the eyes of Western audiences. Postcolonial theorists have also discussed the paradox faced by newly independent nations. As noted by Sudhir (2020), postcolonialism refers not only to the historical period following the end of imperial rule after World War II but also to the cultural and social reconstruction that follows. However, as Edward Said (1978) emphasizes, even after colonial control ends, former colonies may still be influenced by the illusion that they are entirely free from colonial legacies.

The impact of postcolonialism is especially visible among the lower social classes, who often continue to suffer from negative stereotypes and systemic marginalization rooted in colonial ideologies such as Orientalism. In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Sexy*, these postcolonial themes are clearly present. The narrative explores complex issues of cultural identity, power imbalance, and exoticization through the relationship between Miranda, a white American woman, and Dev, a married Indian man. Their relationship is set against a postcolonial context, where individuals from different cultural backgrounds struggle with how identity and desire are shaped by historical and social forces. Lahiri uses their interactions to reveal how colonial legacies continue to influence perceptions of the self and the other in contemporary life.

Lahiri uses their relationship to highlight themes such as the fetishization of Eastern culture, represented by Miranda's fascination of wearing sari, traditional Indian clothing made of silk, cotton or linen, and the alienation experienced by diasporic characters like Dev, who straddles two worlds without fully belonging to either. The power imbalance in their affair is further emphasized when Miranda realizes that Dev views her primarily through a superficial lens, calling her "sexy" without any deeper understanding of her identity. By weaving these elements into the narrative, Lahiri critiques the lingering effects of colonialism on personal relationships, identity, and cultural perceptions.

Praveen V (2016) explains that postcolonialism focuses on the restoration of Eastern identity and the deconstruction of Eurocentrism. Mtairi (2019) examines Edward

Said's ideology of postcolonial literature, which shows the West's domination of the East in knowledge and political power. In addition, Al-Lawama (2024) says that Said's critique of Orientalism reveals the West's bias against the East, which influences postcolonial philosophy and the literary canon. Said's critique also opens space for a more inclusive literary discourse that speaks to power, representation and identity. In the context of contemporary literature, Apap (2016) examines Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Sexy* as a postcolonial meditation on transnational relations and the creation of modern subjectivities. He argues that the story is an allegory that demonstrates the creation of sympathetic relationships between individuals from different cultures, as well as a critical reflection on the practice of literary interpretation itself. There has not been any discussion on *Sexy* that examines deeper using orientalism point of view. Meanwhile, it is a highlight in the short story, along with other apparent issues like feminism.

The short story *Sexy* by Jhumpa Lahiri explores themes of identity, cultural interaction, and personal relationships. This article focuses on the postcolonial elements found in the story. The analysis draws on Postcolonialism theory, particularly as developed by Edward Said, who explained how Western societies construct negative perceptions of the East, or the "Orient," especially in the aftermath of World War II. These perceptions, rooted in colonial history, continue to influence how Eastern societies are viewed today. Historically, Western powers carried out colonization and even acts of genocide to expand their territories and gain strategic advantages during times of war. As a result, the West came to see itself as superior, while Eastern societies were viewed as backward or inferior.

This article examines how such postcolonial attitudes are reflected in Lahiri's story. The relationship between Miranda, a white American woman, and Dev, a married Indian man, offers a lens through which to explore the lingering effects of Orientalism. Miranda's growing curiosity about India, especially about Dev's wife and where she comes from, reveals how her interest is shaped by exoticized and romanticized views of the East. Through this dynamic, Lahiri subtly critiques the way Western individuals may continue to view Eastern cultures through a postcolonial, orientalist lens.

LITERARY REVIEWS

In the theory of postcolonialism, Edward Said made a very important

contribution with his work entitled *Orientalism* (1978). This theory not only highlights the history of colonialism, but also explores how cultural discourses and knowledge shaped by the West about the East serve to construct and maintain colonial domination. Said argued that orientalism is a cultural construction that portrays the East as 'other' and opposite to the West. This representation is more than just a stereotypical image, but a tool used to reinforce the West's political and cultural power over the East. Said (1978) defines orientalism as an approach to understanding the East that is based on an unfair and distorted view. Maliyana (2013) also states that in this perspective, the East is considered exotic, ancient, irrational and mysterious, while the West is considered rational, advanced, modern and superior. This dualistic separation is not just a cultural difference, but also a strategy to construct domination, where the East is placed in an inferior position, both in intellectual, social, and political terms.

