

Sari not Sorry

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Sari not Sorry

by Rohini Bannerjee

I remember the first time I draped one. It had a teal blue hue to it and a wide border. I was slimmer then, just having celebrated the beginning of my Chapter 19. There was a wedding in our small community, and I was tired of wearing the same overly beaded '90s-inspired kurta and pajama bottoms that the White girls in high school called "MC Hammer pants." The extra material did make me feel dowdy, my thick waist expanding as the folds of material were bulky around my midsection. I wanted to wear a sari.

"I think you are old enough now. This will make you officially a woman." Mom squeezed the body fat under my armpit, eyeing which sari blouse from her collection would fit my chest.

"Your breasts are separated, like your father's mother. No actual cleavage. So strange," she added.

We Christian Punjabis here in Halifax are a siloed group within the South Asian diaspora. Without a gurdwara, a mandir, or a masjid to meet, weddings were often where we found fellowship. And where the Aunties found an opportunity to gawk and comment on the next generation of young girls.

The blouse fit. And so, we began to drape.

Mom was pulling and tugging, her long nails scratching my navel as she tucked my pleats, her sapphire ring digging into the flesh of my hips.

"There is just not enough material here for you," she sighed, tucking strategically to cover my exposed midsection. "These saris look better on more slender girls." My chest pinched, as it had the previous night at the pre-wedding mehndi celebration when Lila Auntie remarked on my wide shoulders.

"For our type of women, we need more than the average six yards," Mom muttered with three safety pins in her mouth. I could see beads of sweat on her forehead and her freshly-out-of-the-drugstore boxed hair colour was a couple of shades too dark for her copper skin.

"Ouch. Please Mom, maybe I'll just pin it." My voice shaking a little with apprehension, I couldn't believe my own audacity. Fueled with this newfound confidence, I squinted into the mirror guessing how much material to pull so that the paloo of my sari would land softly but firmly on my shoulder. I gestured to Mom to let me take a safety pin out from her mouth. Instead, she took out all three and closed her fist.

"You need many pins, bacha. Once we start dancing at the wedding, this will unravel. Remember that James Bond film *Octopussy*? Let me do it." Grabbing my bra strap through my blouse, Mom pinned the border of my paloo onto my shoulder. I closed my eyes as I could feel the cold metal of the safety pin on my skin. She placed a second one for good luck, she said.

"Don't move or I'll prick you." I held my breath. Done.

Shifting the fabric so both my breasts were completely covered, the pleats on the bottom were simultaneously yanked and smoothed. I could hear murmurings from my mother of how the back of my sari was riding too high. Standing as still as possible, I felt like a marionette having her strings adjusted for a debut performance.

Beside each other, shoulder to shoulder, Mom looked at me through the mirror, realizing this was the best she could do, and softly whispered, “Go, go show your father.”

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#sarinotsorry, I saw you Dr. David

I was just a kid, circa 1980, walking near the Children’s hospital

I saw you, Doc Sahib

tall torso heavy hips, a salaam alekum

thin sari wrapping each curve of you

Your crisp white lab coat, stethoscope albatross sun shining

I saw you, Dr. David

I saw hope

I saw me

/

I remember getting out of my vehicle in the bitter cold of late January, thick boots on my feet, my oversized winter coat barely closing, relying on a zipper that had clearly given up two winters ago. I placed my feet out the door and gently held up my sari pleats from the wet snow. Never let your sari drag on the ground, I could hear my mother whispering in my head. I sausage-walked into the side door of my building, hoping the elevator wouldn’t take long. As much as I liked wearing a sari out and about, I didn’t like how it drew attention from nearly everyone on campus. But something in me was determined to normalize wearing saris to work.

“Is there some kind of event today Rohini?”

“Oh, that’s pretty. You look nice. A bit fancy though. And kind of too much for class, isn’t it?”

“So, you are Hindu then. But didn’t you go to Catholic school? And isn’t your husband Muslim? Are the saris cultural or religious? Maybe just a blazer and skirt would be better?”

