



Lakshmi Menon from the October 2008 issue of ELLE India

Photograph: Prabuddha Dasgupta; For representational purposes only

# Beauty is the REFLECTION of your SOUL

What really is beauty? And how does one perceive it? As debates rage around the inclusivity of it (or lack thereof), seven voices offer their insights on a term that has been most polarising this year





Tarun Tahiliani's F/W  
2018-19 campaign

**TARUN TAHILIANI**  
**DESIGNER**

Well, beauty is always in the eyes of the beholder. And I have always found dusky and tribal Indian beauty alluring and sensuous. It is also real and unfettered. I gag every time I see fairness creams or people (especially in fashion and modelling) trying to brighten their

skin. I find indigenous beauty so beautiful. But that does not mean I cannot find somebody who is very fair, beautiful. I think it is important to promote and celebrate our diversity, and the tribal sensuousness of Indian women. And that's something we, as a label, try to do, too: endeavour to work with women who represent the true soul of India, and not just a whitened colonised view.

glance, unfamiliar to me? Sometimes. But like with anything done because it has been decided for me by someone else, the feeling of beauty it offers is hollow or momentary.

This summer was one of the first summers I went to the beach with my friends. We brought towels, cherries, chips, books of poetry to read. I wore a bathing suit that, according to the glossy magazines, might be deemed beautiful—it was burgundy, with a delicate design, and I did feel dimly beautiful just wearing it. But the suit had very little to do with why I felt so beautiful that afternoon, and why I realised that my own relationship to what I conceive of as “feeling beautiful” had to change. Stepping into the sea, I couldn't help but laugh—the ocean, so vast, so powerful, the glittering sunlight, and I felt grateful that my life contained the sight. I had the thought—I was doing exactly what I wanted to do with my summer. Later, back on the shore, we lay on towels in the sunlight, sipped coconut water and ate cherries, read poems out loud, napped. Something magical happens when you are so close to the ocean, your mind quiets, you become absolutely present to the sights and smells around you. I loved closing my eyes and hearing the sound of the waves. I loved letting the sun warm me. I loved the smell of the salt in my hair, and how the ocean wind made it coarse and wildly curly. What did it matter what anyone thought of how I appeared, if I was absolutely at ease with myself and my surroundings, exactly where I wanted to be?

Perhaps it is the simplest realisation, but it is one I have really grown to cherish: that I feel most beautiful when I am intentional and personal about how I approach how I appear or experience the world. It could be the smallest thing that gives the most pleasure—for example, recently, I felt attracted to the colour indigo. I took a tiny risk and painted my nails blue for a week; I bought blue eyeliner and experimented with it, and incorporating the colour into my day gave me a private joy. At no point did I wonder how the blue eyeliner looked to my friend, to my mother, because it was something I was doing for me, to honour an impulse in me. And honouring myself felt like the most beautiful decision of all.

**FATIMA FARHEEN MIRZA**

**AUTHOR**

When I was a girl, I was taught by my mother that physical beauty was not meant to be indulged in, that to pay too much attention to it would be vanity and a distraction from what was essential—nurturing an inner beauty. My grandmothers, both of who were raised in Hyderabad before immigrating, had adopted the belief that fair skin was the standard of beauty. I was often warned to stay out of the sun, and scolded any time I returned home tanned, having allowed my skin to do what it naturally wants to. In high school, in college, beauty was at the whim of whoever had been chosen as the possessor of it—the stars and the models—and it was a standard that shifted quickly and seemed always out of reach. I was either too thin or not thin enough, too pale or too tan. Now, I watch my younger cousins and nieces open Instagram and Snapchat, and take selfies with filters that add a golden glow to their faces, enlarge their eyes, shrink their noses—even that, especially that, seems to convey that beauty is always just out of reach, something to be achieved, manipulated into being. Which is another way of saying beauty is never experienced when one is at ease with oneself.

For many years, when I thought of beauty, it was always someone else's definition that I thought of—whether it was my mother and grandmother, who said modesty was beauty, or the glossy magazines that dictated what eyebrow arc corresponded with what eye shape, what face cut matched what haircut. At every juncture, it seemed, a woman learned of beauty through others, and often through the implication that she had already failed to embody it.

Recently, I wondered—when have I felt most beautiful? Is it when I am following the guidelines outlined by women before me, whether that means wearing the salwar kameez my mother has picked out for me, one that is casual and comfortable? Is it when my hair and make-up is done, so no strand is out of place, to the point where my reflection looks, at first



Audrey Pais and Wivina Rose D'Silva from the December 2015 issue of ELLE India

ARUNAVA SINHA  
WRITER AND TRANSLATOR

In the character of Neera, Bengali poet and fiction writer Sunil Gangopadhyay created through his poetry one of the most memorable female archetypes of the collective imagination. In poem after poem written over many years, he built an edifice of romance with Neera, everywoman and no woman, with, among other things, tantalising details about her physical appearance. Read in adolescence, irrespective of one's chronological age, Neera is the woman every young man dreams of loving, and every young woman wants to be.

Read with an adult perception, however, it is obvious that Neera is very much a product of an unselfconscious male gaze, which sees in a woman not who she is, but whom the man wants her to be: a physically attractive object of desire who, however, is never defiled by the mundanities of marriage or even anything more than a suggestion of physical contact.



In Bengali, these Neera poems are at best innocent of gender sensitivity, and at worst, a classic example of patriarchy routed through poetry. Translating these poems into English was an act fraught with anxiety. A reader embedded in a different cultural framework would more likely see the poems as examples of poetry as patriarchy. As the hapless translator, I was caught between wishing I could regain my own naiveté, and recognising the casual disdain for women entrenched in the lyricism of references to her beauty.