In addition, Said (1978) introduced the idea of cultural representation, which refers to the way in which the West shapes knowledge about the East. In this sense, orientalism is not only related to the way the West sees the East, but also to the way the West controls knowledge about the East. Hariyani (2016) also says that these representations often lead to the depiction of the East as static and undeveloped, which serves to maintain the status quo of colonial power. By reducing the East to a limited and distorted image, these representations eliminate the complexity and diversity of existing cultures, while limiting the possibility for Eastern individuals or societies to define themselves.

Ramirez (2015) mentioned that in relation to cultural hegemony a term developed by Antonio Gramsci can be understood as part of a larger process of cultural hegemony. Cultural hegemony refers to the dominance of certain values, norms and worldviews that are widely accepted by society, even though these values are often the product of dominant forces. According to Martayana (2019) in the context of postcolonialism, Western cultural hegemony is not only seen in the form of colonial policies or resource control, but also in the worldviews shaped by cultural discourse, media, education, and literature. This hegemony creates structures that allow the West to maintain its control over the East, even after the end of the colonial era.

For Said, orientalism and cultural hegemony are intertwined and work together

to shape and reinforce the global hierarchy between the West and the East. Western cultural hegemony not only reinforces the image of the East as inferior, but also internalises this view among individuals on both sides. Therefore, despite the independence of the colonial powers, this structure of cultural hegemony continued, shaping the way in which intercultural perspectives and relationships continued. In Orientalism, Said (1978) asserts that the theory of postcolonialism focuses not only on the study of the history of colonialism, but also on how cultural domination and knowledge shape identities, and how those identities are often narrowed and distorted through processes of cultural representation. This process limits the space for colonised individuals or groups to define themselves independently and fairly. This is not only true in political and social contexts, but also in the realm of culture, where Western culture is often seen as superior and more advanced.

Through this analysis, we can understand that postcolonial theory not only examines the political impact of colonialism, but also the long-term impact of the cultural discourses created to support that domination. Thus, orientalism and cultural hegemony function as two complementary forces in creating and maintaining a global power structure based on the cultural and knowledge imbalance between the West and the East.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Orientalism in Khaled Hosseini's novels

According to Said (1978), Orientalism is a discourse that refers to the system of knowledge and representation that the West uses to define, represent, and dominate the East. Said also argued that the West constructed the East as an exotic and uncivilized "Other" which helped to justify Colonialism and Imperialism. This discourse shapes the way the East is understood, portraying it as static and inferior compared to the dynamic and rational West. This discourse is not neutral, but serves as a tool of power and domination, reinforcing Western authority and control over the East. Orientalism is strongly linked to colonialism, providing intellectual and cultural justification for European expansion by portraying the East as something in need of Western intervention. Orientalism operates across multiple disciplines, affecting not only academic fields such as anthropology and history, but also literature, art, and media,

which perpetuates stereotypes and maintains unequal power relations between the West and the East.

In Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Sexy*, the dynamics between the characters Miranda and Dev reveal undercurrents of orientalism, particularly through Miranda's fascination with Dev and his cultural background. Miranda, a young American woman with limited knowledge of other countries, becomes involved in an affair with Dev, a married man of Indian origin who takes visible pride in his heritage. Their meeting in a cosmetics store symbolically represents surface beauty and self-fashioning, which is usually perceived at the first look without any further observation. While Miranda is browsing products for herself, she meets Dev, who is purchasing items for his wife. This juxtaposition sets the stage for a relationship built not on mutual understanding, but on romanticized and exoticized perceptions.

Miranda's initial interest in Dev appears to stem less from personal connection and more from the allure of cultural difference. Her attraction to Dev is made deeper with curiosity and desire for the unfamiliarity of an orientalist gaze that views the "other" as both mysterious and desirable. In this context, Dev becomes an anchor through which Miranda attempts to access a world outside her own, albeit in a superficial and self-serving manner. Dev, in turn, does little to challenge this dynamic. Instead, he invites Miranda into his life while maintaining emotional and physical distance, particularly by keeping their relationship secret and confined to weekend meetings.

