

# Yes All Women: An Analysis of Gender and Culture in Mistaken Identity

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Yes All Women:

An Analysis of Gender and Culture in *Mistaken Identity*

Sexism, by definition, is “prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex” (“Sexism”). Even the Oxford English Dictionary, the language authority of the English speaking world, admits that gender discrimination is a women’s issue. The fact that this has evolved from a political opinion to a statement of fact reveals how maltreatment of women has become embedded in every aspect of our culture, even our language, without us even realizing it. Fortunately, many modern cultures, though not all, have at least advanced to the point where men and women alike can bring light to such issues, especially through the arts and literature. Sharon Cooper does an excellent job of this in her famous work, *Mistaken Identity*. Though only one scene in length, and filled with bouts of witty banter, the play holds more subtext than a Hemingway novel. (Well, that may be a bit of an exaggeration). In only 10 minutes, we are plunged into the life of Kali, a young woman struggling to cope with life as a triple minority-being a woman, a lesbian, and an Indian Hindu living in England-and the struggles she falls victims to as a result of her intersectionality. When approaching the play with a fusion of feminist and ethnic perspectives, one can more clearly see the fragile intersections of gender and culture, and how the culmination of the two make Kali a target of abuse and mistreatment.

From the opening line, we can sense the tension between Kali and her date Steve. Not only does he open the play with a rather condescending line that suggests England's food culture is obviously not up to his standards (Cooper 860), but he continues to ramble on from one random topic to the next, barely allowing to Kali to get a word in edgewise. Even when he asks her a question about whether she's seen a certain commercial, he barely gives her time to answer before he immediately cuts her off and continues talking, almost as if he didn't really care if she had seen it or not; he was just asking to be what he probably considered "polite." This may be the first, but it definitely is not the last time this happens. Throughout the entire play, Steve is constantly shutting Kali down, cutting her off, and controlling the conversation.

At one point, he invites Kali to tell her story, insisting that he is a good listener, and while he's waiting for her to start, he mockingly explains to her that "you have to say something if you want this to continue with what we call in America, a conversation" (Cooper 862). At first, it just seems ironic that he of all people would be advising someone on how to have a proper conversation when he can't even be quiet long enough for someone to answer his question, but when we think about it, is this not the traditional American conversation? Men do the talking and women occasionally interject, but only to agree with whatever the man is saying. In her famous 1995 speech to the UN, Hillary Clinton remarked, "The history of women has been a history of silence. Even today, there are those who are trying to silence our words" (Clinton 779). Though we must admit that America's treatment of women has significantly progressed for Hillary Clinton to be able to do something like speak to the UN, her point stands. Whether it be something relatively small, like Steve shutting down Kali, or much larger, like feminist public speaker Anita Sarkeesian having to cancel her speech because of the numerous death threats she received-threats the police refused to do anything about (Ahmed and Marco)- silencing women is

still a common American practice. Applying this to the play, we see that Steve's actions are a prime example of how culture and sexism have become so intertwined that misogyny inevitably manifests itself everywhere, even in the details of casual conversation.

Of course, it isn't just Steve's blatant sexism that makes him annoying (at best). It's the air of cultural superiority he exudes with every breath. As I briefly mentioned before, he opens the play talking about fish and chips, saying "Why do y'all call them chips. When they're French fries, I mean" (Cooper 860). This can roughly be translated to "This is not how Americans do it, so it is wrong." This idea that American culture is the superior culture is harmful in many aspects. Not only do people like Steve feel entitled to insult other cultures, it also instills a false sense of responsibility. Americans, thinking they are more educated and more civilized, believe they have a moral obligation to help those from other cultures, who they deem as "helpless."

