

## Your appearance is none of our business

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In a world of Instagram filters and body modification apps (yes, they exist), it is evident that we think a lot about how we look. Don't most of us spend a considerable amount of time every day, looking into the mirror, trying to enhance our physical appearance, and if possible, making small fixes to hide our flaws? A little concealer here, a little hair gel there. No matter how satisfied we are with our own looks, no matter how much we think we resemble our favourite actor or actress, we are always targets of comments like "What are you wearing? You look like a guy!" Comments like, "You're too dark, you won't get a good partner this way," addressed towards a person who has a bit more melanin than average, are pretty hurtful. I'm sure that 90% of us have received such unsolicited, 'friendly', criticism about our physical appearance at some point in our lives. The remaining 10% could be lying, or could be the 'heroes' who save us from embarrassing ourselves in front of others by (not-so) 'subtly' pointing out their defects, so that we can start working on them. We too might have done the same, even if unintentionally. Who knows, perhaps a small comment we made about someone's appearance could have affected them a lot.

To elucidate more on this topic, I will share some examples from my personal life. I have a great love for food that has contributed very generously to my body weight. I have been teased about my weight before and used to cry a lot earlier. As I've grown older, I have learnt to take it easy and I even joke about my weight. I realised that taking these comments seriously will not affect the other person in any way, so I might as well just brush it off. I never actually cared about my weight when I was younger. I used to wear clothes that were obviously tight for me, but nothing deterred me from wearing those clothes, and I would often go around showcasing myself as a confident, Victoria's Secret model. I never felt bad about being a chubby person until my relatives, and a few friends, started reprimanding me for it. "Lavanya, lose some weight," "You look like your mother's mother," "You're too fat." Constantly hearing these comments really lowered my self-esteem. Of course, while I did know that I was fat, I just could not understand why it bothered other people more than it bothered me. It was almost as if my adipose, which I had nurtured for more than 15 years, would infect them as well, like a virus. Consequently, I stopped

wearing sleeveless tops because of the fear of my 'fat arms' showing, I stopped wearing shorts because of my 'thunder thighs' (a term my mother uses frequently, which I quite like, ironically) and I used to shut myself up in my room if any relative came to my house. Had I been a bit older, I would not have cared a lot, but as a young child, this had a deep and long-lasting impact. Weight was just one aspect of my appearance, which people pointed out blatantly. I have also been ridiculed for my skin tone, and I took it so seriously that I started using Fair 'n' Lovely (which for the record, is extremely harmful for the skin). When my mother observed, she insisted that I trashed all those fairness creams. Thanks to that, I learnt how to appreciate my skin colour.

Of course, if one is lucky enough, one might even have very 'enthusiastic' friends, along with such relatives. In grade 6, one of my 'friends', Piya (pseudonym), out of nowhere, started commenting that, "Oh, just look at Lavanya. Everything about her is imperfect. Her uniform, her eyebrows, her hair and her skirt." We all must have heard of a term called backbiting or back-bitching, but ever heard of front-bitching? At that moment, I smiled and thought, "She is my friend, and if I say something back to her, our relationship will turn sour, and I don't want that to happen." But the moment I stepped into my home, I broke down. A similar incident happened when I was around 15 years old. I was sitting in class one day, just making senseless jokes with the rest of my friends. After 5 minutes, my friend made an out-of-the-blue statement. "Lavanya, your nose is like a *pakoda* (fritter)..." I did not understand whether to laugh at how creatively she had criticized my poor nose, or cry that my nose didn't fit her 'ideal' standard of what a nose should be like. I still laugh at the ridiculousness of her comment sometimes, but I will not deny that it did impact me and since then, I've been conscious about it as well.

These instances are just a few examples. Whether we like it or not, we all are affected by it in some way or the other. It may be expressed in the form of sadness, disappointment, or even anger. I have seen people being conscious about certain physical features because others have ridiculed them. One of my friends has big breasts, and almost every other day someone used to taunt her about it. She always wears oversized clothes in an effort to hide herself, and no matter how

much I try to make her feel comfortable in her own skin, she is never able to gain the confidence be herself. I contemplated a lot about it. Is it wrong to look a certain way because it is considered to be 'imperfect' and 'peculiar' by others? Will I be accepted by others only if I listen to what they have to say about my body and my appearance? The answer to these questions, I realised much later in life, is no. Having imperfections is what makes us human and people who accept us for who we are, are the ones that deserve to be a part of our lives.

In light of this statement, I find it necessary to mention that Piya and I are no longer friends, but, I am grateful towards her, because if it were not for her, I would have probably never understood that it is alright to look a certain way, irrespective of the so called beauty standards. No matter what, there will always be a person who will be unhappy with a certain part, or perhaps, even the whole of us. The same people who used to tell me to become healthy and fit, are the ones who now say I look weak, because of the weight I have lost over the years. Weak? Out of all the words that are available in the dictionary, they chose weak. But, if wearing bright, quirky clothes makes one happy, then no one should stop one from wearing them. If one is comfortable in one's own body, then not a single person has the right to put them down for it. Though I never use this Internet phrase (because it is grammatically incorrect), I think it is appropriate in this context to say, "You do you." As one of my favourite quote (by an anonymous person whose name I wish I knew) goes, "When you are truly comfortable

in your own skin, not everyone will like you, but you won't care about it one bit."

Here, I have only elaborated on examples of physical appearance, but there are a lot of things we say or even do in real life that can affect someone very negatively, as stated previously. It is extremely important to surround oneself with positive and non-Piya kind of people. As a Psychology student, and as a person who has had such experiences, reflecting on them has made me extremely careful about what I say to people. I try to be as honest as possible, but without coming off as condescending. It is, of course, important to communicate what one has in one's mind, but it is equally important to say it in such a manner that the person does not feel dismayed. I have now realized how the tiniest of things can impact us negatively, and I have learnt to be more sensitive towards the insecurities that other people may have. Even if I do (unintentionally) end up offending someone, I am always sure to apologize. The wise persona inside my head always says, "Sticks and stones may break someone's bones, but words can definitely hurt them," which I couldn't agree with more.

Now, as an almost 20-year-old person, armed with my takeaways from these experiences, I have become more optimistic in my outlook towards life. Not only do I view myself more positively, but I ensure that a bit of my positivity also rubs off on others as well. I have certainly come a long way, from being a shy, funny and emotionally driven person, to a shy, funny, and emotionally driven, but also, a much wiser person.