Ultimately, of course, a translator cannot and should not add anything or take away anything, and only enable the work to speak for itself. But it is difficult to know just how beautiful Neera the woman remains in translation, compared to the figure—"...in the unruly strands of hair framing your half-asleep tender face..."—that the Bengali poet drew with his imagination and his art.

Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian from the December 2015 issue of ELLE India



Photographs: Bikramjit Bose (Audrey Pais, Wivina Rose D'Silva), Arsh Sayed (Alok Vaid-Menon and Janani Balasubramanian); For representational purposes only. Farrokh Chiofia (Mehr Jesia)



Mehr Jesia from the April 2018 issue of ELLE India

MEHR JESIA  
FORMER MODEL

I'm turning 50 next month, and I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about doing something about the laugh lines and the frown lines. Who hasn't? I even tried a PRP facial when I turned 45, and I was really happy with the result. But I've increasingly been feeling like I don't want to hide my age. There's a certain beauty to being effortless, to not trying too hard, and being true to yourself. So, I've learned to be grateful for what is going on in my body.

I believe beauty comes from personality. My mum is 83 and wears her wrinkles with as much style as she does her beautiful clothes, travelling the world with her friends, living the life of a 40-year old. That's something to aspire to! As I grow older, I feel that the second half of my life is taking me where I want to go, in so many ways. I feel stronger and more beautiful. I wake up in the morning and I'm happy with what I see in the mirror, and no one can take that feeling away from me.





Aparna Sen

**NEMAI GHOSH**  
PHOTOGRAPHER

What I find intriguing about Aparna Sen is that she is not only an able actor, but also one of the finest directors India has ever produced. This rare combination certainly was one of the reasons why I photographed her. Being the daughter of the famous film critic Chidananda

Dasgupta, she had a natural talent for roles both in front of and behind the camera. I witnessed the beginning of her journey at about 16, in *Samapti* (1961) by Satyajit Ray. And I looked at her through my lenses in her first directorial venture, *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981), which earned her national and international awards. This photograph was taken by me in her drawing room, as she stood in front of the poster of the film.

Photograph: Nemai Ghosh

**ZUNI CHOPRA**  
AUTHOR

“You’re beautiful.” Powerful words. Words a lot of people dream of hearing from the ones they find beautiful, too. Beautiful. It means strong, explosive, charming, funny, brave, intelligent. It means everything at once. But most of the time, it means nothing at all.

What is beauty? If you had to define it, what would you say? Not pretty. Something more than pretty. Something deeper, something that runs beneath your skin like paint beneath the frame of a canvas.

I know what many of you would start with: high cheekbones, curved hips, silky hair, light eyes, bright skin. That’s what beauty means to the world around us. But that’s not all, is it? That’s not all it takes to be beautiful. Not to me. To me, it’s an air about a person; a little spot of sunniness that they put into the world, an inexplicable sense of joy that they carry around with them like clinking pennies in a shirt pocket.

There’s a trope in today’s world: the most beautiful girls don’t know they’re beautiful. You’ve seen it in pretty much every rom-com that’s ever existed. She thinks she’s plain, she laughs nervously; he tells her she isn’t, he says she’s special; they kiss in the glow of the sunset; end credits. But you know what I see in truly beautiful women? The opposite. They walk with an air of badassery and confidence that turns heads around them. They know they’re special. Not because a man told them they are, or because of the length of their eyelashes or measurements. But because they’ve looked inside themselves; really looked, and have fallen in love with what they found there.

That’s what beauty means to me. At some stage in every girl’s life, she must look in the mirror and recognise the little things: the glow in her cheeks, the dimples when she smiles, the sway of her hair. Sure, everything’s a little ruffled, but she’s far from a mess. And the moment she recognises that, she’ll start to shine from the inside out, like a dormant star finally beginning to burn. The secret to beauty, then, is to look in the mirror every morning and tell yourself, “Hey. You know what? You’re incredible. I love you. And I always will.”

**RANJIT HOSKOTE**  
POET AND AUTHOR

Unlike the weightier Biblical prophets, who lament the loss of Jerusalem, rail at arrogant kings, or call fire and brimstone down upon their enemies, Jonah gets only a few modest pages in the Old Testament. Yet, he leaps from those pages into our times, our contemporary. He sidesteps the path God has laid down for him. Committed to belief yet assailed by doubt, he second-guesses God, never settling into a life of quiet purpose. He doesn’t seek out adventures, yet they happen to him.

At age 13, looking down from my classroom at the bursting breakers of a monsoon sea, I imagined Jonah in his flowing robes, aquiline-nosed, trying to be resolute, standing on the deck of a ship cursed by his presence. He prepares to throw himself overboard to save his innocent shipmates. He dives in an arc across the stormy waters, aquamarine crested with foaming grey. The sea opens its maw. He is swallowed by a whale, which dives into the depths, giving him three nights of solitude and silence in which to reflect on his choices. Surfacing with a starburst of breath fountaining across a bay, the whale returns Jonah to land. Has he found the will to obey? No. He questions God’s wisdom again, is again brought back to illumination, and saved a city from damnation. There is a fractal beauty to his jagged record of departure and return, defiance and devotion.

Like us, Jonah is a survivor and escape artist. The whale is the system he’s trying to out-sail, but which contains him. Neither is complete without the other. Together, they incarnate affordance and misstep, redemption and catastrophe, a seesaw of the paradoxes that define us. In a hyper-networked age, the whale is no longer outside us, nor are we outside the whale. We are, each of us, Jonahwhale.