Just like sexism, this has become a fundamental part of American culture since its beginnings. Early settlers forced Native Americans into Christianity, not necessarily because they cared deeply about Natives' souls, but because that was their "moral duty." This trend not only applies to people of other cultures, but also to women. Women are seen as the weaker of the sexes and therefore, seen as needing a man to take care of them, a knight in shining armor. Even today, this rings true. In recent decades, America has become one of the leading countries in the fight against sex trafficking of women and children. While this is definitely impressive, Congress refuses to ratify CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women). If America cares so much about women and their safety, why would they not want to pass this? It seems perplexing but when you notice that anti-trafficking laws are "not only aimed at protecting women, but also at enforcing attitudes about the moral propriety of certain forms of sexual behavior" (Resnik 789), it all seems to make sense. Americans aren't

necessarily concerned with how well women are treated, but rather the fact that they can say they're doing their duty to women, while still enforcing male domination of female sexuality.

Thus, as both a woman and a non-American, Kali is subject to twice the harassment. As soon as Steve realizes that Kali is really struggling, he immediately becomes the hero, and encourages her to talk about it so he can help. Yet, he is constantly making snide remarks that suggest he thinks Kali is not as educated or civilized as him because of her gender/culture. These include lines like “Three years ago, at a 4<sup>th</sup> of July Celebration-you know that’s the holiday-” (Cooper 863) as well as “You have to say something if you want to continue with what we call in America, a conversation” (Cooper 862), which I quoted earlier. The fact that he feels the need constantly to reinforce the idea that he is superior suggest that his concern is anything but sincere. Not to mention, his idea of “helping” includes once again turning the conversation back to himself and telling sob story after sob story about his own life, but of course he already fulfilled his duty by offering to help, so the outcome doesn’t really matter to him. Here we have yet another example of how his culture has molded him in such a way that leads him to mistreat Kali.

The goal of this paper is by no means to criticize American culture. While it obviously has its flaws, so does every culture and I believe it’s equally important to point out the effects Kali’s own culture have had on her life. Kali mentions that if her parents find out she’s a lesbian, she could be disowned, prohibited from seeing her family again (Cooper 864). While this may seem a bit extreme, it isn’t inaccurate. In 2012, a case study was done involving various religions and their opinions on homosexuality. Almost all religious denominations referred to the practice as “unnatural” and “transgressing the religious duty to procreate” (Valentine and Waite 478), but it was Middle Eastern religions (Islam, Hinduism, etc.) that reacted most strongly. In these

cultures, people will go to great lengths to avoid coming in any sort of contact with homosexuals, even moving jobs just to avoid a gay person (Valentine and Waite 479). It's no surprise that Kali is terrified to tell her family. We can see this terror when she tries to tell Steve that her family doesn't know. He invites her to talk about it, and she seems almost paralyzed, potentially with fear. He has to prompt her several times before she finally responds with "I was hoping you wouldn't tell Rashid" (Cooper 862). Steve asks her to open up, and the first thing she says isn't about herself, but her brother, which suggests how important her family is to her, and more significantly how important it is they don't find out she's a lesbian. Later, when Steve tries to make a joke saying, "I can tell him you're a lesbian and if he doesn't let you be with his kids anymore, I'll punch him in the face" (Cooper 864), but Kali doesn't laugh, probably because this is no joking matter to her. Because of the harsh restrictions of her culture, she is genuinely afraid of just being herself.

Kali may be fictional, but her experiences are all too real and representative of women all around the world. By exposing how deeply sexism has become rooted in our culture, Sharon Cooper has done a great justice. However, the fact that the play still borders on humorous, when the topic is anything but, suggests that just like every other woman, Cooper is a victim of culture. Whether she makes her play humorous because she is subconsciously afraid of overstepping the bounds womanhood has confined her too, or because she knows that at this point in time women's messages must be carefully worded or else be met with terrifying repercussions. Sharon Cooper, Anita Sarkeesian, and all women who even begin to threaten the traditions of the patriarchy face constant danger to their lives and reputations, but their work is not futile. Plays like *Mistaken Identity* are nothing less than groundbreaking and essential in laying the foundation for a brighter future for women, especially women of color, but true success will be

achieved when these ideas don't have to be sugarcoated in cunning one liners, and "typically against women" won't be found next to "sexism" in the dictionary.

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