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MY TURN

How I Came To Be The "Lady in the Sari"

My personal path of fashion self-discovery took me back to our unbeatable Indian dress

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Last year, I had to make a work related trip to the Italian city of Vicenza. There I was introduced to an elderly gentleman. "Ah," he said, clasping my hand. "You have been described to me as the lady in the sari. Why are you not wearing one?" In my functional beige pantsuit, I suddenly felt slightly ashamed. I had gotten off a plane to come straight to the meeting. I didn't think a sari would be appropriate. This man's perception was not misplaced. Over the past few years, I have made numerous trips to Europe and US in my capacity as a fashion writer. When I was much younger, I thought the way to shine was to wear a little black designer dress, like all fashionable women. Then I realized that I had adopted an urban uniform that wasn't really mine.

So I learned how to drape a sari. As a Hindu Sindhi girl brought up in the bosom of a semi-traditional trading family in Hong Kong, this sari business should have come naturally. But it didn't. I was cajoled into wearing one during family weddings

after relatives insisted it would "look nice." But I would stand, frustrated and impatient, while someone would tie and pleat and fold the fabric on me. Then, I carried the sari like a burden.

Now, my sari-wearing has become a burden no more. Instead, it is an honor and a privilege. Who needs a Chanel gown or a Gucci evening suit--all essentially redolent of sameness--when you can be swathed in a beautiful pink brocade sari, shot with golden threads, its pallu revealing a parade of peacock motifs? What can possibly rival the elegance of a Kanchipuram sari, all handwoven silken threads and flecks of gold?

So now, whenever I travel, I pack a tiny bag filled with a few saris, some glass bangles, bindis and a shimmering kundan set. At formal dinners in glamorous Western capitals, where low-cut dresses and fanciful frocks are the norm, the effects of me and my sari are fascinating. There is an immediate sense of respect. I am often greeted by a halting "Namaste" instead of a two-cheek Euro-style kiss. People suddenly, surprisingly, become rather tender.

At an outdoor cafe in Florence once, in a chiffon sari with a colorful tie-dye pattern, I walked past French fashion designer Christian Lacroix. He stopped his conversation to stare at every fold in the fabric and thread. Wanda Ferragamo, owner of the Italian fashion empire that bears her name, made her way across two gilded salons to tell me that I was "the most elegant woman in the room." At another party in Paris, actress Tracy Ulman peered at my bindi, cast her eyes over my rich ivory silk and gold sari and asked, "Are you someone rich and

famous I should know about?" And, most memorably, at a charity benefit in Los Angeles last summer, where Hollywood celebrities competed with one another in their sexy, revealing dresses, I stood apart in a pink and green silk brocade sari. A young American man approached me, looked at the bikini-clad dancers on high platforms around him, pointed at my sari and said, "Now that is how all women should be dressed. I think the sari is God's gift to womanhood."

So the next time I saw the man in Vicenza, I did not disappoint him and arrived in a dark-hued cotton sari. The look of appreciation on his face was worth more than all the designer dresses in the world.

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