"...her sentences peppered every now and then with an Indian word, through the laminated wall between their desks. But that afternoon Miranda hadn't been listening...." (Lahiri, 1999)

In *Sexy*, Jhumpa Lahiri subtly explores themes of Orientalism through Miranda's growing fascination with India and Indian culture. Early in the story, Miranda is accustomed to hearing her co-worker Laxmi speaking Hindi during phone calls with her family. Though she usually listens with curiosity, on one particular afternoon, she is distracted and does not pay attention. This moment, however, reflects Miranda's broader interest in the unfamiliar and the exotic culture, which in this case is India. It is due to little knowledge she has about the country but becomes increasingly intrigued after beginning an affair with Dev.

Laxmi's use of her native language at work signals an effort to preserve her cultural identity in a foreign context. Like Dev who proudly points out India on a map during a date with Miranda at the Mapparium, Laxmi maintains a strong connection to her roots. Dev's gesture of showing Miranda where India is located, and explaining where his wife is from, further emphasizes his pride in his heritage. From an Orientalist perspective, as theorized by Edward Said, this interaction reflects how the East is often represented through a Western lens, mapped, observed, and objectified. The map, especially as displayed in a Western institution like the Christian Science Center, becomes a symbol of this power dynamic in which India is reduced to a point of curiosity, a foreign and romanticized space that exists primarily through the gaze of the Westerner.

Miranda's desire to know where Dev's wife lives reveals more than mere interest. It reflects an orientalist gaze. Rather than seeking a genuine understanding of Indian culture, Miranda's thoughts are shaped by her romantic involvement and her perception of India as the land of Dev's "first love." In this sense, her fascination is personal and possessive, rather than cultural or empathetic. Lahiri thus illustrates how the legacy of orientalism persists in modern, intimate relationships, where the East continues to be exoticized, simplified, and viewed through the lens of Western desire and imagination.

Cultural Hegemony in Khaled Hosseini's novels

Cultural hegemony proposed by Gramsci refers to the domination of ideologies and values that are accepted by the wider society as the norm or natural, even if they originate from the ruling class (Kasiyarno, 2014). In the context of post-colonialism, cultural hegemony describes how Western cultural power is propagated through media, education and social systems to reinforce the West's dominant position over non-Western countries. Western countries, through the control of knowledge and representation, create the view that Western values-such as rationality, modernity, and individualism-are universal standards that should be accepted by the world.

This concept is closely related to the theory of orientalism developed by Edward Said, which explains how the West represents the East (including Asia, the Middle East

and Africa) as 'Other', exotic, backward and irrational. This representation, according to Said, is not just a view, but a tool of domination used to cement the West's political and cultural control over the East. Cultural hegemony serves to expand and sustain this orientalist discourse, by making Western ideology widely accepted, even in the non-Western world. Hence, the two are interconnected in illustrating how Western cultural domination, already begun through orientalism, continues in the form of a globally accepted ideology, shaping the way the world views and values non-Western cultures.

Based on the previous explanation, the following are some examples that show the presence of cultural hegemony elements in the short story *Sexy* by Jhumpa Lahiri

"...Dev pointed to India, which was red, and far more detailed than the map in *The Economist*. He explained that many of the countries, like Siam and Italian Somalil and,..."

The passage from the short story shows how Dev points out a more detailed map of India, and this can be considered as a form of dominant representation from the West that values or depicts the Eastern world (including India) in a different way than the Easterners themselves see it. *The Economist's* map, to which Dev alludes, reflects a Western perspective of the world- where Eastern countries like India are often portrayed in a larger, more prominent, or even more meaningful way in Western narratives. In terms of cultural hegemony, this map shows the dominating influence of Western culture on how the East is viewed, even though it is a much simplistic representation that does not take into account India's social, historical, and cultural complexities. This creates a narrative that is heavily dominated by Western powers, which often ignores or diminishes the indigenous cultural identities of Eastern countries.

"...The next day, when Dev came to visit, Miranda asked him what his wife looked like. She was nervous to ask, waiting until he'd smoked the last of his cigarettes, crushing it with a firm twist into the saucer. She wondered if they'd quarrel. But Dev wasn't surprised by the question. He told her, spreading some smoked whitefish on a cracker, that his wife resembled an actress in Bombay named Madhuri Dixit..."