I dropped my bags in my office and found my heels, the ringing of the comments from the White staff and faculty still persistent in my ear. Most of my empty answers to their judgements resulted in nervous laughter or shrugged shoulders. Decolonizing my profession meant showing up to class outside of a Western dress code. However, what about decolonizing my own mindset? Why did I have this sudden urge to explain my choice of clothing? I did no such thing when I wore a pencil skirt and a blouse. Well, except if the blouse had a paisley print and was a bright orange. Then I was told by White women that I was so courageous to wear colour and all those exotic prints which they wouldn’t dare to wear.

I didn't have the capacity to simply say to all fashion police officers around me that I just wanted to feel and look pretty, and saris made me feel this way. These saris were so patient too, waiting in my closet to be selected. They came out at Christmas or Easter dinner but often felt neglected against my A-line skirts and blazer collection which were my usual university teaching attire.

I slipped into my Sacha London black pumps and noticed that the sari pleats were now uneven. The change in height from winter boots to heels altered how the sari fell. The back of my sari was not dragging but instead it was riding too high, and the blue petticoat underneath was peeking through the border. I took a long breath and tugged and tucked. I looked at my watch, and I had to get to class in ten minutes.

Shoulders back, remember Rohini, you are your Ancestors.

I stopped in the washroom near the classroom where I was teaching that morning's second-year French grammar class. I intended to use the toilet, but I knew that if I rustled the pleats, there was the likelihood I would bugger it all up. I checked my hair and walked out.

Maybe wearing saris to teach is not a good idea, I mumbled to myself. And then I walked into class, and I saw my students smiling.

"Alors, ça va tout le monde?"

I walked around the classroom, asking the students to sign the attendance sheet, my paloo sometimes brushing up against a chair or table, the sounds of the embroidered border muffling my negative thoughts.

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#sarinotsorry, I saw you Dr. Devi.

I was an untenured professor, circa 2008, in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

I saw you, Dr. Devi

tresses tucked behind the ear, crimson lips aglow, ki manière

cotton sari, an everyday, I just found this and threw it on, kind of look

Refreshing, really.

I held your novel in my hand; I wrote a paper on it and was about to speak

and then

I saw you, Dr. Devi

and you gave me permission to wear a sari too

And so, I did

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Going to coffee shops to answer emails, meet up with colleagues or friends, or simply to find a quiet space to be, has been a regular practice for me. The week Vice-President Kamala Harris was sworn into office I consequently swore to myself, and to my small Instagram following, that I would wear a sari every day for seven days. Seeing someone with the same name as my own auntie, someone who had roots in South Asia but also was born on Turtle Island, someone who had Brown skin like me, that had a special zing to it.

I showed up at my favourite café a couple of days in a row. I wore an orange daywear sari, as my mother would call it. It was light, nothing too shiny or bright, a bit more on the plain side, no design or beadwork. The second day I planned a phulkari lime green cotton sari I had bought in Mumbai. On day three of my Kamala Sari Week, I chose a jewel-toned teal silk sari. I walked into the café and ordered my usual. The baristas have known me since my children were little and always expect me to order the Americano and so I did. As I walked with my filled mug to a small table, another patron approached me.

“I have to say this. You look stunning.” Her left hand held her latte, the other a pen.

“I’m from the UK and am visiting Halifax. I have been coming in every day, and I look for you. I look to see if you will wear a sari and what colour you will go for, and I’m like, she did it again.”

I scanned her face to see if I could discern her ethnicity. I desperately wanted her to be Brown. I wanted her kind words to feel real, less like the dominant culture pointing out my otherness. Her amandine eyes and high cheekbones led me to believe she had South Asian roots. Her hair was lush and as she approached, I could perceive the scent of incense from her.

“That’s kind, thank you.” My voice was trembling. I didn’t know why.

“In London, it’s normal to see women wearing saris but here not so much. You remind me of my aunt when she was younger. She would just wear saris on the Tube, back in the ’70s, and not give a shit. I feel like you are kind of the same.” She looked me in the eyes, barely blinking, like she had rehearsed this soliloquy.

