

## When I Wear My Saris, I Feel Powerful. Like a Queen in Full Regalia

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By Rashmi Patel

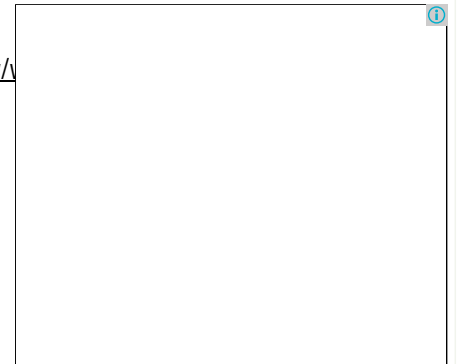


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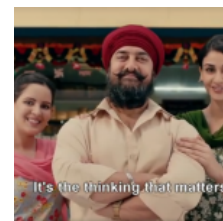
I am all for comfort, so much so that I buy my shoes from medical stores. No kidding. Here in Melbourne, they sell rubber-soled, flat, almost-bordering-on-styleless shoes in medical stores. Perhaps, less tolerance for discomfort is a sickness too. Truth be told, starting from the all-cotton Jockey, all the way to my never-waxed limbs, I am a constant embarrassment for some of my stylish friends. They have taken me shopping, frowned at my shapeless attire, cajoled me into trying all sorts of clothes, given suggestions on WhatsApp, mail, and phone, and yet, here I stand: An incorrigible pro-comfort woman who yearns to be fashionable but only so much. I do admire style.

In my first few days after landing in Melbourne from Bangalore, a friend organised a party and suggested that I wear a 'nice dress'. I was displaced, lonely, and broken-hearted from leaving Bangalore. Yes, Melbourne was beautiful even on the first day but unfamiliar beauty is akin to no beauty at all for an uprooted soul. I didn't want to wear a nice dress. I just wanted to wriggle into my kurtas and cry over the absence of idli-dosa joints that open as early at 6 am in Bangalore. But my friend was insistent. Everyone was wearing a dress and it would be odd if I wore pants or kurta or god-forbid, a sari. "A dress will be more comfortable too," she said.

So I shopped with her and shaved my legs. I put on the dress and walked into the party and it was then that I discovered a new kind of discomfort. Not the physical kind, which you feel when the drawstring of your sari petticoat is a tad too tight. I felt a discomfort somewhere other than on my body. I felt it in the depths of my visceral cavity and along my spine. I felt it tugging at my heart. I felt it every time I saw other women in high heels prancing about in their dresses, flicking their hair. I felt it, because had it been my party, I



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would have worn a sari. But here I was so out of place from my own comfort zone that the physical comfort of slipping into a western dress as compared to wrapping a sari did not count at all.

I don't like being conspicuous. And yet, here in a foreign country, when I wrap a sari around myself I feel more like myself than in any other attire. In a foreign country — where you are constantly struggling between donning a new identity and retaining your old one — a sari is a statement of being home with myself in a new place. So when someone says, "Holy cow! You are wearing a sari," I tell them that I am most comfortable in a sari, which is no guarantee that I will not trip while walking or that I will not constantly pull at my drawstring or that I will not fumble with my *pallu*. It's just that comfort has taken on a new definition for me, especially after moving out of a place I have called home for so many years. A sari is my way of making a new place my new home. A sari is my way of saying, look, I have come here from elsewhere and I hope you are ok with me being me. A sari is my way of saying that I will navigate and adopt a new culture in a way and at a pace that I feel comfortable.

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So for the next two parties at my place, I happily paraded in my saris, wrapped lovingly and leisurely. "Omigod! You look so comfortable. I could never do that," said a guest. I smiled because I was not sure if I could explain. How would I have explained that comfort is a matter of context, of culture, of history, of the feeling of belonging to oneself, one's past and one's present? If I had been confident that she would not have laughed at my answer, I would have said: It has taken me years to find the right kind of saris for myself. I have rejected the rich silks, the starchy cottons, the listless synthetics and the papery blends. I have discovered and lovingly collected comfortable cottons that are woven by-loom and by hands. The saris I own are the stuff of dreams: I have slept in them, ran in them, given talks to roomful of people in them... When I wear my saris, I feel whole and powerful, like a queen in full regalia.

Just a few days ago I broke my left collar bone — this, when I am set to appear at the Jaipur Literature Fest pop-up at the Melbourne Writers Festival. "What will you wear," asked a friend, "I don't think you can handle a sari. Besides, isn't it getting predictable, you and your saris?"

A sari may be predictable in my case, but only as much as the shape of my lips or my habit of ending a heartfelt line with 'yaar' or the way I intersperse my English with Hindi, Gujarati, or Kannada. I don't mind this predictability. This is my current solidness, all of it, and though it may change with time, it currently defines me.

Writhing in bed in pain, I began conversations with my collar-bone. I told her lovingly that if she didn't heal in time, I would wear something that would cause me no pain but still break my heart. There is such a thing as being physically comfortable and emotionally broken. I would like to believe my collar-bone loves saris too. It has healed with a small bump. It is in some pain but it has whispered its blessings to me.

"Are you crazy," screamed a friend from Bangalore. "You should be in bed. I have never heard of a broken collar-bone healing in five days. And now you are wearing a sari! What if you trip?"

What if I trip? What if my *pallu* drops and my broken collar-bone cries out in pain just then? What if my drawstring is tight? I'll still be comfortable. I'll get up, I'll ask for help. I'll scramble to the washroom and loosen the drawstring. I'll more than survive, because this is who I am. I am ready to play it a little risky. This is how I feel whole, at home, in my element, no matter where I am.



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**LG** (<http://gobblefunksite.wordpress.com>)

February 22, 2017 at 11:52 am (<http://theladiesfinger.com/love-wearing-saris/#comment-4710>)

Brilliant piece of writing. I can relate to the sentiment one hundred percent.

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