The short story depicts how Miranda, who is from the Western world, asks

about Dev's wife's appearance. Dev answers that his wife resembles Madhuri Dixit, a famous Bollywood actress in India. Madhuri Dixit is a symbol of Bollywood beauty that is heavily influenced by Western beauty standards, as seen in the way Western media portrays the beauty and sophistication of Bollywood actresses. In the context of cultural hegemony, this can be analysed as an adaptation of Indian culture to Western beauty standards. Despite Bollywood's unique and cultural characteristics, the Western world has influenced how beauty is perceived, even in the Eastern world. The emphasis on star culture such as Madhuri Dixit shows how Western culture (through film, television, and other media) regulates beauty standards and idealised images of women-creating a more homogenous view of global beauty.

“A few days later Miranda went to an Indian grocery in Central Square that also rented videos. Miranda opened up her Filofax where she had written down “Mottery Dixit.”

She looked up at the videos on the shelves behind the counter. She saw women wearing skirts that sat low on the hips and tops that tied like bandannas between their breasts. Some leaned back against a stone wall, or a tree. They were beautiful, the way the women dancing on the beach were beautiful, with kohl-rimmed eyes and long black hair. She knew then that Madhuri Dixit was beautiful, too.”

Another example of cultural hegemony in *Sexy* can be seen when Miranda becomes curious about Dev's wife after hearing her name. She goes to an Indian grocery store in Central Square that also rents Bollywood films. Miranda had written down the name "Madhuri Dixit" in her planner, thinking it might help her imagine what Dev's wife looks like. At the store, she looks at the DVD covers showing glamorous Indian women in traditional outfits, with kohl-lined eyes and long black hair. Seeing these images, Miranda assumes that Dev's wife must be just as beautiful as the actress. When the store owner offers to play a subtitled version of the video, Miranda refuses and quickly leaves.

This moment highlights both Orientalism and cultural hegemony. Miranda, as a Western woman, views Indian women through exoticized stereotypes, associating their beauty with mystery and sensuality. Her curiosity is driven by a desire to understand and even compare herself to Dev's wife, yet she is not interested in fully engaging with Indian culture—she rejects the subtitles, showing a lack of effort to understand the

language. From Edward Said's perspective, this reflects how the West often views the East: as something exotic, different, and beautiful, but not fully human or equal. Miranda's Western background places her in a position of subtle superiority, even as she is fascinated by the "Other." Her actions show how Western individuals can exoticize Eastern culture without truly understanding it, reinforcing the postcolonial themes in Lahiri's story.

Through those passages, we can see how cultural hegemony plays a role in shaping cultural perceptions and representations among the characters in *Sexy*. Western media and Western standards play an important role in how Miranda constructs the image of India, and how this image becomes a tool of cultural domination, albeit unwittingly. This illustrates how cultural power and social power are often used to shape our understanding of other cultures, in ways that often ignore the reality and diversity of those cultures.

CONCLUSIONS

Jhumpa Lahiri's *Sexy* serves as a vivid illustration of how *Orientalism and Cultural Hegemony* persist in shaping identities, relationships, and perceptions in a postcolonial world. The story highlights the fetishization of Eastern culture through Miranda's fascination with Indian traditions, such as her curiosity about Dev's wife and her attempts to understand Indian identity through superficial symbols like Bollywood imagery. This reflects Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, where the East is perceived as exotic and "other," reinforcing stereotypes rather than fostering genuine understanding.

Furthermore, cultural hegemony is evident in the depiction of how Western standards influence even Eastern perceptions of beauty, as seen in Dev's comparison of his wife to a Bollywood actress admired within both Western and Indian contexts. Miranda's position as a Western individual also symbolizes the subtle power dynamic in her relationship with Dev, where her perspective dominates her interpretation of his culture. Lahiri critiques these dynamics by revealing how colonial-era cultural narratives continue to govern interactions between the East and the West, often reducing the rich complexity of Eastern identities to stereotypes. The short story ultimately underscores the enduring influence of postcolonial cultural discourses, where Western ideologies and

representations still overshadow and shape global perceptions of the East. Lahiri invites readers to question these entrenched biases and consider the nuanced realities of cultural identity and power in a postcolonial world.

The benefit of this article for further projects is that this article can be used as a reference to pay more attention to how orientalism and cultural hegemony are portrayed in novels, films, or poetry, where researchers examine how interactions arise in a work from the perception of orientalism and cultural hegemony in Post colonialism theory. The article can be read directly in the above article, especially for students, who are doing research, this article can be used as one of the references who are doing research, this article can be used as one of the references in researching orientalism and cultural hegemony in a written works or film.

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