“Thank you.”

I wanted to say more. I wanted to thank her for taking the time to come over to me and share her heart. I instead was processing the compliment, the observation, the connection, the beauty of the moment. I brought my gaze down to my feet as she walked away. She turned and added, “Keep it up. You’re making a difference. I know you don’t know it, but people are looking at you, and in a good way, if that makes sense.”

She walked back to her table where a tall, slender White man waited for her; he was busy picking at a cinnamon bun with generous icing. I think it was the same one I had contemplated purchasing myself but told myself it would be too much.

Instead of returning to my emails, I got up from my seat, gathered my paloo, the part of the sari I let drape past my shoulders, scanned the room for any other Brown faces, and, seeing none, ordered a cinnamon bun.

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#sarinotsorry, I saw you Madam Ji

I was on my way to France, circa 1995, with a connection at Heathrow

I saw you, Madam Ji

Toes forward as you walked, the pleats of your sari gliding, namaskar

rushing to your gate, handkerchief in your hand

I didn't care that your sari was dragging on the ground and

Neither did you.

maybe your name is Kamala, and you

took the Tube in the '70s and didn't give a shit

I saw you, Madam Ji

Or maybe it's Maharani

/

I remember hearing Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan playing in the background. His qawwali melody echoing in the apartment, the tabla so fierce. The lighting was set up, and the photo shoot was about to begin.

I had been professionally draped in a thick magenta and gold silk sari. My belly rolls were all covered, and I was embodying the sari; it had molded onto and into and through my body, a fusion of sort. Pins were everywhere but instead of feeling restricted, I felt free. My chest had been deemed ample and inviting under the blouse that was sparkling à la Bollywood red carpet vibes. My eye makeup was sultry, hair unpinned and shiny.

Considering that all my life I had ached to have White skin, blue eyes, and blonde hair, today was a miracle. April 14, 2023, I relished in my caramel Brown skin, my dark, diamond eyes, and rich chocolate hair. I smiled with my backside filling out the sari. I treasured my strong inner thighs touching when I stood. I knew who I was.

"Dr. Rohini, are you ready?" Sara had her camera in hand.

"One second, I have to send a quick photo to my parents."

Ela, who had so patiently draped me, took the photo for me on my cell phone. I sent it to my parents with the caption, "Look what your daughter is up to today."

Mom responded within seconds, "I showed your father. He said you look beautiful. I think you are like a professional model or something. Good job bacha."

Later in the local park, I joined a professional model, twenty years younger than me, and we took shots near rhododendrons and tulips. We moved in sync and in contrast.

“Dr. Rohini you seem so comfortable. Are you sure you haven’t done this before?”

“Just in my dreams,” I giggled.

We took more shots near the waterfront and by a local art gallery. The wind was in my hair.

My phone was ringing incessantly. I was in the moment, making art, in public, in a sari, in my Brown skin. My brother kept ringing and so did my husband. I finally answered.

“It’s your dad. You need to talk to your brother, right now.” I trusted his voice.

The ambulance had already loaded Dad when I arrived at my family home. He had a faint heartbeat. An hour later, he did not. I am glad the last image Dad saw of me was in a sari, free and beautiful, making art, because art is whatever reminds you to stay alive, if not in this life, in the next.

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#sarinotsorry, I will keep seeing you Rohini

I was on my way to myself, circa 2024, my full-length mirror

I saw you, Rohini

Smile full, the lines of your neck lifting your chin with pride, Bonjour

Paloo dancing on your arm

You chose a sleeveless blouse because your arms are

Robust, like your heart.

I saw you, Rohini

And I won’t look away anymore

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Daughter of Indian immigrant Settlers on unceded Mi'kmaki territory, **Rohini Bannerjee** is a scholar, translator and creative writer. Chevalière de l'Ordre de la Pléiade and Full Professor of French, with research focusing on the literatures and cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean at Saint Mary's University (Halifax), Rohini is published in India, Canada, France and Spain, in both English and French. Her short stories and poetry explore themes of belonging, identity and body image.